



Comprendre l'islam politique. Une trajectoire de recherche sur l'altérité islamiste 1973–2016

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BOOK REVIEW

Comprendre l'islam politique. Une trajectoire de recherche sur l'altérité islamiste 1973–2016 [Understanding political Islam: Research trajectories towards understanding the Muslim other 1973–2016], by François Burgat, 2016, Paris, La Découverte, pp. 260, €22.00, ISBN 978-2-70719-213-4

Understanding Political Islam: Research Trajectories towards Understanding the Muslim Other 1973–2016 is not a research book in the classical sense nor is it the author's memoirs placing himself in the midst of events that attest to his own heroism. Published in France, it is rather a complex narrative that reminds me of the late Malik Bennabi's *Memoires of a Witness to the Contemporary Age* (1965). Research Director of the IREMAM (Institut de Recherches et d'Etudes sur le Monde Arabe et Musulman) in Aix-en-Provence, François Burgat delivers a personal testimony as to how a young man raised in the province of Savoie (France) discovered the Arab world, and how he constructed Islamism as a research object. It includes a testimony to some of the most important events that have shaken the Arab world from its independence to the present day. It also includes an appraisal of the evolution of academic and journalistic research on the subject of Islamism, in particular the evolution of French Islamic studies.

Through his own tireless efforts, during lengthy research residencies in Arab countries including Algeria, Yemen, Libya, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon, Burgat constructed the subject of Islamism. He made devoted efforts at conducting in-depth interviews with one hundred influential figures and activists from Islamic movements both inside and outside these countries, as well as carrying out fine ethnographic studies on the trajectories of several Islamic figures and their transformation over the last quarter of a century.

Burgat is the knight of an unruly horse wandering in the opposite direction of the hostile wind of French Islamology. This field has been indeed dominated by political science and pushed forth by government funding in order to serve, in many cases, the security forces in implementing their security policies against terrorism and unwanted opposition movements. In a time in which this science has been marred by reductionism and generalities, as well as essentialism towards Islam and the Islamism, Burgat builds a new method based on the idea that the Islamic trajectories of people in the Arab nation are characterized by a shared Islamic semantics, but which, nonetheless, produced different social and political praxis. Such Islamic semantics is based on a lexicon and not a particular grammar. In other words, the lexicon that makes claims about politics, social justice, identity and rights is more of a medium for signification and symbolic referents more so than being a rigid and normative basis. In turn, this facilitates a diverse range of thought and action vis-à-vis this medium (lexicon). For example, if the term *Shura* is inferred from Islamic tradition, then *Shura* (as a concept) will be understood in different ways depending on the different grammars assumed. To illustrate, for example, the political-Salafi trajectory would argue that *Shura*—as a practice—is not binding (upon those in authority) whereas other actors will use *Shura* as an equivalent to democracy. According to Burgat, when the West finds itself facing an opposition that uses such a lexicon or a traditional Islamic semantics framework, it thinks that the problem comes from that lexicon, but then refuses to call into question the West's historical and contemporary responsibilities of such hostility.

Burgat has built his subject of Islamism through multiple books. Among the most important of these are *Islamism in the Maghreb. The Voice of the South* (1988), *Face to Face with Political Islam* (2002) and *Islamism in the Shadow of al-Qaeda* (2008). These books decipher

the grammar of each Islamist movement and connect it to the grammar of the socio-economic and historical contexts. According to Burgat, Islamic movements are an extension of emancipatory and independence movements in the region as well as social and cultural movements that express the aspirations of a wide segment of those populations. However, Burgat pays more attention to the historical factors above the social-economic factors by shedding a light on the fact that much of the activities of radical Islamic movements are in reactions and not engagements per se such as Sayyid Qutb to Usama bin Laden. This, however, does not mean that Burgat is a researcher engrossed by post-colonialism or Third Worldism. He deeply believes that amongst the different religious and intellectual traditions there is indeed a universal human heritage.

