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“WHAT DOES GOD SAY THAT I SHOULD BE?”

MUSLIM INTELLECTUALS IN EUROPE AND THE IMAGINED “MUSLIM IDENTITY”

Abstract: The narrative of “Muslim identity” is fast becoming a key problem in Europe. The narrative, sustained by Islamic governments, movements and intellectuals, blocks the way of “European Muslims” toward modern subjectivity and citizenship. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of literature and initiatives by critical Muslim intellectuals that challenge the narrative of “Muslim identity”. This paper offers philosophical-anthropological insights into the problem of “Muslim identity” in Europe through the cases of four Muslim intellectuals: T. Ramadan, M. Chebel, F. Benslama and L. Babès.

Keywords: Identity, Muslim intellectuals in Europe, modern subjectivity, alterity, T. Ramadan, M. Chebel, F. Benslama, L. Babès.

“What Does God Say that I Should Be?”¹ This question is not part of a Muslim theological manual. It was asked by Tariq Ramadan, one of the leading Muslim intellectuals in Europe while lecturing about “Muslim identity”. When I put this question in front of my students, many of them were suspicious of the validity of the question. Some of them think that the answer is evident: God wants Muslims to be believers (a tautology in this case) which renders Ramadan’s question rhetorical. There is a point to this answer as Ramadan claims that God wants something specific from „Muslims” in Europe and that Ramadan knows the answer. Others think that Muslims’ identities depend on their own choices (free will) and, therefore, God does not meddle in this matter. There is, however, a much more serious paradox to Ramadan’s question: imagining a “Muslim identity” in Europe whereby the authority of God is needed to warrant Muslimness. Theology is used to support a political anthropology, although, in Ramadan’s perception, nothing separates the realms of God and that of human beings.

As we speak today, the notion of “Muslim identity” in Europe is rarely contested. “Muslims” accepted to be identified as such and non-Muslims are satisfied with the designation of a whole range of populations as Muslims. Most participants in the public sphere seem to agree that “these people are Muslims” and they cannot help it anyway. It is what they *are* and Europe should cope with it.

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¹ RAMADAN 1999.

That being the case, the history of “these populations” urges us to criticize the narrative of “Muslim identity”. As immigrants stepped into Europe from Africa and Asia in the fifties and sixties, they were not treated as “Muslims”, but as “invited workers”. Social identity defined what they were: Cheap male workers whose ethnic, cultural or religious stock was irrelevant. However, as the descendants of these workers were born in Europe, but not Europeans nor “imported workers”, they became for a while identity-less, until the “Muslim identity” came by the end of the eighties to fill the gap. A vicious identity circle came into existence and the shift from social to religious identity transformed entirely the nature of the problem. Both „Muslims” and “non-Muslims” accepted the conversion of the problem into a “Muslim problem”. The process is indeed complex. Political actors used a phenomenon they observed in the „descendants of immigrants”, namely an islamisation since the seventies, led by exiled Islamists and agents of different “Muslim countries”, to justify a discursive and political machine the dynamic of which is to bog down a problem of immigration, citizenship and integration.

It is argued here that the narrative of “Muslim identity” is a simulacrum (Jean Baudrillard) of a discursive tradition (Talal Asad). Muslim states and Islamic movements quickly created an Islamic political imaginary² for workers and their descendents. This imaginary has been entertained since the veil debate and Salman Rushdie’s affair in 1989. Muslim Ideologues crafted a series of myths to sustain „Muslimness”: Palestine, the narrative of injustice, the Muslim community, the conspiracy of media, Andalusia, the veil and other symbols, “our identity”, the halal food, Islamic finance, etc.

The narrative of “Muslim identity”, always expressed in the third person,³ hides the subjectivity of every subject who is an immigrant worker or a descendent of immigration. It refers to an “original Muslim identity” that never was. Nationals from Turkey and Morocco do not define themselves as Muslims in terms of their identity, but as Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Moroccans, Amazigh, etc. One cannot belong to “an identity” that does not exist.⁴ That is why it is a simulacrum. Furthermore, the first generation of immigrants was cut from Islam as a discursive tradition. The second generation, under the influence of religious policies of “Muslim states” and Islamic movements, connected with a discursive tradition they found dignifying, burying themselves in a de- subjectifying imagined identity.

