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“Critical Islam” Debating/Negotiating Modernity

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Abstract

The intellectual discourse of Muslim elites born and educated in a Western environment gives impetus, sometimes not entirely consciously, to the debate on the critical potential of the public sphere. This new Islamic critique suggests that the Western public spheres lose their cohesive force and political thrust and practically dismantle into fragmented, disparate, and alienated discourses under increasing transnational pressures because they have never questioned their normative secular underpinnings. This new critical insight implies new modes of public participation and occasions a transformation of the traditional notion of public sphere as it has been described by prominent Western theoreticians of modernity (such as Jurgen Habermas). The debate between the classical Western approach to “public sphere” and modernity and the “new” Islamic critique of it (via Tariq Ramadan, Fethi Benslama, and Malek Chebel) is at the center of this paper.

“Critical Islam” and the Public Sphere: Defining the Limits of Modernity

[1] The relationship between reason embodied in contingent historical practices and reason as a universal category, has never ceased to be an important topic in the critical theories of the various disciplines within philosophy and social science. The discussion on the function of religion intensifies the theoretical debates for a number of reasons. On the one hand, reason has been recognized in the West as an internal purpose of all religions ever since the European Enlightenment’s assertion of the Cartesian rationality and the Kantian autonomy. On the other hand, in the modern age, deeply marked by the complex cultural, economic, and political processes of globalization, secularization, and cultural homogenization, religion appears to be the only refuge of difference, the true sanctuary of values and authenticity. Unlike the Enlightenment reason that, in the insanities of world wars, the hell of concentration camps, and the unbridled, morally problematic technologization of society,

seems to have failed to fulfill modernity’s promise of emancipation, religion reappears in the Western public discourse as both an ultimate recourse to sanity and an individual path to salvation.

[2] Certainly, the growing public visibility of religion in Western societies could be approached through different conceptual tools. From sociological and anthropological perspectives, religion is often understood as reflective of complex communal, cultural, social, generational, and even economic dynamics. From a political perspective, religion today seems to mobilize with new force and arguments the debate about the power and limits of the secular state. The intense political debate about religious symbols in Europe betrays the political crisis of the (European) nation state that seems unable to handle the loss of control over certain religious segments of the European population. The resulting demonization of religion in general and of Islam in particular exacerbates even more the feeling of failure of Western secularism. The Western secular state seems unable to generate successful political impartiality amidst multiculturalism. From the perspectives of theology and philosophy, the debate on religion is primarily on the sources of reason. While for theologians and philosophers it is important to assert whether reason is divinely inspired, or a product of independent, morally free thinking, or both, cultural theorists, on the other hand, recognize in the multiple dimensions of the current religious upheaval the pitfalls and failures of the inherently secular project of the European Enlightenment and its most precious product, Western modernity.

[3] My intention in what follows is to enter the debate on the crisis of modernity through a commentary on one of its major constructs, the secular public sphere, and to provide a perspective on the critique that I would like to name simply (and for the sake of methodological clarity) “critical Islam.” The task of my paper is thus twofold: I wish, first, to organize and present in a vivid argument the thrust of secularism and the project of the European Enlightenment through the prism of the theory of the public sphere as developed by Jurgen Habermas; second, I wish to draw the complex trajectory of critique issuing from three Muslim intellectuals, Tariq Ramadan, Malek Chebel, and Fethi Benslama, all of them products of and working within Western academia. It should be noted that Ramadan, Chebel, and Benslama do not share a unitary vision of Islam and that their critiques come from the intellectually disparate and sometimes contradictory fields of theology, literature, anthropology, and psychoanalysis. What connects their perspectives, however, is a mistrust of the emancipatory project of secular reason and Western modernity. Therefore, the term “critical Islam” is a theoretical construct invented to reflect a critical mode of analysis generated by the intelligentsia of the Muslim Diaspora in the West and does not claim theological accuracy. Moreover, the notion “critical Islam” suggests an intellectual wink at the classical school of critical theory in Europe, the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, one representative of which is Jurgen Habermas.

[4] What I propose is the hypothesis that religion – specifically, the intellectual discourse of Muslim elites born and educated in a Western environment – initiates, sometimes not entirely consciously, a debate on the critical potential of the public sphere and secular modernity. Precisely this public debate on religion, initiated by Western Muslim intellectuals, occurring on the boundaries of various disciplines and exploiting various vocabularies, is crucial for any attempt at understanding and deconstructing the East-West division. This

debate has not only theoretical but also pragmatic dimensions. On a theoretical level, the discourse I call “critical Islam” re-conceptualizes the normative and political facets of the theory of the public sphere in particular and of secularism/modernity in general within three different theoretical regimes. On a pragmatic level, “critical Islam” encounters the secularist state (especially in the French case) with intellectual arguments that did not remain unnoticed given the intensity of the public exchange and the subsequent legislative measures. I would like to pay particular attention here to the three different modes of thinking shown in Ramadan, Chebel, and Benslama, keeping in mind that ideas can hardly be divorced from political praxis.

