

# **The Critical Role of France in the Building of a Post-Islamist Muslim World**

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The growing insecurity in the Middle East and Africa broke in a few years all geopolitical certainties: USA and debt are declining in favor of their salafists epigones, the European Union has been broken by the migrants' crisis. In the military field, France and Russia are alone to have some ability and willingness.

Faced with the threat of Islamism, France could be the last country in Western Europe to be able to use a selective force in the Sahel, and to block the jihadist tide. In fact, the long History of France has made it one of the most active cultural and political interfaces between the Christian West and the Arab-Muslim world.

Despite its current political renunciation, its military capacity is intact, as its analytical and critical abilities. Many signs indicate that France, through its culture, can revive its deep historical forces to help the continent through the actual identity crisis.

The wars that shake the Muslim world are not only due to the context of the Middle East, but involve Islam itself. Islam lives a second nahda, a revival that is a civil war and a challenge to its orthodoxy. Who can define orthodoxy ? the moderates? the jihadists? Saudi Arabia ? This question is so destabilizing for the believers that it's accompanied by an excessive violence. Muslims need a scapegoat to avoid questioning too deeply about the nature of Islam... In this internal battle to Islam, France can play a role, both intellectual and geopolitical...

## **I. France, a historical interface between Christian West and Muslim world**

### **\*Discovering Islam**

France discovered Muhammad and Islam through military conquest. In 732 Arab troops were stopped at Poitiers by Charles Martel Carolingian leader, but their raids lasting threaten the coasts of Gaul. Chroniclers make the list of these incursions, without trying to understand who the invaders. They are considered illegitimate children of the servant Hagar. They are called Sarakenoi

[Saracens] because Hagar was sent away empty, indeed Hagar said to the angel: "Sara sent me away empty-handed" [Gen 21, 10-24: Sarra - kenoï: Sara - Empty].

Muhammad is the harbinger of the Apocalypse, a blasphemer and a manipulator of crowds who invented false miracles and whose body ended devoured by dogs.

### **\*The progress of knowledge by the Crusades (1100-1270)**

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the crusades, conducted by French barons, helped to tarnish the enemy and know him better.

Chivalric romances are shared between fascination for the Eastern world and repulsion for his "law" (*lex*), term used for another religion. French mentality develops the image of the Saracen woman, sensual, shameless, temptress, anti-thesis of a typical western courtly woman, modest. However, Europe is more interested in Islam, to write fiction biographies of Muhammad.

The French abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable (died in 1156) built an argued controversy against Islam, using Eastern texts translated from Arabic to Latin. For exemple a translation of the Qur'an he commanded to a english translator, Robert of Chester; translation entitled *Lex Saracenorum seu Koran*. If this translation has many qualities, the comments of Peter the Venerable in its margins are cruel. Next to the Quranic verse II.67 about Moses, Pieter mocks: *Ecce fabula!* ( "What nonsense!").

The text, however, shows a direct interest in the opposite belief, that we try to understand, to explore with honesty. This typical French curiosity during Crusades is still present.

A major conceptual progress is made by theologians of the University of Paris in the thirteenth century, including Thomas of Aquino. The West had to describe Islam inadequate concepts: paganism, heresy, Judaism. For them, Christianity was the only "religion", the only worship linking (Latin: religare) God and man. But Thomas, in his study of ethics, defines the concept of "religion" as a virtue related to justice: the man who makes worship to God is fair and just, "since it belongs to religion to make God the honor due to him". Because Muslims faith is a worship to God - false for the theologian - they practice religion as a vertue. By detaching the concept of the Christian faith and by connecting it to moral code, Thomas prepared a better definition of islam and of its identity

### **\*The Great Turk in Western thought (1270-1790)**

From the late thirteenth century and the failure of Crusades, the Ottoman threat takes over and the Byzantine Empire collapses. Turkish pirates infest the

Mediterranean Sea threat for three centuries by the white slavery. Between 1500 and 1800, approximately one million Christians were captured. The Turkish danger concerns half of Molière's plays. Yet, in the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, Monsieur Jourdain is honored to give his daughter in marriage to Great Turk himself!

The Turk was becoming commonplace in France. Francis I inaugurated the alliance with the Turk against Charles V. In 1543 the Ottoman fleet and its 30 000 soldiers overwinter in the port of Toulon under the frightened eyes of contemporaries. In return, the Sultan agreed to the King of France commercial privileges in Syria and Turkey. Political realism prevails and still inspire Louis XIV against the Emperor of Austria.

