



HAL
open science

The Koran and Freedom of Thought

Dominique Avon, Abdellatif Idrissi

► **To cite this version:**

Dominique Avon, Abdellatif Idrissi. The Koran and Freedom of Thought. Books and Ideas, 2008.
halshs-01631224

HAL Id: halshs-01631224

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01631224>

Submitted on 8 Nov 2017

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The Koran and Freedom of Thought

Dominique AVON and Abdellatif IDRISI

There was an age when people had the right to criticise the entourage of the prophet, when religious controversy was carried out with a great freedom of tone, and when Islamic scholars glorified atheism. Today, all the many debates relating to Islam present one single dilemma: the abandonment of faith or fundamentalism. In this article, a linguist and a historian relate how the two “givens” of Islam – the integrity of Mohammed’s entourage and the inimitability of the Koran – gradually became established over time. To them, Islam should be reconciled with the science of texts and freedom of thought.

As an article title, “Plurality in Islam” could well surprise the reader. Published during the summer of 2006 and written by Jamâl al-Bannâ¹, the article gave rise to no controversy at all, illustrating the difficulties of questioning the most common of commonplaces. Jamâl al-Bannâ is not just anybody either. He is the youngest son of the founder of the Frères Musulmans, a scholar free of any relations of subordination with the Sunni religious and political authorities. The thesis developed was the following: a certain number of people think that because Islam is the “religion of uniqueness”, the Muslim community should be defined by the quality of uniqueness, that it should follow one single leader, that it should have a single press, a single party, etc. “No,” replies al-Bannâ, “uniqueness is ‘God’s’ own attribute, none other than ‘God’ can claim to uniqueness, not even the communities of believers that make claims to it. The groups targeted have not failed to recognise themselves, starting with those who proclaim, believing they have an answer for everything, that the Koran is our constitution.”²

In what follows, the author singles out the legal professions who have failed in their tasks by closing off the sciences over which they have reigned masterly for centuries. He defends a principle of “freedom” supported by a principle of “justice” and the necessity to extend reflection (*tafkîr*) in reference to ‘Abbâs Mahmûd al-‘Aqqâd (1889-1964). The apologist intentions of the latter are well-known from his biography of Mohammad which, by his own admission, was more a testimony to a genius than the work of a historian³. The biographer was a talented journalist, with more than seventy works to his name and a committed and caustic polemicist with an encyclopaedic knowledge that he owed to his personal library of nearly 40,000 works. The very kind of figure that contemporary Islam needs, explains al-Bannâ, not to reproduce what he has done but to live up to the example of his efforts of thinking, an effort that he also applied beyond the confessional corpus.

We would like to go further and show that, several centuries ago, Islam had an even larger scope for discussion. Our publishers should remember this – or be told –, particularly in these times where a large publisher like Random House censors its own publications for fear of possible reprisals over a novel about Aicha⁴.

¹ Jamâl al-Bannâ, “La pluralité en islam”, *al-Masrî al-Yawm*, August 9, 2006.

² A slogan developed by the Frères Musulmans in the 1940s, and that is still fashionable today in some circles.

³ ‘Abbâs Mahmûd al-‘Aqqâd, *‘Abqariyyat Muhammad*, Cairo, 1943.

⁴ The forthcoming manuscript is that of Sherry Jones, *The Jewel of Medina* (see *Libération*, August 18, 2008).