The “Muslim” subject is yet to fully claim reflexivity and active citizenship in European societies. It is the case that many immigrant workers or their descendents consider themselves citizens and act as such. However, the dominating trend of Islamic intellectuals and activists continuously enhances the narrative of “Muslim identity”. In the following, I suggest a philosophical-anthropological inquiry into the problem of “Muslim identity” in Europe through four voices: T. Ramadan, an advocate of the narrative of “Muslim identity”, and three secular

2 WERBNER 1998. 11-31.

3 TAN 2008. 31-49.

4 SHIVELY 2006. 537-542. This does not exclude religion from being a component of identity.

Muslim intellectuals who criticize this narrative and rebuild the “Muslim” subject as citizen (M. Chebel, F. Benslama and L. Babès). While Ramadan has been the subject of dozens of studies, this paper offers the first scholarly study on Chebel⁵, Benslama and Babès.⁶

Tariq Ramadan and the imagined “Muslim identity”

T. Ramadan (Born in 1962) is a Swiss intellectual of Egyptian origin who is particularly active in France, Qatar and the UK. He studied philosophy and French literature, and obtained a PhD in Islamic studies at the University of Geneva. He completed his academic studies with a brief training at Al-Azhar between 1992-1993 then 1994-1995. Although he negates having organisational links to the Muslim Brotherhood, he still claims the intellectual heritage of Ḥasan al-Bannā, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. He is also under the heavy influence of other Islamic ideologues.

T. Ramadan formulates the question of “Muslim identity” as follows:

“We are entitled to our values and our identity [...] the law manages specific and shared values”.⁷

This statement implies a series of understatements. To begin with, it entails that there is a “universal Muslim identity” that adapts to the local context, and in this case, the European context. While this might be tempting for some Muslims to imagine such identity, going so far as to call it an *umma*, it is a religious ideal, not a reality. An Indonesian and a Qatari do not share a Muslim identity. They share a religion, but their identities are composed of different ethnic, social and cultural elements that radically separate them, the same way a Christian from Texas does not share the same identity with a Christian from Kenya.⁸

T. Ramadan, like most Muslim thinkers today, attempts to resolve the problem of this “unidentified Muslim identity”, by using the vague expression of “the principles of Muslim identity”, meaning the foundational texts, beliefs and practices required by God and his Prophet.⁹ These are the guiding lines of such

5 Ruth Mas dedicated a study to Chebel’s secular views of love, but not as a Muslim intellectual: MAS 2004. 273-301.

6 Franck Fregosi offers a useful, although general description of the field of Muslim intellectuals in France in: FREGOSI 2008. 93-115.

7 RAMADAN 2008.

8 In his study of Muslims in Mumbai, Ari Singh Anand shows that „the ostensibly ‘religious’ domain of Islam is not necessarily the only, or even primary, basis for achieving a self-consciously ethical selfhood for even those who identify as observant and devout Muslims [...] the religious domain of Islam in this context is defined as such and intersected by discourses and practices of the self as a political and economic agent defined largely in terms of political modernity”. ANAND 2014. 377-398.

9 RAMADAN 2008.

identity. A modern reader, embedded with the ethical sense of the word principles, could think of a principle such as human dignity. It is not the case in Ramadan's use of the word principle which has here a religious sense, that of concrete regulations of Islamic law and belief. There are two additional problems with "the principles of Muslim identity". On the one hand, they are not the same for a Salafi, a Muslim Brother, a Shī'ī, or secular Muslims. On the other, "these principles" are but the tenets of Islamic law which cannot be sustained in the modern world, let alone in European societies. "These principles" lead simply to the disintegration of modern societies. Ramadan's vocabulary might be misleading. The use of terms such as principles, spirituality, and intelligence to find "shared meaning" between Muslims and non-Muslims is ambiguous. These terms bear a different content whether we think within a post-secular perspective (the case of Christianity) or pre-secular (the case of Islam). It would be naïve and erroneous to consider the use of these terms as equivalent.