With travel books, the translations, the founding of the first Arabic language courses (Paris 1539), knowledge of Islam is spreading in France. From the seventeenth century, humanists and Enlightenment philosophers are looking at Islam with interest. The French translation of the Qur'an (1783), the French traveler in Istanbul are source of curiosity; they describe the luxury, sensuality and muslim monotheism to better denounce austerity and Catholic doctrine. In Persian Letters of Montesquieu the Qur'anic message appears as a mixture of rational mind and theistic spirituality, without clerical authority and without an incomprehensible Trinity. Voltaire also emphasizes the genius and wisdom of the prophet.

The new prestige of Islam and Muhammad, however, was a pretext to denounce Catholicism institutions and absolute monarchy.

### **\*Colonization and Orientalism (1790-1962)**

The Egyptian expedition launched by Bonaparte in 1798 was a great vector of knowledge of islam, and initiated a more scientific approach to it. Orientalism, a new branch of the university in the nineteenth century, intends to study the Arab and Muslim world through its history, language and religion. The School of Oriental Languages in Paris, founded in 1795, is the first orientalist institution.

But behind the optimism and generosity of orientalist approach, orientalism is a fragile intellectual process: sense of cultural superiority, curiosity for the exotic, studies manipulated by the colonizers, disinterest in the East "real" in favor of a return to the past. Islam is bright only in the Middle Ages, and Muhammad's genius stops in seventh centur... Orientalism appears as the intellectual face of European colonization. At the same time, Algeria was invaded (1830).

June 8, 1830 was proclaimed to the peoples of Algiers, "We, your friends, the French, we are coming to Algiers. We guarantee and respect your money and all your possessions, and your holy religion."

The Third Republic believes in the union of civilizations in Algeria, and prohibits the Catholic missions of Muslim populations or diverts them to black Africa.

In this context, Orientalism seems naive, and many intellectuals think - too quickly - that the Muslim world will become secular and scientific, and the liberal journalist Barthelemy Prosper Enfantin (died 1864): "The great communion is preparing. The Mediterranean Sea will be lovely this year, this noisy coast rises and calls the West asleep... In the past, East lit up the West; refer now its light." The fierce hostility of medieval scholars may have disappeared, but the misunderstanding remains. Everyone does not share this enthusiasm, and the nationalist writer Ernest Renan says in 1862: "Islam is the most complete negation of Europe."

Until the War of Algeria, republican universalism dominated minds. The two world wars reinforce this feeling, as indigenous troops fought for their country. In 1926, the Great Mosque of Paris was inaugurated to salute the courage of Muslim fighters. The royalist Charles Maurras sees it a "threat to our future." Yet in 1947, the French citizenship is granted to all Algerians. We want to believe that "Algeria is France", despite cultural and religious differences. With the start of the war in Algeria (1954-1962), only French colonists still defend this ideal, unlike the National Liberation Front and General de Gaulle too. The independence is inevitable and reopened fractures.

### **\*Current issues**

Since 1962, the situation has been exasperated by external factors (decolonization, Arab-Israeli conflict, Islamism) and others who concern the French society (immigration debates, increasing secularization, failure of Republican integration model). Two trends clash. On one side, a generous desire to integrate Islam and its various currents. To do this, we insist on Islamic mysticism, Sufi particular, we oppose a "good Islam" Republican, "tolerant", "Islam of France", to another, close, fundamentalist or terrorist.

On the other side, mistrust remains, reinforced by the high media profile of radical Islam, by the attacks in Paris and violence of Daech. France still hesitates to choose one's attitude towards Islam, and therefore its policy.

## **II. French criticism culture, an interface culture**

### **\*France, culture and Islam**

In addition to its intimate historical knowledge with Islam, France has a long tradition of intellectual criticism of religious phenomena. This rationalism, which was often aggressive towards the religious fact, particularly Catholicism, could be used in favor of a critical reading of the Qur'anic doctrine by Muslims themselves.

This is what was done by the Young Turks in Turkey in the late nineteenth century. Inspired by the French Enlightenment and Freemasonry, the group Young Turks and Mustafa Kemal rebuilt the broken Turkey after the first world war, based on a secular and nationalistic vision of society and history. Unfortunately, imitating the Enlightenment, the Young Turks have also taken the intolerance of the French Revolution and its brutality towards deviants.