Mohammed's entourage: opening up the pantheon

According to documents long neglected in the interests of smooth narratives, Mohammed's close entourage was not only capable of glorified acts of heroism, loyalty to the faith and friendship, but they were also accused of murder, adultery, drunkenness and apostasy. In *Sharh Nahj al-balâgha*, Ibn Abî al-Hadîd (1190-1257) denounces the excessively sacred qualities accorded to the companions of the Prophet of Islam and his closest entourage. While this tendency to bestow sacred qualities upon the group has been amplified by the Tradition, it was inexistent at the start of Islam. To back up his argument, Ibn Abî al-Hadîd tells of the disputes, controversies and disagreements witnessed, not only within Mohammed's family, but also among his companions and successors, accused of major errors. He points to internal struggles, motivated by politics and power-seeking, known to everyone; medieval texts cite them in detail, and authors even allow themselves to take sides with the protagonists in question. The list Ibn Abî al-Hadîd gives is non-exhaustive, as the actual causes for discord were indeed numerous. He talks of the insinuations about the supposed Judaism of Zayd b. Thâbit, pointing to the two *du'âba* (sidelocks) he wore when he was a child and his games with "small Jewish children"⁵. The issue is important; Zayd was one of Mohammed's secretaries and the person behind the compilation of the Koran after his death. It was unthinkable for people to believe that the Prophet of Islam might have been informed by Zayd of anterior Jewish and even Christian writings⁶. And yet having consulted specialists in Baghdad, the names of whom he gives, Abû al-Qâsim al-Balkhî (who died in 931) rejects the traditions according to which Mohammed ordered him to learn these languages. Zayd frequented the Jewish school of Yathrib (the future "city of the Prophet", Medina)⁷, he knew Aramaic, Syriac and Hebrew before the coming of Mohammed to the city.

⁵ Ibn Abî al-Hadîd, *Sharh nahj al-balâgha*, Beirut, Dâr ihyâ' al-thurât al-'arabî, 1960, 20 vol., p. 2090-2092.

⁶ Claude Gilliot, "Le Coran, fruit d'un travail collectif?", in Daniel De Smet, G. de Callatay and J.M.F. Van Reeth (eds), *Al-Kitâb. La sacralité du texte dans le monde de l'Islam*, Actes du Symposium international tenu à Leuven et Louvain-la-Neuve du 29 mai au 1er juin 2002, Bruxelles, Louvain-la-Neuve, Leuven, Acta Orientalia Belgica. Subsidia III, 2004, p. 195-99 (185-231); *Id.*, "Une reconstruction critique du Coran ou comment en finir avec les merveilles de la lampe d'Aladin?", in M. Kropp (ed.), *Results of contemporary research on the Qur'an*. The question of a historico-critical text, Beirut, Orient Institut/Würzburg, Ergon Verlag, 2007, p. 62-66 (33-137).

⁷ Michael Lecker, "Zayd b. Thâbit, 'a Jew with two sidelocks': Judaism and literacy in Pre-Islamic Medina (Yathrib)", *JNES*, 56 (1997), p. 259-73.

Aicha, one of the Prophet's wives⁸, is also at the heart of controversy. She was accused of adultery, before she was found not guilty. It was she who contradicted the companions who claimed to quote Mohammed when they said "three things bring misfortune: women, homes and horses". Versions vary according to the reasons behind this denunciation of the falsification. A hadith indicates that Aicha hated Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, who was set to become the fourth caliph and first Imam of the Shiites, to the extent that she wouldn't even say his name⁹. Traditionalists – the authors of the Tradition – carried out definite and definitive choices, electing figures for reasons that were later difficult to comprehend, but around which much was at stake. This was the case with the issue opposing Aicha against 'Abd Allâh ibn 'Umar¹⁰, about the number of *'umra* (the Mecca pilgrimage) carried out by the Prophet. The Traditionalists chose to adopt Aicha's position, the mother of believers¹¹. From a certain era onwards, her utterances became considered implicitly as the substitution for the prophet's words, naturally outside the inspirational framework¹², because her words were supposed to provide an infallible recollection of the memory of Mohammed's day-to-day activity.