Let us examine further the term principle. Ramadan employs it, on the one side, to convey the reformist meaning of return to the foundations, which involves the by-passing of centuries of Islamic legacy. He sees the Islamic civilisation in two versions: one common and the other specific. As he puts it: "The great Islamic civilization and its specificities: Persian, African, Arab or western. While there are superior common features, there are also distinctions in culture and language and peculiarities at the level of nations".¹⁰ Universal Muslim identity emerges in the making, or rather, in the de-making of these foundations. Is it possible to go to the foundations without the whole Muslim tradition? Hermeneutically, it is a vicious circle and impossible to achieve. For the link to the principles is only possible through history and language, and we understand both at the point where we are because they reached us with a certain meaning they assigned to the foundations. On the other side, he means by principle that which is immutable. This includes values and beliefs that cannot be conceded to any other culture or society, and which are rooted in the foundations. They are the core of what a Muslim is. Ramadan's fundamentalist vicious circle is full: whether from today (identity) or from the past (principles), Muslims are "condemned" to their "origins".

Ramadan believes that law is different from values and the national identity of a modern state. This error of thought might come from two reasons: T. Ramadan's 20th century Islamic ideology which is very suspicious of law and the state, seeing positive law as illegitimate, or at least as "technical". Only Islamic law is absolute, and therefore expresses, presumably, the "Muslim values" and "identity". In a secular world, law does not support the religious specificities of communities; it regulates and protects the rights of the citizens, including religious rights, but does not support "religious identities".

Additionally, there cannot be a constructive community that upholds its own values while it shares at the same time other values with the rest of the society. Common values are formed by social institutions and secular policies over time, and by way of interactions between individuals. So, Muslims ought to be secular

¹⁰ RAMADAN 2009. 265.

in order to live and participate in European societies. Certainly, these values cannot be claims. For if they exist, they cannot be claimed and if they do not exist, they cannot be invented. At any rate, a claim within a given society is only receivable inasmuch as it is formulated in the terms defined by this society, its values and laws.

T. Ramadan usually uses the phrase “common values”, referring to values Muslims and non-Muslims share such as freedom. He divides people on the basis of religion while the road to these “common values” was secular and historical. Individuals cherish freedom, not as Muslims or Christians, but as modern subjects. For Ramadan, values should emerge from the two books: the book of revelation and the book of nature.¹¹ It is evident that non-Muslims, conceded that such identification is possible in a modern world, cannot accept to share any values with Muslims that are based on a book of revelation. Modernity has introduced differentiation as a major mechanism of knowledge and organisation. Truth is what humans can verify and nobody can judge the truth of the book of revelation. Besides, no single truth could be found in the intersection of the book of revelation and the book of nature. All that could be meaningful if “Muslims” generate one reading of this “one book” of revelation (which is not true considering the differences in both corpuses and interpretations of Muslim traditions). Since the “one truth” is non-verifiable and non-existent, from any stance we take, it cannot be a truth.

Malek Chebel and the quest of the subject in Islam

Born (in 1953) and raised in Algeria, M. Chebel immigrated to France in the seventies as a student. He got his PhD in clinical psychopathology and psychoanalysis at the University Paris 7 (1980), a second doctorate in anthropology, ethnology and religious studies at Jussieu (1982) and a third PhD degree in political science at the Institute of Political Studies in Paris (1984). As a public intellectual, he engages, particularly, in the debates on *islam des Lumières*, the body and the subject in Islam.

Chebel addresses the question of identity as a problem of subjectivity in Islam. He asks a double question:

„Is Islam able to establish an identity without the latter being confronted with otherness, and amended by it, enriched? Which sources and which events will produce self-image, and therefore the image of the other?“¹²

11 RAMADAN 2008, 169.

12 CHEBEL 2002, 127.

The answer to the second question comes from his *islam des Lumières*. In 2004, he suggested 27 ideas to reform Islam: Respect of the other, freedom of thought and consciousness, pre-eminence of the individual over the community, humanism, pre-eminence of reason over any other form of thought and belief, etc.¹³ Chebel refers to a different Islamic repertoire than Ramadan's. He turns to Islam as a civilisation, with its achievements in Muslim philosophy, popular religion, literature, especially literature of pleasure, rational theology and Sufism. In other words, he endorses the interpretations of Islam that are post-foundational and non-orthodox, the function of which, for him, is to free Muslims from orthodoxy, the guardian of the foundations.