Burgat began life as a leftist with Marxist inclinations. He went to Algeria (1973–80) and took up a topic related to the politics of the Algerian socialist state. The Algerian experience would come to play a significant role in his intellectual path. He would come to witness, according to him, how bureaucracy and political despotism killed the Algerian socialist state. This, in turn, led him to recognize the ‘gradual fading of Leftist Nationalism and Arab Socialism and their inability to produce neither revolution nor reform’ (67). He would also turn his attention to the emergent elites of the Islamic movements during the second half of the last century in most Arab countries. These included the intellectual transformations of former Nasserite activists such as Tariq al-Bishri (Egypt) or communists like Adel Hussein (Egypt), both of whom—along with other Islamic figures like Rashid al-Ghannoushi—developed a new programme for Islamic revival inspired by *tajdidi* (revisionist) Islamic thought. Furthermore, he would also become aware of the systematic colonial politics of the French authorities in Algeria even after having granted it its independence. Perhaps this is what would encourage him to view Islamic movements as a reaction to colonial politics, a reaction that is taking various forms that include ‘cultural representations of a Muslim Other who refuses to embrace some of the precepts of Western Modernity’ (132). This would then encourage him to devote much attention to Western support for what Burgat referred to as ‘Arab Pinochets’.

The significance of Burgat’s work is his ability to observe and account for the dynamics of Islamic discourse and actions of Islamic movements without monolithically categorizing them all under the rubric of ‘political Islam’. I prefer indeed to use ‘Islamic Political Thought’ or ‘Islamic Movements’ because the term ‘political Islam’ is often used to deride a movement and to suggest that all their trajectories are the same, composed of readers of Sayyid Qutb of the Muslim Brotherhood to al-Qaeda. It is worth noting that among those who employ such categorizations (e.g., political Islam) are the ‘guardians’ of official Islam who consider that the Islam to which they adhere is essentially apolitical. As such, the confinement by those guardians of the Islamic opposition figures in the religious sphere is a way of denying themselves from being political. This point has been strongly reiterated by Burgat through this book. Burgat’s experience in Sudan was built on the *tajdidi* platform of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood in comparison to the prevailing Sufi movements. Burgat’s work on Sudan was written during the reign of Hassan al-Turabi who played an important role in the early 1980s in organizing forums to establish alliances between emergent Islamic movements, nationalists and leftists, as well as how these platforms contributed to new relationships between Hezbollah and the Aoun movement, or Hamas and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. He also described how these platforms and gatherings displeased security and intelligence services in the West. Burgat writes on how the French intelligence services would send an informant, funded by the former interior minister, Charles Pasqua, to spy on those attending these events.

Burgat goes on to describe his experience as director of the French research centre in Yemen (Centre français d’Archéologie et de Sciences Sociales de Sanaa). Given that Yemen was not colonized by a Western power, Burgat describes how he felt more comfortable to act and

build relationships with many of Yemen's political and economic elites and figures. He gave close attention to the ways in which modernization took their own natural course without having been pushed by a colonial state. It was in Yemen that Burgat would have his first experience of pushing for online publication through an electronic gateway as part of the Institute of French Studies' website in order to push for more visibility of Yemeni knowledge production along with their French one. This gateway indeed swiftly allowed online publication in different languages. He would repeat this project during his time as director of the French Institute of Near East in Damascus (Institut français du Proche-Orient).

Burgat ends each chapter on an Arab country with a personal testimony about the uprisings that occurred there. These were uprisings, according to him, that came to prove his hypothesis on the importance of Islamic elites as key actors that co-launch (with others of course) these uprisings and/or benefit from them, before the emergence of counter-revolutions made possible by an alliance between the military and leftist elites and petrodollars. Here, Burgat is very sensitive to the role of regional and international actors in confessionalizing some of these uprisings (Bahrain, Syria and Yemen). He also devotes a chapter on the Palestinian Resistance Movement, Hamas, which has suffered from triple dominations by Israel, the Palestinian National Authority under Fatah, and finally Western hegemony, which refused to accept the results of the Palestinian legislative elections that gave a victory to Hamas. Here Burgat remembers how the settler's conversation with him in the public transport from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv is no different from that of the French settler in Algeria.