What is important to highlight is that the successors of the companions had a great freedom to criticise and judge the behaviour of the entourage, especially when their errors were established. They considered them as they did their own entourage and did not think twice about denouncing them. It is only subsequently that the Tradition, followed by the *vox populi*, turned them into sacred figures. Ibn Abî al-Hadîd supports his argument with Koranic sura, which to him constitutes the proof that the companions, as well as the prophet's entourage, were not totally free from error and sin. These references, he says, applied to all of them: "Say, I who dread, if I rebelled against my Lord, the chastisement of a terrible Day"¹³; "Arbitrate among men according to the truth, do not follow your passion, it will make you stray far from the path of God, those who stray from the path of God have a terrible torment

⁸ Aicha is the daughter of the first caliph of Medina (from 632 to 634) and the most faithful companion of the Prophet for the Sunnites. According to the Tradition, Aicha was considered as the favourite wife of the Prophet; she is said to have been twenty when she died. The date of her death is traditionally believed to be 678, that is to say, more than forty years after Mohammed.

⁹ Al-Bukhârî, *Sahih al-Bukhârî*, tome 1, chapitre "*al-ghusl wa al-wudû' fî al-mikhdab wa al-qadah wa al-khashab wa al-hijâra*" (The use of lotion and the ablution of basins, pitchers, wooden and stone vases), Beirut, Dâr al-qalam, 1987, p. 156-157. This hadith is cited several times in the *Sahih al-Bukhârî*.

¹⁰ 'Abd Allâh (who died in 693) was the son of 'Umar ibn al-Khattâb, the second caliph of Medina (634-644); he is considered by the Tradition to be among the Prophet's young companions.

¹¹ J. Chabbi, *Le Seigneur des tribus*, Paris, Noësis, 1997, p. 349.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 350.

¹³ Al-An'âm 6/15; Yûnus 10/15.

awaiting them for forgetting judgement day”¹⁴. As a fervent defender of the Shiite cause, he accuses Mu’âwiya (the fifth caliph, who fought against Ali, the fourth caliph) and his successors with being at the origin of the prohibition to oppose the companions through accusations of “fabricator”, “miscreant”, “apostate” or “hypocrite”. As Jacqueline Chabbi has shown, “one mode of representation and accreditation of the past” has been imposed. According to these mechanisms and criteria, in the chains of heritage transmission dating back to the times of these figures and the words and actions associated with them, there is no room for doubt¹⁵.

In-depth study is possible and desirable, using other tools, to trace the evolution of these narratives. The first remark necessary is that the figures involved in these anecdotes, recounted in the books of *Hadîth*, *Maghâzî* (military expeditions), and *Sîra* (the Prophet’s biography), as well as other types of work, most often have an excessively symbolic value in the roles that they play. They are codified and organised in a very precise way. Each has become untouchable, a *salaf* whom the Tradition has rendered sacred. The Traditionalists have boxed them off into a closed group at a specific moment of Arab-Muslim history.

¹⁴ Sâd 38/26.

¹⁵ The prevalence of a feminine narrative emanating from the wife of the Prophet “*’umm al-mu’minîn*” the mother of believers or from her daughter Fatima, an even more sacrosanct figure, is questioned in today’s strongly patrilineal Arab society.

We might think, as Ibn Abî al-Hadîd claims, that the prohibitions weighing on these figures go back to the early days of Islam. Not at all. Ibrâhîm ibn Sayyâr al-Nazzâm (who died in 846), associated with the *mu'tazilisme* doctrine, was so daring that he categorically denied all the hadith or would make up ridiculous ones himself (on the superiority of the cat over the dog for example), allegorise the verses of the Koran he didn't like, and denied the literary inimitability of the Koran and accused all the companions of the Prophet with committing serious sins¹⁶. He is an example of a radical who set out to show the possibilities for increased openness eleven centuries ago, including what today appears the most sacred. Considering the period, we cannot talk of freedom of thought; the idea would be meaningless. Those mu'tazilites who formed a school around two radical principles were considered blasphemous. Those principle were firstly that everything that exists is the result of a Creator, and his "word" is therefore created—in other words, the Koran is not the expression of God himself; and secondly that man is not only capable of discovering through the work of his intelligence the great moral truths himself, but he is also free to follow them if he wishes. This school with its various tendencies tied its destiny to the authority of Abbasid caliphs—al-Ma'mûn and his two successors—while persecuting its adversaries, who, in turn, became adept at stifling *mu'tazilites* writings for more than a century¹⁷. This is interesting to the extent that it was born from a legal problem relating to the validity of contradictory testimonies. The issues are considerable here because, as a function of the outcome, the weight of the Tradition of the prophet's acts and words depends on the channels of transmission of the heritage that go back to Mohammed, and is open to attack. However, many of our contemporaries are afraid of attack. They are not aware of the pioneering work showing that the Muslim historiography of origins is constructed in part in continuity with the late tradition of Antiquity, which cannot be extracted from the context in which it came to be¹⁸. Let us wager that the work announced on the total re-examination of the hadith collections by the Turk religious authorities will manage to get things moving. No equivalent commitment is forthcoming in the Arab world.