To the first question, Chebel answers that „Islam does not favor the emergence of an autonomous subject escaping religious imprint“.¹⁴ There is, however, hope for secularized Muslims, to emerge as modern subjects:

“There remains to the Muslim the possibility to turn from a *being-within-the-realm of God* to the social and political individual and acquire an interactive citizenship in the *Umma*. But to properly reinvest Socius without leaving its faith, the being-of-belief must first undock the close link that binds it to the institution of the mosque, as well as granted the impressive prerogatives to it [...] the birth of the Muslim citizenship has this as a price: turning its back to the mosque without removing God from its vital horizon.”¹⁵

In Chebel's mind, there is a link between space and identity. Disconnecting the individual from spaces governed by Islamic law, foundational to “Muslim identity”, is, thus, a first step towards a modern subject in Islam. It takes the opposite strategy of the promoters of “Muslim identity” in Europe who unceasingly build mosques. After all, secularisation is about separating spaces, which is necessary to any modernisation process. This is the first step. Modernisation and the emergence of the subject have to address two additional challenges: those of thought and action if one might isolate them as categories. As a mode of thought, Islam discourages autonomy of the self with regard to traditions. Thought should *be principled*. Social and political structures, which are traditional or semi-traditional, hurdle further the liberation of the subject. Despite all modern techniques, the state in Islam acts as a commander of the believers:

„The Muslim subject exists today in an area that the Muslim ‘moral clergy’ still held in awe, at the same time causing a critical reading of its realization in the concrete world. The paradox remains unresolved: one cannot in Islam today become a subject of action and reaction, an autonomous subject of movement without

13 CHEBEL 2004.

14 CHEBEL 2002. 127.

15 CHEBEL 2002. 269-270.

the intercession of the „state manager” itself not yet completely free from the mosque. At the outset, Islam amalgamated the contingency of the human being with its projection in an afterlife far more rewarding.”¹⁶

Chebel takes the opposite standpoint of T. Ramadan. He successfully and rightly shifts the focus from the texts to the subject, from an ethical-juristic perspective to anthropological-philosophical-psychological one. There is a long way to go from the current status where solution is seen outside the humans to the emergence of a modern subject, and therefore, of conditions in which identity actively functions as a process:

“After the critical phase of identifying with the model of ancestors, considered to be ideal and perfectly reconstructed in so many aspects, Muslims will have to display their determination vis-à-vis the many choices available to them. For the true post-oedipal bifurcation lies here: how can they now accept themselves without turning their backs on modernity? how can they access modernity – and which one? – Without turning their backs on their faith? This double challenge of earning modernity without losing faith is central to their contemporary history unless they are reluctant to cut the Gordian knot.”¹⁷

Some anthropologists would disagree with Chebel. For example, Saba Mahmood, inspired by Talal Asad, argues for „uncoupling the notion of agency from that of resistance as a necessary step in thinking about forms of desire and politics that do not accord with norms of secular-liberal feminism and its liberatory telos”.¹⁸ In other words, a modern subject might emerge in Islam without the secular-liberal norms. Mahmood’s thesis has its own flaws. Suffice it here to underline one major shortcoming; Mahmood engages the debate on the subject from a post-feminist and post-modern perspective. That is to say, she acknowledges different forms of subjectivity as equally valid. Women in Egypt, her field of study, live a pre-secular and modern daily life, under the pressure of patriarchal religious and social order. They aspire to modernity, but cannot have access to it, and turn to different modes of negotiation with the pre-modern world. A modern subject cannot emerge without traditional or semi-traditional norms.

16 CHEBEL 2002. 283.

Recently, Kabir reminded us of the dogmatic character of the state in Turkey, the only secular state in the Muslim world. As he puts it, “departures from otherwise salient norms do not of necessity challenge the dominant forms of reflexivity. More often, they place at risk the coherence of the deviating utterance or act itself”. TAMBAR 2012. 669.

17 CHEBEL 2002. 285.

18 MAHMOUD 2006. 31.

Fethi Benslama

In 1972, Benslama (born in 1951) emigrated from Tunisia to France as a student. He studied psychopathology at the prestigious Paris 7 and anthropology at the EHESS. He got a PhD in psychology in Paris 13 (1999). His family in Tunisia has deep interest in the Islamic legacy, and particularly in the interpretation of dreams. Raja Benslama, his sister is also a psychoanalyst, and scholar of Muslim traditions and Arabic literature. F. Benslama has contributed much to the debates on psychoanalysis and Islam. His two projects: *Le manifeste des libertés* and *raison et déraison en islam* have attracted the interest and the support of a multitude of intellectuals in France and Belgium.