Burgat then goes on to examine the circumstances of French people from Arab origins, or what he calls 'the Others amongst us', and how the French government and media have given a platform to reformist voices who, in turn, transformed 'Islam in France' to 'French Islam' that is adapted to what a French audience wants to hear. Here, he uses a nice metaphor of a train, where the locomotive is separated from the rest of the carriages. Burgat describes the Islamic reformists as the locomotive which, instead of pulling the rest of the carriages, is running alone detached from the carriages while being watched by the spectators (the French general public audience listening to the reformist). The detached carriages represent the Muslim public that is supposed to be pulled by the driver. As a result, these reformists produce what Burgat refers to as 'false secularism' which seeks to assimilate the culture of the Muslim Other into that of the majority. For instance, drinking alcohol becomes part of this secularism. Burgat calls upon French modernity to do away with its own formalism and recognize that it is the right of a woman to wear whatever she pleases, including the *hijab*. This superficial way of understanding secularism, Burgat argues, can be found in the Arab world where the illiberal left understood modernity and the traditionalists understood Islam. Hassan at-Turabi provides important innovation calling for any dress for praying against this latter, specifically the Sufi movements that imposed only specific traditional dress for that.

Burgat then devotes much time to speak of his long-standing relationship with the Swiss (from an Egyptian background) Philosopher Tariq Ramadan. He also discusses his differences with Ramadan with regards to the Arab uprisings. Burgat recalls how the French authorities banned Ramadan from entering its territory to deliver lectures in several cities, despite the fact that Ramadan is a true reformist (who drives train carts with his locomotive) with wide followers especially among European Muslim youth. Tariq Ramadan rose to fame for his concept of positive integration, calling upon European Muslims to take up such positive integration. Ramadan calls upon, what he refers to as, 'Western Muslims' to contribute in a positive manner to the development of their communities instead of thinking through the 'we' and 'them' binary. He refers to this as the post-integration phase. And while the French media, according to Burgat, continues its witch hunt against Ramadan, it invites Imams who comfort French audiences, such as Imam Hassan al-Shaghloumi. Burgat brings to fore the

double standards in France, which is selective in its determination of what constitutes free speech. An example of such, Burgat cites, is the French government's handling of the *Charles Hebdo* magazine, or what he refers to as the government's blind alliance to the magazine, after it was attacked in 2015.

In this book, we find passages of strong critique of other research and experts in the field of Islamic studies such as Oliver Roy and Gilles Kepel, both of whom have monopolized the media and political space. Burgat also critiques politicians with Islamophobic inclinations, especially after the Paris attacks of 2015. From the very first page he sarcastically dedicates the book to Roy and Kepel who galvanized some of his ideas. He also thanks the former French Prime Minister Manuel Valls and his advisors for 'the ardent adventure of a deplorable drama of withdrawing the nationality from undesirable migrants' (3), which gave Burgat a stronger desire to prove that such an opportunistic project for electoral reasons would be at a high cost to the people who Valls pretends serving. Burgat has pointed out that the most common interpretation of the phenomenon of jihadism, whether in the West or even in some Arab regimes, insists that jihadists are considered 'fanatics', which is a way of denying that there are historical and sociological contexts that contribute to their 'deviance'. And if those for Kepel are crazy about God, for Roy they are simply mad! While Kepel shows that the problem is in Islam as a doctrine within the paradigm of radicalization of Islam, for Roy there is the 'Islamization of radicalism'. As Roy points out in his important book, *The Jihad and Death* (2016), terrorists are primarily socially marginalized, which has led them to radicalism, but Roy points out the nihilism of their terrorist acts. Roy provides an excellent review of the paths of some who left France for Iraq and Syria, showing that they did not pass through the Salafist mosques and, thus, there is an individual understanding of Islam, which later prompted their radicalism. Burgat criticizes his colleague Roy, stating that he did not take into account the implications of the hegemonic relations between the North and South and the importance of the Palestinian cause for those who feel strangers in their country, France. Here, I would criticize Burgat for the fact that a good analysis of this radicalization should combine not only these crucial factors but also the sociological and psychological factors that Roy focuses on.

Finally, even if François Burgat is disappointed about his marginalization from politics and the media in France, he remains one of the most positive influences on the development of thinking on Muslim communities in Europe, and their institutions, and a theorist on the rights of those generations to adhere to their own Islamic semantics. Through a series of interviews I have conducted with some activists from the French community, it became clear to me that Burgat's message to the Muslim community to vote for the Presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron in order to avoid the worst outcome has much more audience than Tariq Ramadan's call for what he calls *active abstention*.

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