¹⁶ Robert Caspar, *Traité de théologie musulmane*. Tome 1 *Histoire de la pensée religieuse musulmane*, Rome, P.I.S.A.I., 1996, p. 150. On the subject he cites the thesis of Mohammed Abû Rîda, *Ibrâhîm b. Sayyâr al Nazzâm wa-arâ'uhu l-kalâmiyya al-falsafiyya*, Cairo, Lajnat al-ta'lîf, 1946, 183 p.

¹⁷ Dominique Urvoy, *Histoire de la pensée arabe et islamique*, Paris, Seuil, 2006, p. 174-191.

¹⁸ Abdesselam Cheddadi, *Les Arabes et l'appropriation de l'histoire. Émergence et premiers développements de l'historiographie musulmane jusqu'au IIe/VIIIe siècle*, Paris, Sindbad/Actes Sud, "La Bibliothèque Arabe", 2004.

The Arabic language has a history

This is maybe because the Arabic language remains a stumbling block¹⁹. Contrary to appearances, the language does not necessarily have an acknowledged history, as is witnessed in the frequent affirmation that God created the Arabic language with the exclusive aim of spreading Islam; Adam—whose existence is not put into question by the proponents of this opinion—talked Arabic and his son Cain too, because texts attributed to them have been published²⁰. A century ago in Basel, the German researcher August Fischer (1865-1949) launched the idea of a historical dictionary. He collected a number of lexicographical reports that were later deposited at the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo²¹. In 1934, his idea was resurrected by the Academy, whose members created a “dictionary committee”, of which Fischer was a member. The Second World War put a halt to the work; the orientalist was in Germany, and his collaborators and data in Egypt. He died in 1949 without ever finishing the undertaking. In Cairo, the academy made his notes available to all, but nobody in Egypt picked up the research to finish it. In their preface to their *Grand Dictionnaire* (1956), the authors however recognise that the history of the Arabic language does not stop in the 2nd century of the Hegira, and that the language has a past, present and future²². In the Arabic language world, little has been done for a half-century to illustrate this affirmation. Research carried out by the Institute of Arab Manuscripts, under the direction of Salâh al-Dîn al-Munajjed and his successors, has added useful elements to the study. But scholars are waiting for qualified workers, financial support, and a will capable of overcoming the obstacles posed by the representatives of the religious magisterium. There is still no etymological dictionary of the Arabic language. Some German scholars have been able to obtain copies of Fischer’s notes that they have used alongside those of Theodor Nöldeke (1836-1930), Hermann Reckendorf (1863-1924), H. L. Fleischer (1801-1888) and Heinrich Thorbecke (1837-1890). In 1956, they started working on the publication of a dictionary of classical Arabic²³.

¹⁹ Claude Gilliot and Pierre Larcher, “Language and style of the Qur’an”, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an* (EQ), III, Leyde, Brill, 2003, p. 109-135.