Benslama uses Islamic mysticism and tools of psychoanalysis in the study of Islam as a religion and a political system. He is influenced by Jacques Lacan, Freud, Ibn 'Arabi, Avicenne, Averroès and Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ṭāhā. Despite a somewhat similar curriculum to that of Chebel, their approaches are quite different. Chebel combines anthropology and history, with a clear historical imprint, which makes him an *islamologue* in the eyes of the media. On the other hand, psychoanalysis dominates Benslama's analysis. He focuses primarily on the collective delirium of the return to origins that led to the attempt to return and clone the "original" Islam by force, leading to accuse most Muslims today of disbelief. To explain radicalism, he resorts to the notion of despair of the masses. It is this despair that in his view explains the narrative of "Muslim identity".

Benslama believes that primary identities and affiliations [family, clan, religion, region, etc.] should be virtually destroyed, not to be altogether eliminated, but rebuilt as specific expressions and mediation of collective political identity or membership (under the influence of Balibar and Hegel). This rebuilt collective identity should be secular:

"When the religious institution decomposes as it happens chronically, and it is the case of Islam today, the invasion of demonic and archaic forces - where there is blurring of boundaries between the animal and human - sprayed dikes of reason as to produce an identity delirium which, like any delirium, considers itself a cure. But secularism as we understand it is another cure for the myth of identity, which does not reject the principle of the responsibility of the human with respect to any other, but gives this responsibility political effectiveness through the subject citizen."¹⁹

Benslama deconstructs the narrative of "Muslim identity" at its inception. For him, the whole idea of „islamic identity“ is but a symptom of a pre-modern subject, who submits to religious and political structures in which divine law and authoritarian order are the keywords. The modern subject emerged in the revolution against these traditional structures. As he himself states it:

¹⁹ BENSLAMA 2005. 60.

„The traditional subject (*‘abd*), although possessing all the prerogatives of a subject of law (and divine law is a law and not an arbitrary power), remains subject to a theological - political structure whose goal is to harmonize the human identification of individuality with God and the political space. That structure attempts to govern the psyche and society at the same time. But the modern subject addressed by psychoanalysis appears in societies where the separation between the birth community and the political community has taken place through a civil revolution backed by a powerful government apparatus. We should not forget that, in the traditional world, the patriarchal structure made the father both a *paterfamilias* and a political leader, since the space of the group and that of society were nearly the same. Filiation determined power.”²⁰

This explains why God appears in Ramadan’s question about identity. In the narrative of „Muslim identity”, God warrants the discourse about „Muslim politics”, „Muslim community” and „Muslim society”. Being a servant of God is considered compatible with being a citizen of a European state. There lies the critical point about the narrative of „Muslim identity”. Being a citizen of a modern state cannot happen without a political philosophy in which political theology is disqualified. This is not the case in a „Muslim community” where theology, including political theology, puts the citizen after God and his mediators. Schizophrenia takes place and some violently try to solve the contradictions of a political double life imposed by a modern political philosophy and a pre-modern political theology.

Furthermore, the claims of „Muslim identity” reveal a pathological relation between identity and alterity:

„The masses – and not only in the case of Islam – have been dragged in all directions toward unreasonable claims of identity, which can result in the cruelest acts of violence under the guise of appropriating the proper of who they are. By the same token, we willingly proclaim the destruction of the proper of the other, hoping to deprive him and his humanity of it, leaving him as exposed as a skinned animal. I have suggested using the term expropriation to refer to this sense of threat to the proper of what one is, as well as to the desire to dispossess the other because he might prevent the “Self” or the “Us” of the community from remaining the same. Expropriation appears to overflow the classic concept of the death drive, to the extent that it does not cease with the reduction to inanimacy but aims at the annihilation of qualities relative to identification, symbolic

20 BENSLAMA 2009. 203.

genealogy, and alterity. Thus, expropriation would be at the root of any transindividual processes that feed genocidal hatred.”²¹