Whether inspired by Catholicism or by the Enlightenment, the French reason is separated from mysticism. In France, even religion wants to be reasonable and rational, even though Church talk about Trinity. There is a common tradition with Islam since the Mutazilite crisis in the ninth century and the beginning of the Kalam science, which wants to be logical and rational. French culture is a form of relationship with the world ("être au monde"), with the real, curious, eager, much more than an attraction to the supernatural. Similarly, Islam limits the possibility of unity between the soul and God to prefer a vertical untouchable, as if the earth was created sufficient to itself.

But let's be honest: the intellectual and rational processes are very different in French culture and Muslim world. In Islam, the initial doctrinal truth was very simple, as shown in *Shahada*, but it was developed until the thirteenth century by a profusion of religious or philosophical comments. However, in Catholicism, the truth seems too broad to be understood, and we must always reveal the meaning of the mysteries, without ever completely get there. Finally, in the French rational mind, in Descartes one's, the truth is built step by step, axiom by axiom, each one had to be shown before proceeding to the next, to conclude therefore a non-religious truth, strong, efficient, which justifies to death.

Nothing less French than this short Muslim profession of faith.

### **\*Greek thought**

Similarly, the ways of acculturation of Greek science are radically different between Islam and French culture. In Islam, Greek culture was digested: an author reads Aristotle or a Greek thinker, wrote a text to paraphrase it and

comment it on, to better integrate it in Muslim thought, and then destroyed the manuscript became useless. His purpose is to assimilate the universal knowledge and spit it out in Arabic, according to Muslim doctrine. The border between the old and the new is abolished, nobody knows whose is the text: a Greek? a Muslim? In this culture of digestion, the best work is that which equates the best original text in islamic thought.

In contrast, among the theologians of the University of Paris, culture is inclusive and comparative. The Greek text must always be kept in the text and copied beside its Christian comment, to better prove the excellence of its new understanding. The sources are carefully noted, and the reader can compare the source and its commentary, the old and the new. Progress and traditionalism are parallel, and their combination leads to permanent criticism. The best work is that which shows that the new is better than the old.

In both cases, France and Islam wanted to assimilate Greek thought, but this assimilation hasn't changed Islam while it founded the French thought.

### **\*The typical french History-Critical Method (nineteenth-twentieth Centuries)**

During the nineteenth century, the French research participated in the foundation of the new historical-critical science, that attacked both Bible and Koran, to show their contradictions and explain their writing based on the historical context.

Besides the chronological classification of the *suras* between the Meccan and Medinan periods, the division of the verses clearly shows there to be a multitude displacements within the same *suras* – sign of a substantial editorial work, probably after Muḥammad's death. In the second *sura*, known as “The Cow” and said to have been revealed in Medina around 622-624, verses 19-37 have been identified as being of Mecca origin while verses 126-129 are uncertain. The idea of a global textual coherence is thus considerably weakened: it seems obvious that it undergone revisions to the point of including later passages in the middle of sequences which were already coherent by rhythm and meaning. This results in the production of certain heterogeneous assemblages.

The following verses (S. 23, 10-16) are thus revealing (the figures indicating the phonetic value of vowels on recitation according to the rules of *tajwīd* ; in bold are the nasalisations) :

10. These [believers] are the heirs (*al-wa<sup>2</sup>ritū<sup>4-6</sup>na*),
11. who will inherit Paradise: they will dwell in it for ever (*ja<sup>2</sup>lidū<sup>4-6</sup>na*).
12. We first created man from the essence of clay (*sula<sup>2</sup>lat min ṭi<sup>4-6</sup>nin*) ;
13. then placed him, as a drop of sperm, in a safe enclosure (*qarār makī<sup>4-6</sup>nin*).

14. The drop We made a clot of blood, and the clot a lump of flesh. This We fashioned into bones, and then clothed the bones with flesh, thus bringing forth another creation. Blessed be Allah, the noblest of creators (*al-ḥa<sup>2</sup>liqī<sup>4-6</sup>na*) !

15. After that, at length, you will die (*lamayitū<sup>4-6</sup>na*),

16. and on the Day of Resurrection you will be raised up (*tub ‘aṭū<sup>4-6</sup>na*).

The group of verses 10-13/15-16 constitutes a sequence of great importance, having its own theme, rapid scansion, and coherent two-by-two rhymes (10-11; 12-13; 15-16). But verse 14 was later added in, being different in terms of tone and length, and it was unsuccessfully sought to make it rhyme with verses 12 and 13.

Regis Blachere's works shown that the actual Qur'ān is the product of a historical evolution: as a matter of fact, no seventh Century material evidence has been preserved, and despite the orders given by 'Uṣmān to destroy all versions different from the compilation himself established, some alternative versions continued to circulate until the beginning of the eleventh Century, even in Baghdad.