²⁰ After the death of Abel for example, Adam composed an elegy (*rithâ’*) in which he cried for his son; Wahb Ibn Munabbih, *Kitâb al-Tijân fî mulûk Himyar*, Sanaa, Edition Markaz al-dirâsât wa al-abhâth al-yamaniyya, s.d, pp. 24-25.

²¹ Jörg Kraemer, “August Fischer Sammlungen zum arabischen Lexikon”, *ZDMG*, 105 (1955), p. 81-105; Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, VIII, Leiden, Brill, 1982, p. 4-5.

²² Ibrahim Madkour, “Le dictionnaire arabe au XXe siècle”, *MIDEO*, n°6, 1959-1961, p. 337-345.

²³ Jörg Kraemer, Helmut Gätje (1927-86), puis Anton Spitaler (1910-2003), Manfred Ullmann (1931-), *et al.* (hrsg.), *Wörterbuch der klassischen arabischen Sprache*, auf Grund der Sammlungen von August Fischer, Theodor Nöldeke, Hermann Reckendorf, I-IV (lettres *kâf* et *lâm*), Wiesbaden, O. Harrassowitz, 1957-2006 (the translations of the Arabic are given in English and German). It is hoped the publication will continue.

The time has come to realise that it is possible to have several approaches to one and same thing, without perceiving the other to be at the service of a goal of harm and destruction. A civilisation, a culture and religion that are most solid are those that are not afraid to reach out and be confronted with others, because they have a solid base, founded on conceptions that do not stifle debate out of hand. The confrontation with other viewpoints represents enrichment. Excessive protectionism (women without faces and mosques forbidden to non-Muslims²⁴) and attempts at a total clampdown have never constituted strength. On the contrary, they reveal deep faults and weaknesses which plunge us into the meanderings of obscurantism from where it is difficult to interact with points of view that are not our own. Can we really, today, teach in total serenity and without scruples, that “Arabic is the language of Heaven”, and that before we get there everybody will be confronted with the “linguistic analysis of the tomb”, which means that the angel charged with questioning the dead on their arrival at the tomb will ask questions in Arabic, and may misfortune befall he who cannot answer? Some adhere to this vision of things, even though Muslims with a command of Arabic are only a minority in the world (not to mention the non-Muslims), is not at all reprehensible. But what becomes worrying is when it is not possible to simultaneously hold a different argument. While in the West, many believe in clairvoyance and horoscopes, there is always someone around to say that these are deceptive, charlatan practices; having heard the other side, people are still free to believe. The problem is that in the case of the “linguistic analysis of the tomb”, no ulema has opposed this point of view, even though linguistic studies have progressed and evolved considerably.

Less freedom of speech today than yesterday

Naivety is a poor advisor. Discussions about these subjects are trapped in major political stakes. To say for example that Nabatians were Arabs or be of the opposite opinion has inevitable implications for the most burning issue of the region in the last sixty years: the Israeli-Arab-Palestinian conflict. The shortfall in research should not be reduced to this question. The disquiet goes much deeper. In the controversy between Ernest Renan and Jamâl al-Dîn al-Afghânî in 1882, al-Afghânî asked Renan to not condemn the Islam of the future, in the name of a glorious past, while recognising the blockages of the moment:

²⁴ The prohibition of non-Muslim foreigners to enter mosques, instituted by Maréchal Lyautey under the French protectorate still exists in Morocco.

“I know all the difficulties that Muslims will have to overcome to reach the same degree of civilisation; access to the truth through philosophical and scientific processes is prohibited to them. [...] Yoked to the dogma to which he is a slave, like an ox to a cart, he shall walk eternally in the same furrow ploughed before him by those who interpreted the law.²⁵”