Benslama’s expropriation is intriguing and deserves an inquiry on its own. It starts as disidentification. The latter constitutes the core of the narrative of “Muslim identity”; it separates identity and alterity and disengages from society. For any “Muslim” born in Europe, and not only, is one and the other, whereby identity and alterity are components of its subjectivity. By disidentification from its society, the individual expropriates its own complex identity. M. Verkuyten and A. A. Yildiz have studied identification among Turkish-Dutch Muslims. They concluded that „Many participants show low commitment to the nation, and many indicate national disidentification. In addition, there is very strong ethnic and religious identification. Ethnic and Muslim identifications relate negatively to Dutch identification and to stronger Dutch disidentification”.²²

Essentialisation is another form of expropriation. We have come across Ramadan’s insistence on the “principles of Muslim identity” and its “essential common features”. It is a process of de-pluralisation of Islam, eliminating all the cultural diversity and historical evolution of Islam. It is exactly what fundamentalism does: reducing the complexity of history into the fundamentals of theology and working to bring people to those fundamentals. Another study about cross-national comparison of British Bangladeshis in London and Spanish Moroccans in Madrid has highlighted the process of essentialisation. It is showed that:

“Subjects’ multiplicity is complicated by their desire to meet – not reject – the essentialist standards of belonging to the identity paradigms discursively available to them. Rather than defiantly cherry-picking preferred characteristics of religion, ethnicity and nationality, individuals’ responses suggest that they are trying to fulfil perceived standards of authenticity. Such a contention helps explain the prevalence of Western Muslims’ expressed and well-documented ‘identity crisis’, suggests the enduring relevance of identity essentialisms, and more broadly, complicates post-modern conceptions of identity formation.”²³

Moreover, expropriation acts as concealment. The narrative of “Muslim identity” hides an indecisive subject, unwilling “to cut the Gordian knot”, in a position between pre-modernity and modernity. Consider Žižek’s magisterial reading, inspired by Benslama, of the function of the veil in Islam, an important marker of “Muslim identity” in Europe. Žižek suggests that:

21 BENSLAMA 2009. 54

22 VERKUYTEN – YILDIZ 2007. 1448.

23 GEST 2015. 1868.

“What if the true scandal this veil endeavors to obfuscate is not the feminine body hidden by it, but the INEXISTENCE of the feminine? What if, consequently, the ultimate function of the veil is precisely to sustain the illusion that there IS something, the substantial Thing, behind the veil? If, following Nietzsche’s equation of truth and woman, we transpose the feminine veil into the veil which conceals the ultimate Truth, the true stakes of the Muslim veil become even clearer. Woman is a treat because she stands for the “undecidability” of truth, for a succession of veils beneath which there is no ultimate hidden core; by veiling her, we create the illusion that there is, beneath the veil, the feminine Truth - the horrible truth of lie and deception, of course. Therein resides the concealed scandal of Islam: only a woman, the very embodiment of the indiscernability of truth and lie, can guarantee Truth. For this reason, she has to remain veiled.”²⁴

As it seems to me, the truth fundamentalism shies away from is modernity. A fundamentalist is a reluctant individual: unable to live in the past and too fearful to embrace the present. The narrative of “Muslim identity” is not, in reality, a step into the past, but a jump into the dark (religious violence could be the ultimate sign of this jump). It attempts to solve the problem by inventing a simulacrum. In particular, the veil is an emblematic symbol of expropriation and des-identification. First, the veil des-identifies the subject, establishing a boundary between the veiled woman and society. She wants society to see her veiled, claiming the right to be in the public space equally to other non-veiled women. A paradox of its own; she refuses to be equal to other women and takes the veil, and then, she wants to be treated as equal to those she withdrew from. It is a visible example of expropriation. Second, the veil reduces a woman into a *principled* religious being, a believer who obeys to God’s commandment (of veiling), thus essentializing her complex identity. The rejection of society is in fact a denial of what makes her identity since all the complex elements of her identity, and alterity should I add, reside in her society. Finally, she conceals her subjectivity by taking the mask of a “Muslim identity”. Modern subjectivity is a heavy responsibility. For many individuals, the mask of a “Muslim identity” allows them to retreat and get an easy narrative to relate to, instead of facing the world as it is. This narrative gained notoriety in the seventies and the veil became its symbol: in the aftermath of 1967 war, the failure of development policies and modernisation. Islamic fundamentalism offered the perfect mask; on the one hand, it is a refuge from successive defeats, blaming it all on the distance Muslims took from “True Islam”. On the other, it is a merciless and nihilist machine of war.