Very plausibly, the *šahāda* itself, the profession of faith, attests of an evolution. Arabic inscriptions in Syria dating from the beginning of Islam have been discovered by french archeological teams. They never mention the Prophet, like the *šahāda* of the Dome of the Rock (cca 695). Thus the core of Muslim doctrine was subject to some hesitation until the period 680-720.

### **\*The Philological questions**

Since the last quarter of the twentieth Century, semantic and philological research has sought to go beyond the historical-critical analysis and to reconsider the Qur'ān as a whole, with its internal logic and its own "ideological project".

The first Qur'ān manuscripts did not have the diacritical marks necessary to recognise the consonants. This is well known. Thus, the manuscript of the Grand Mosque of Sanaa (end of the seventh Century) has bare letters. From the eighth Century onwards, our textual witnesses show those diacritical marks. Moreover, the vowels were not noted either, which multiplied the reading possibilities of the sacred text. Until the tenth Century, when the Caliphs imposed seven canonical readings, there were many ways to vocalise the Qur'ān. Philologists have put forward the hypothesis that this double lack of diacritics and vocalisation of the written text during the first Century of Islam produced a multitude of errors.

Without contesting the existence of strata of composition, new studies consider the Qur'ānic text as a whole, whose internal characteristics should be

considered, and linked to the Arabic context and the logic of arabic rhymes et rhythm. Many suras form pairs whose subjects meet or oppose.

Thus in *sura* 101, known as “The Disaster”, theme A of the first verse finds its counterpart in the last verse; verses 2 and 3 offer the same theme B, which is found again in 10; it is the same for the couple of verse 4-5, paralleled in verses 6-9. This interlocking process is confirmed by the finals:

1. The Disaster [Theme : A<sup>1</sup> – final : *al-qāri ‘a*]
2. What is the Disaster ? [B<sup>1</sup> – *māl-qāri ‘a*]
3. Would that you knew what the Disaster is ? [B<sup>2</sup> – *wa mā<sup>4-5</sup> ‘ādrā<sup>2</sup>ka mal-qāri ‘a*]
4. On that day men shall become like scattered moths [C<sup>1</sup> – *al-mabṭū<sup>4-6</sup>ṭi*]
5. and the mountains like tufts of carded wool. [C<sup>2</sup> – *al-manfū<sup>4-6</sup>ṣi*]
6. Then he whose scales are heavy [C<sup>1a</sup> – *mawā<sup>2</sup>zīnuhu*]
7. shall dwell in bliss ; [C<sup>1b</sup>]
8. but he whose scales are light, [C<sup>2a</sup> – *mawā<sup>2</sup>zīnuhu*]
9. the Abyss shall be his home. [C<sup>2b</sup>]
10. Would that you knew what this is like? [B<sup>’</sup> – *wa mā<sup>4-5</sup> ‘ādrā<sup>2</sup>ka ma hiya*]
11. It is a scorching fire. [A<sup>’</sup> – *nāru ḥāmiya*]

A certain number of *sura* respect this type of subtle prosody masked by an apparent disorder which can be reduced to the three following layouts: ABC/A’B’C’; ABC/C’B’A’; ABC/x/A’B’C’. The verses that articulate the passage of a sequence or a theme to another are thus the most important. In the long description of the carnal delights of Paradise (S. 55, 46-76), the central verse give the real ethical message of the Qur’ān: "What is the reward of good if not good itself?" (55, 60). As said by Michel Cuypers, “the statements that occupy in the center [of a *sura* or a sequence] sometimes prove to be more universal and fundamental than the special rules surrounding them”. The inconsistency of the text, so much repeated, would be to overlook.

Other french philologists approach to the text is to insert it into the nomadic mentalities of the Hedjaz, pregnant within the earliest Muslim communities. However, the conquest and integration of a large number of the great Persian, Mesopotamian, Syrian and Egyptian cultural centers would have made a large number of typically tribal and peninsular references incomprehensible, thereby needing to be reinterpreted. *Sura* 114, the ending one, would be a kind of echo of this tribal Proto-Islam:

1. Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of Men (*rabb an-nās*),
2. the King of men (*malīk an-nās*),
3. the protector of men,
4. from the mischief of the slinking prompter
5. who whispers in the hearts of men ;
6. from jinn and men.