The scholar’s words bear the mark of a kind of fascination for scientism, the quintessence of which is apparently embodied by Europeans. He also fosters the so-called “double truth” thesis: for the humble, the faith of the coalman, for the elite, access to philosophy. Al-Afghânî has never been translated into Arabic and this is not insignificant. There are two groups who claim the heritage of the scholar and his companion in exile in Paris, Mohammed ‘Abduh (1849-1905), to break with the relative spiral of decline noted in a mainly Muslim world. The first (Taha Husayn, Abd al-Razîq brothers, etc.) highlights the need to not take the tradition inherited as an established fact, to open up to foreign languages and new disciplines, in particular the human sciences and linguistics, and to reconsider the expression of Muslim faith in the present day. The second (Rachid Ridâ, Hasan al-Bannâ, etc.) invites us to return to the model of the elders (*salaf*), convinced that there is in the Medina paradigm from the time of Mohammed a model that cannot be bettered. Between the two positions are the conservative ulemas, guardians of the temple at the service of the State interests of authoritarian regimes. Their story is punctuated with well-known confrontations, most often lost by the first tendency²⁶. But what is important to highlight, beyond the legal notice and trials, is the freedom of expression that prevails in such discussions. Today such freedom has in part disappeared.

²⁵ Ernest Renan, *L’Islam et la science* (avec la réponse d’al-Afghânî), Montpellier, L’Archange Minotaure, 2003, p. 40.

²⁶ By way of example, see Ali Abd al-Raziq, *L’Islam et les fondements du pouvoir*, Cairo, 1925 (new translation and introduction by Abdou Filali-Ansary), Paris, La Découverte / CEDEJ, 1994.

According to others, the breaking point comes in the middle of the 1970s. Basing his study on sometimes unpublished sources, Hamadi Redissi noticed how Wahhabism had slipped from the margin of Sunnite orthodoxy to the centre with the ability to fix norms. One of the key moments of this passage is according to him the failed discussion between Habib Bourguiba and Sheikh Ibn Bâz, then one of the authorities of the University of Medina. Through a *fatwa*, Ibn Bâz accuses the Tunisian President of flagrant impiety, punishable by death sentence. Bourguiba escaped the sentence but the basis of Ibn Bâz's position received support from ulemas in positions of responsibility, all the way to India²⁷. He recalled that the scriptural space was definitively closed and that all he was doing was applying the law, instigated in the Middle Ages by his predecessors, which consists of fixing norms and modes of enquiry. He therefore posited himself as an authority deciding the legitimacy of opinions on writings. To Ibn Bâz, thought could not be reduced to itself and it could not dissociate itself from the founding text, even from the mouth of a President of a sovereign and independent State who cast doubt on the literal reading of the transformation of the "staff of Moses" into a snake. The staff of Moses really did turn into a snake and to blazes with allegory and metaphor! It is possible that metaphor is little appreciated by jurisconsults, to the extent that it has an ability to transgress meaning. But is not *Balâgha* (rhetoric) important, because it controls the figures of speech, that is to say, the production of meaning?

The fact of refuting stories that seem implausible, in the way in which they are presented, is perceived as a challenge to the divine word. For Ibn Bâz, as for Medieval Islam, there was no distribution of ways of thinking or literary genres. The vision of philosophers, political experts, literary critiques, historians and even heads of state could not be dissociated from that of the *muhaddith* (the transmitter of prophetic traditions) or from the *faqîh* (the jurisconsult). In this perspective, everything has a common basis, defined by the predecessors of Ibn Bâz, where exemplariness consists of conforming to norms, to a hierarchy of thought and writing. Thus no rereading is possible and anybody who attempts to do so leaves himself open to heavy sanctions.

²⁷ Hamadi Redissi, *Le Pacte de Nadjd, ou comment l'islam sectaire est devenu l'islam*, Paris, Seuil, "La couleur des idées", 2007, p. 217-232.