24 ŽIŽEK 2006.

Leïla Babès

Similarly to Chebel, Babès emigrated from Algeria to France as a student in the seventies. She obtained a Master degree in political science from the University of Provence (1981) and a PhD in Political Science at Aix-Marseille 3 (1984). She turned, however, later to sociology, and especially sociology of religion which she teaches as a Professor at the Catholic University of Lille. Babès has been known to promote secularism and an “interior” and “positive Islam”.

Babès considers that all projects carried out to fix the world according to the Islamic ideal only led to demolish the state and the political space. She promotes new relations between constructed and lived Islam. She is interested in the religious emotion which is expressed by other means than the doctrinal teaching (trance or female devotions, worship of saints, couscous as a gift and sacrifice), that is to say a plural and multifaceted Islam, anthropological and not theological. She wants to rehabilitate the spiritual dimension in order to reinterpret Islam as a religion of belief that postulates the primacy of the heart. By the same token, it perceives Islam as a religion of balance, of the measure, but also of the *niyya*, purity of intention, admitting, however, the social constraints of morality, the community and law in Islam.²⁵

This spiritual path finds echo in the Sufi way. Babès is not a Sufi, however. Rather she adheres to “a spirituality of belief”. She argues that young Muslims in Europe hold on to Islam as religion of the heart. Spiritualization could help to construe the law favoring its allegorical meaning. Spiritualization cannot achieve its re-reading of Islam unless it is founded on secularization of Islam which implies a double objection process of ritual, a practice of social conformity, and a critical sense that combines intellectual rigor and spiritual expectation. She coined the phrases “interior Islam” and “positive Islam” to identify this spiritualization and secularisation of Islam.

Nevertheless, Babès does not reject the idea of return to “principles” and “essence” of Islam. Her “matrix of Islam” is different from that of Ramadan’s:

“Actually, there is return, but to the essential, to the spirit and not the letter, a liberating, and egalitarian ethics, to the use of reason and intellect, not signs of reification, a legacy from another era. Does this imply a rejection of the normative reference? Islamic law has been a structuring reference for Muslim being, to the point that the abandonment of personal status for Muslims in French Algeria meant renouncing their identity. But keep in mind that Islam is a religion of belief that postulates the primacy of the heart. Social constraint of morality, the community standard is not greater than eschatology. Despite being a religion of law, Islam remains a religion of balance,

25 BABÈS 2000. 32.

of the measure, but also of the *niyya*, purity of intention. The question of religious practice is inseparable from faith and extends beyond orthopraxis. The canonical observances say nothing (or very little) of the question, the deep belief or practice at large (individual ethics).²⁶

Babès suggests an alternative narrative to that of “Muslim identity”. It is based on living Islam as a spirituality, a Christianized Islam, so to speak, which achieves more than a goal: it is a positive Islam in the sense that it refers to the lived reality of young Muslims in Europe. It also disconnects Muslims in Europe from law and its guardians and spaces (the mosque and the jurists). Finally, it fits completely in the framework of a secular society as it is a private interior religiosity. Her answer to the narrative of „Muslim identity” is incisive:

“I do not like feeling trapped in an identity. Mine is multiple, plural. It may be moving. It is not final. I do not belong to any particular community. Religions are worn by peoples’ cultures, customs, norms, social change. What interests me is how people stand in relation to this change. Their relationship to modernity. Thus, in Islam, with its plural traditions and how things are changing in relation to modernity, to change, to the Western Traditions themselves is not static. It is not monolithic. It is made of controversies, contradictions. We must turn our backs on a fixed perception of Islam, where Muslims would be amalgamated by a culture, a tradition evenly. No, Muslims are not determined by diagrams, pictures. There is a plurality of meanings and references we should try to rehabilitate.”²⁷