Whereas current exegesis understands the first verses to be recognition of the universal God of Islam, Jacqueline Chabbi shows that the *rabb* has firstly a local meaning, indicating the lord of the tribal camp (*rabb al-dār*). The *malīk* refers to a wider, inter-tribal reality, to a chief who has managed to impose himself above his natural group, over several cities and wells at the same time. According to such an interpretation of this late *sura*, the original Islam did not have universalist pretensions, and might have been a sort of Arabic henotheism. But its victories beyond its peninsular and nomadic context led the new masters of the community to widen the Qur'ānic vocabulary. The word *rabb* was thereafter associated to the only God.

This French intellectual culture, which combines intimate knowledge of Islamic texts, respect for religious and critical analysis, can help to build a new relationship of Muslim communities to their sources, to leave their literalism to an new understanding of the faith.

### **III. The political role of France in the world of post-Daech**

#### **\*The French blindness**

Against Daech, France has committed all tactical and strategical errors since 2011: alliance with the jihadists, war against Gaddafi, criminalization of Bashar al-Assad, no ground invasion, air bombing. Because of the Paris attacks, attention was focused on terrorism, while terrorism is a way to a purpose, not an end in itself. For men attracted by terrorism, fearing a population can prepare minds to another step, ideological one, changing a political regime, provoking a coup, getting autonomy of a province. The terrorist has a face and a name, it is not just a monster, he follows a logical. Terrorism has a purpose and France has forgotten it.

#### **\*France and USA**

Another mistake: France is linked to United States. Now, thanks to shale gas, the US problem is not the Middle East, and President Obama has done everything to disengage from the region.

Now the attention of United States turned to Russia. On 15 November 2015, the *Institute for the Study of War*, the main american academic think-tank, basing its reports to the US policy in Middle East, published the elements for a new US strategy in Syra.

Some passages indicate that the United States are preparing, after the next presidential election, to harsh military tactics, that can compound the trauma of population and the failure of the peace:

“We must stop the gloves against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, adjust the rules of engagement for accepting the risk of collateral damage, hitting all targets of ISIS that are on our lists, and do maximum damage possible by the air and quickly (...).”

A crisis is already feared with Russia:

“Everything must be done to remove the Assad regime of power, not just Assad (...). We must reject the Russians from Syria.”

The United States therefore already switched to the "post-Daech" world, a world who promises no mercy for the people of the Middle East.

However, in this dramatic vision, France has clearly a role as intermediary and diplomatic power relay, as long as the French leaders agree to distance themselves from the US ally.

### **\*French failures**

Current failures of in France are not only those of its leaders: they are intellectual and moral. Only military options, technical and blind are actually thought; the hypothesis - in itself absurd – of an endless world war haunts the minds and speeches. As George Orwell showed in his novel, “1984”, staging a permanent war becomes the logic of a without landmarks world. Thus, by focusing media attention on ISIS and its crimes, France and the United States are exempt from any responsibility in the emergence of Daesh. Clearly, fear of jihadism is also a blackmail for Western societies that have lost the meaning of peace.

The war against ISIS is easier than peace. The choice of a soft war by airstrikes reassures a volatile electorate. But nobody wins peace by military means, much less by airstrikes, which are a sign of refusal to fight. The air action is necessarily unfair because it invariably strikes civilians... All our allies played in their time the islamist card Islamist: Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia.

France has even trained and armed the "moderate Islamists". So we haven't learned anything from the Afghan war, Libyan, Iraqi, Arab Spring... All Islamist declares himself moderate in exchange for cash and weaponry, until he can impose sharia law. Support Islamism is putting wood in the jihadist fire. France and the United States therefore have lost peace because they no longer know how to think differently in terms of war, and an indirect war...

But, in any conflict, solutions to obtain peace come in three times. First step, the war; medium step, diplomacy; Long-step, reconstruction of wounded

societies. Currently, only the short-step has been thought. The true peace recalls the Aristotelian requirement of the common good: the security of people, property, stability of states and borders, the freedoms of religion. These requirements haven't been discussed in Middle East, even by France. France is fighting without knowing what for, for what good...

### **\*Conclusion**

So provocative, we could say that this is not so much the Islamic state that is the problem now, but the same principles of French diplomacy who will no more accept political reality to defend the common good. Are we still able to think the world without Manichaeism and references of democracy?

French culture despises neither religious nor Muslims, but it is deeply anti-globalization. Because France has only universalists culture and reason. Its global political power had always failed, as shown the memory of Napoleon's Army in Moscow. France is anti-globalization and therefore anti-capitalist. It is anti-globalization and therefore anti-Islamist. Faced with this double Islamist and capitalist globalization, France could be one alternative to the cruel violence of Daesh and to the sweet violence of global liberalism. More than ever, the gun of France is its reason.