Since this aborted debate, we have seen a hardening of positions and an exaggeration in the accusations of apostasy, an inflation of *fatwas*. This is not the place to dwell upon the political or structural causes of the phenomenon²⁸. The assassination of Faraj Foda and the forced exile of Nasr Hamid Abû Zayd, accused of apostasy for their writings on the Koranic texts, are the most emblematic examples. There are also less public ones. Hassan Hanafi, head of philosophy at the University of Egypt for more than thirty years, is careful recalling the positions of his youth:

“Atheism is the purification of religion of all schemas applied to it throughout its history. Atheism is a return to religion in its original purity. It repossesses the essence of all revelation. Atheism is often the position of the man who feels crushed beneath the weight of the God of theologians [...]. It is the fact of human reason that refutes superstitions, mystery, idolatry and all exteriority. [...] Atheism is also the point of freedom.”²⁹

Hanafi proclaimed himself a disciple of Qotb and Mawdûdi, then embraced Khomeini inviting him to inject a little Marxist analysis so as to reach the real “Islamic revolution”³⁰. Today he denounces the writer Abdelwahab Meddeb as “sold out to the West”³¹.

²⁸ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad. Expansion et déclin de l'islamisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 2000.

²⁹ Youakim Moubarac (ed.), *Les Musulmans. Consultation islamo-chrétienne entre Muhammad Arkoun, Hassan Askari, Muhammad Hamidullah, Hassan Hanafi, Muhammad Kamel Hussein, Ibrahim Madkour, Seyyed Hossein Nasr et Youakim Moubarac*, Paris, Beauchesne, “Verse et controverse”, 1971, p. 118-119.

³⁰ Olivier Carré and Gérard Michaud, *Les Frères musulmans (1928-1982)*, Paris, Gallimard/Julliard, “Archives”, 1983, p. 91.

³¹ Abdelwahab Meddeb, *Sortir de la malédiction. L'islam entre civilisation et barbarie*, Paris, Seuil, 2008, p. 175.

In French research, Islam has inherited a status apart, and is not studied to the same extent as Judaism and Christianity in the “history of religions”. It no longer exists in a sector once known as “orientalism”. Alexandre Popovic is no doubt the last great specialist to make a public claim to it. Although balanced out very early on³², the thesis of Edward Saïd³³ – which has been oversimplified – undermined its foundations: the East is the construction of European scholars and scientists on which to support a cultural domination underpinned by military might. Sociology and political sciences therefore picked up an escheated phenomenon. Otherwise, French specialists of contemporary Islam can be counted on the fingers of two hands. Because of its history, the state of research in North America is different, but the vogue for “cultural studies” like the weight of American external politics leads to a similar result: Islam and Muslims are often part of a total otherness.

Comparative studies have often proven to be very productive. In linguistics there are Arabic specialists working together with Hebrew specialists (for example at INALCO or the University of Aix-en-Provence³⁴), but their work is little known by a broader readership. They remain very timid in the field of history and look first at the most spectacular or most radical aspects³⁵. Actors in this area never fail to point out analogies to their reactions. In al-Afghânî’s answer to Renan, cited above, the Islamic intellectual accurately observes that “the revered heads of the Catholic church have still not disarmed” in the struggle opposing them to the “intellectual or philosophical movement” of their time. The religious authorities were disconcerted by disciplines claiming autonomy in relation to theology and confessional rights. In this framework, the relationship to the text considered as a divine expression ceased to be regarded as sacred, the notions of “revelation”, “creation”, “supernatural” and “conscience” were debated unreservedly. Archaeological discoveries (the remains of a man in the German valley of Neader) in philology and in linguistics upset established narratives, and with the public reading of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, it was no longer possible to claim that the Bible was the most ancient of the history of humanity.

³² Maxime Rodinson, *La Fascination de l’Islam*, Paris, Maspero, 1980.

³³ Edward W. Saïd, *L’Orientalisme. L’Orient créé par l’Occident*, Paris, Seuil, 1980.

³⁴ Philippe Cassuto and Pierre Larcher, *La Formation des mots dans les langues sémitiques*, Publication Université Provence, 2007. Pierre Larcher is a professor of Arabic and Philippe Cassuto a professor of Hebrew, both at the University of Provence.