[5] Tariq Ramadan considers that a public sphere centered on the generation of public opinion, even when the interlocutors do not constitute a *demos* in the narrow political sense of the word, is legitimate if it has a universal normative basis, one that only religion and no other normative power may yield. Ramadan overtly declares that Western public spheres lose their cohesive force and political thrust and practically dismantle into fragmented, disparate, and alienated discourses under increasing transnational pressures because they have never questioned their normative secular underpinnings. This new critical insight implies new ways of public participation and occasions a transformation of the traditional notion of public sphere as described by Jurgen Habermas.

[6] Malek Chebel, psychoanalyst and anthropologist of Islam, is committed to developing in a series of fundamental theoretical works a complicated historical-literary-psychoanalytic commentary on the traditions of love, sexuality, and gender divisions in Islam that will culminate in a complex “pedagogy of love” in the words of Ruth Mas, a major researcher of Chebel’s thought (275). Chebel’s work, which aims to de-essentialize Islam by re-thinking the historical relation between Islam and the West, has gained popularity in France at a moment when the French public sphere has become bitterly vulnerable in regards to secularity. At the risk of a hasty generalization, I would like to suggest that Chebel is attacking the non-negotiable cliché of the supremacy of European civilization’s integration of Christianity and secularism by placing Islam inside the European narrative. While Ramadan’s critique stresses that the Islamic cosmopolis and the universalism of the Muslim *ummah* are compatible with modernity, Chebel perceives the integration of Islam and the West through the “positing of sex at the crucible of the Islamic religion” (Mas: 280).

[7] Finally, Fethi Benslama, a French-Arab psychoanalyst, similarly focuses on the complicated Islam-West relationship in his recent book *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*. Unlike Chebel, however, Benslama is interested in the origin of Islam as represented in the central theological corpuses of Islam and Christianity. Paradigmatic for both Islam and Christianity is the parable of the triad of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar and the consequent birth of Abraham’s two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. While Isaac was conceived by divine intervention – by the will of God as a response to Sarah’s desperation at her sterility and childlessness – Ishmael occurs naturally as a result of copulation between Abraham and Hagar. According to *Genesis*, Abraham is the symbolic father of the Judeo-Christian tradition because Sarah’s child is an exception, something external to the natural law. By contrast, Abraham is the real father of Ishmael and of Islam, which means that Allah, neither giving birth nor being born, functions in a completely different way than the God of Judaism and Christianity. The “God of Islam is not an originary father,” a fact that places God in a

unique, trans-parental position according to Benslama. This radical alterity in Islam is extremely important in its encounter with modernity because it reflects a concept of absolute sovereignty that is foreign to the historical, political, and religious trajectory of Western secularization (2009a: 125).

The Public Sphere Theory: Communicative Rationality as the Locus of the Modern Universe

[8] Within strictly Habermasian terms, based on the principles of his discourse ethics, a public sphere cannot be developed around religious values. Religion belongs to the sphere of ethics, not of discourse ethics (or morality). The moral sphere encompasses “procedural” or formal questions of *justice*, which allow universal answers, while the ethical sphere encompasses questions of *good*, the answers to which can only be relative and particular. There are no universally correct answers to ethical questions (because they refer to what is good for me or for us) while the moral (or the discursive) is characterized for Habermas by formalism, universalism, and impartiality (Habermas 1993: 127). Religion is the domain of ethical values, because any of its tenets or prescriptions can ask why a religious value is valuable. Religion cannot be a foundational principle for the German philosopher, partly due to Habermas’s commitment to the creation of a non-metaphysical alternative to the traditional metaphysical moral philosophy. In a commentary on the philosophy of Heidegger, Habermas warns that “as soon as the boundary between faith and knowledge becomes porous and as soon as religious motifs enter into philosophy under false names, reason loses its grip and becomes carried away with itself” (quoted in Harrington: 549).

[9] Reformulating Kant’s categorical imperative in its requirement that norms be universalizable, Habermas develops the essence of his own moral philosophy: norms are valid only when they satisfy everyone’s interests. Matthew King summarizes Habermas’s philosophical standpoint this way: “for a norm to be valid, it must be the case that ‘*all* affected can accept the consequences and the side effects of its *general* observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone’s* interests . . . According to Habermas, condition (U) represents the Kantian essence of the moral point of view; for Habermas to be moral is to be impartial, and to be impartial means not to arbitrarily favor anyone over anyone else – not even a very large majority over a minority of one” (294).

[10] According to Habermas, the public sphere is a communicative space where the principles of discourse ethics should be applied. Religion is not allowed there because its universal claims bring fragmentary and often opposing values into the public space. For example, covering a woman’s face and body is a sign of modesty and chastity in Islam, but this prescription does not reveal why modesty and chastity are important feminine attributes. If a woman’s covering of her face and body is a valuable expression of religious freedom, this again, to Habermas, does not tell us why religious freedom should be considered a value. Another important point is that, if everyone in the public sphere performed religiously motivated acts, the public space would dismantle and fragment into numerous, disconnected, and barely communicating communities. In a way, the public sphere would lose its reference to a cohesive normative foundation based on the impartial and discursively constructed “common good.”