It might be said that the narrative of “Muslim identity” claims as well a European American identity. For example, D. D. Zimmerman shows that young Muslim women in the United States „develop coexisting identities in an attempt to escape categorization as either oppressed or liberated, and to negotiate their identity between integration and loyalty to religion, ethnicity, community and family”.²⁸ In the process of negotiation, the young women came to claim strong signs of Muslimness such as the veil to comply with the pressure of the communities. The notion of negotiation is too vague. If it means to seek balance between the commandments of God and the citizenship, then the modern subject is not yet born in „Western Islam”. Certainly, any modern subject negotiates within a situation or a context, the different elements of its identity, but within the realm of human society and norms. Negotiation does not mean the same thing to a modern subject and to a pre-modern individual. For the latter, God is the ruler of a system in which are entangled the family, the clan, the community and the religious ritu-

26 BABES 2000. 31-32.

27 BABES 2011.

28 ZIMMERMAN 2014. 311.

als and guardians. Concessions are made to this system because it primes over modernity. A modern subject does not consider God as a ruler and all concessions go the other way around. This marks the difference between Babès and Ramadan:

“In this relationship with God, placed in a context of constant search, the focus is on personal experience, verbalized by concepts of inquiry and path. Their²⁹ religious experience thus appears as a kind of movement, an upward curve. Relatively speaking, this phenomenon seems more lean than Glock called experimental dimension, that of the spiritual life and actual experience, rather than fall into the ideological dimension, that of beliefs and religious feelings. But what there is precisely in this modern attitude is the will of distancing from the community consensus, and any institutional representation in favor of a symbolic capital not new, but delved into the religious Tradition and reinterpreted in the light of a purely individual emotion.”³⁰

As a sociologist, Babès underlines the complexity of modern societies. There is no way to claim a domination of a narrative of “Muslim identity”, while in reality the majority of young Muslims do not practice religion. She turns this lived religiosity into a form of Islam capable of modernisation. It gives full agency to the modern subject to reconsider the Tradition and live it as an individual experience, afar from any communitarian sense. Here lies the difficult issue: the narrative of “Muslim identity” finds ground in isolated communities, ghettos, where people start to distance themselves socially and culturally from the mainstream society. A double movement is needed then: modern societies reclaiming conceded places to “Muslim communities” and intellectually speaking a critical thought of modern subjectivity to deconstruct the illusions of “Muslim identity”.

Conclusion

It has been shown that the narrative of “Muslim identity” relies on a vague idea about the “Muslim principles and values”. It constructs an artificial “Muslimness” out of imagined origins of Islam. It is an-anti modern thought, which in practice, leads to disintegration, des-identification, expropriation, concealment and essentialisation. Any discourse on Muslim identity is an illusion, an intellectual ghetto and a radical act. It assumes that Muslim Identity is static and unilateral self and the other interact in permanent construction. The solution to a concrete social problem can not be identity. All this does not make the identity problem a valid

²⁹ She refers to a majority of young Muslims she studied in France in the nineties and their „islam positif”.

³⁰ BABÈS 1996. 131.

problem. For one is always the one and the other. That is why the question asked by T. Ramadan is false. For everyone is at the same time the one and the other, and God cannot want two things at the same time, in the same person. Theology put apart, for anthropological reasons, humans change over time and place and evolve.

Can there be a way out from the narrative of Muslim identity? This article contributes to existing knowledge on identity and alterity as one complex process with multiple aspects by providing evidence from three critical Muslim intellectuals (Chebel, Benslama and Babès). These intellectuals deconstruct the narrative of “Muslim identity” through different mechanisms. Chebel uses the rationalist repertoire of Islamic civilisation to offer an alternative “origin” which finds its continuity in Western modernity. Chebel believes that without the emergence of the modern subject and freedom from subjection to the community, there cannot be subjectivity, and therefore, modernity in Islam. Benslama draws attention to the pathological character of the narrative of “Muslim identity” by which it oeuvres for expropriation of the other. Babès suggests an interior Islam, a sort of post-modern spirituality in which the modern subject establishes a link with God, discarding the juridical and communitarian aspects of Islam.

The contribution of this study has been to put forward that the narrative of “Muslim identity” is neither valid nor inevitable. It also showed that critical Muslim intellectuals are able to provide viable alternatives. Concrete measures to compete with the narrative of “Muslim identity” have been taken. Chebel founded the Review of Enlightenment *Noor* and Benslama a *University of Freedoms*. Certainly, there are limitations of such initiatives and the logistics of the fundamentalist outweigh those of critical intellectuals. At any rate, it remains possible to reclaim lost spaces to Islamic fundamentalism and its rhetoric.

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