³⁵ Élie Barnavi, *Les Religions meurtrières*, Paris, Flammarion, “Champs actuel”, 2006.

The self-questioning was painful and it became known as the “modernist crisis” in the Catholic Church³⁶. The church pursued a philosophical combat which, over time, took on the form of a vigorous dialogue on the presuppositions behind the epistemology of sciences. It was joined in this domain by believers from other Churches, and their most dynamic expression was the Radical orthodoxy movement³⁷. However, it did lose the trench warfare it had been leading with the historico-critical exegesis. Today the Roman magisterium does not uphold that the first five books of the Bible were written by Moses. The Catholic faith has not been undermined by this fact³⁸. Couldn't the same happen with the Koranic text?

Islam, a simple expression of religion

The Arab-Muslim culture is defined by its solid centre. This centre or nucleus is the Koran. It is from the centre that the norms, models of thinking and legitimisation of writings have been determined. Any undertaking in the Arab-Muslim domain has to be confronted, in an implicit or explicit way, with the Koran, which has become the legitimising authority, the supreme model of reference, and the founding narrative. All Medieval writings and (for the most part) modern writings have based themselves on the founding text, from moral epistles to the grammatical text. The paradox is that, on the one hand, believers invoke inimitability (*al-i'jâz*), a barrier that forbids the human use of Koranic processes. This means that we are faced with a form of speech-writing that refuses all imitation, but that is posited at the same time as a model. By definition, a model is used for reproduction and imitation. Here there is total ambiguity.

Beside a narrative of confession, it should be possible to talk of Islam as one form of religious expression among others, nothing more. It is in this permanent coming and going between the two poles—confessional thought and non-confessional thought—that a majority of believers in Judaism, Christianity, and many other religions, have accepted to move. Their representatives have walked this line with difficulty, and sometimes incompletely, as shown in the recent debates on creationism in the United States. In the Muslim world, the movement is

³⁶ Émile Poulat, *Histoire, dogme et critique dans la crise moderniste*, Paris, Albin Michel, “Bibliothèque de l'Évolution de l'Humanité”, 1996 (1962). Pierre Colin, *L'Audace et le Soupçon. La crise du modernisme dans le catholicisme français 1893-1914*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, “Anthropologiques”, 1997.

³⁷ Adrian Pabst and Olivier Thomas Venard, *Radical Orthodoxy. Pour une révolution théologique*, Genève, Ad Solem, 2004.

³⁸ François Laplanche, *La Crise de l'origine. La science catholique des Évangiles et l'histoire au XX^e siècle*, Paris, Albin Michel, « Bibliothèque de l'Évolution de l'Humanité », 2006.

a timid one but it is not non-existent³⁹. It may find a decisive impetus in Europe. The condition is to recognise that, in the past, there has not always been “consensual acceptance” between Muslims on “the immutable rules stemming from the authentic sources of Islam: the Holy Koran and the Sunna (the tradition of the prophet)”⁴⁰. The passion to challenge this position was strong, a century ago, when Mohammed ‘Abduh respectfully crossed swords with Farah Antun, founder of the *Al-Jami’a* review, in which the latter published texts translated from Voltaire, Rousseau, Hugo or Darwin. To not continue this movement is to hold a part of humanity apart from an intellectual labour where speech is never closed.

The authors take full responsibility for the content of this article, but they wish to thank Claude Gilliot, professor at the University of Provence, for his advice and his proposals for additional material.

Published in www.laviedesidees.fr, December 23, 2008

© laviedesidees.fr

³⁹ See Abdou Filali-Ansary, *Réformer l’islam? Une introduction aux débats contemporains*, Paris, La Découverte, “Textes à l’appui / islam et société”, 2003.

⁴⁰ La “Charte des Musulmans d’Europe”, signed in Brussels, 10 January 2008, overlooks this past and the silence of authors do not enable us to understand the diversity of the Islamic landscape.