[11] Habermas’s discourse ethics appears at a time when an enormous plurality of ethical frameworks, together with the systematic invasion of the “lifeworld” by administrative and commercial forces, seems to challenge the very possibility that we can live in accordance with common norms. A rescuing step for Habermas comes from a simple non-historical observation: despite our perceived and sometimes painfully felt differences, we humans continue to discursively engage, interact, and broadly agree with one another. Communicative interaction is essential to our human identity. However, under modern conditions of cultural and moral heterogeneity, we cannot expect our interlocutors to share a common ethos. Therefore, discourse ethics’ main concern is how validity claims appearing in moral discussions can guide speakers towards consensual and rational resolutions of practical conflicts. Impartiality is achieved only when “a principle of universalization” and a “principle of discourse” are applied according to which valid social regulations are seen as those that can be non-coercively embraced by all.

[12] His discourse ethics’ assumptions comprise the thesis for which Habermas is most severely critiqued by analytic philosophers of language (such as Searle) and American pragmatists (such as Rorty and Fish) and is a major point of debate between him and his postmodern interlocutors in French academia. It is important to emphasize, though, that Habermas’s “linguistification of the social universe” also represents his theoretical engagement with *difference* and *otherness*. Since human nature is universally communicative and intersubjective, there is no radical otherness that cannot be accessed or commonly shared through language. The *Other* is not an abyss of incomprehensible differences but a speaking (thus knowable) nature. The human being is irreducible in the sense that human nature, even though subject to objectification and instrumentalization, is capable of resisting colonization. How is emancipation possible, then? Through *discourse*, because it contains the rules that ensure equal respect and universal solidarity; sharing meanings with the *Other* is already a denial of instrumentalization. Equality, universality, and inclusiveness are intrinsic to the communicative practices of the lifeworld, and the very process of communication subjectivizes the participants, making them agents.

[13] After reading in meaningful succession Habermas’s three deep explorations of the public, *Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere* (1962), *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), and *In Between Facts and Norms* (1996), one could say that, for him, the public sphere is a network of communicative processes that move between an active civil society and the political legal systems of liberal democracies. Nevertheless, Habermas views the historic unfolding of the public sphere within the Western Westphalian framework (the history of national states) as perpetually unfulfilled and unable to fully satisfy the criteria of rationality and universality needed to qualify as a Western, modern, rational, and democratic type (the terror of the guillotine, Weimar nationalism, the rise of fascism, the leftist utopias, and the insanities and despair arriving with the advent of the uniformed individual in the mass society are but a few of Habermas’s great disappointments).

[14] However, optimism emerges from the idea that, due to our deep reciprocal interdependence, we might be able to initiate a dialogue on historical legacies and that, in the process of their appropriation (which never happens innocently), we might be able to open “the community” for future interventions and collaboratively negotiate the parameters of the concrete political realities we currently inhabit. The importance of the revolutionary aura of

the French Revolution for Habermas is not the eventual failure of its historical realization as a rational and universal type; Habermas’s writings do not mourn over a lost historical utopia. The year 1789 is rather the horizon of hope for the possibility of a rational society. Habermas’s conceptual work ever since the publishing of the *Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere* is an effort to capture the essence of “community” as the building of rational solidarities in an infinitely open and potentially revisable project, the project of modernity.

Ramadan, Chebel, and Benslama: a Normative Reformulation of the Project of Modernity?

[15] What characterizes cultural modernity for Max Weber and subsequently for Habermas is the separation of reason, as expressed through religious and metaphysical worldviews, into three major spheres: science (connected to truth), morality (connected to normative rightness), and art (connected to beauty). Scientific discourse, moral and legal inquiry, and art are differentiated into knowledge complexes that are concerned with three fundamentally different claims: cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical, and aesthetic-expressive (respectively). It should be noted that the project of modernity as formulated by the eighteenth-century *philosophes* consisted in developing these three spheres in accordance with their internal logics, an act thought to lead naturally to the mastering of the forces of nature on the one hand and the deepening of our understanding of self and world, progress, justice, and even human happiness on the other hand (Habermas 1991: 322-24). The twentieth century battered this optimism. Important here is stressing that the discourse of “critical Islam,” skeptical of both modernity and secularity, appears in the contexts of modernity’s aporias and disillusionment with the continuous differentiation of the world into separate “value spheres.”

[16] The point of critical Islam, however, is that the secular public sphere has already been dismantled. It is no longer productive, certainly not of the Muslim communities’ narratives, and needs to be framed within ethical principles in order to regain its critical power. Civil and religious values, according to Tariq Ramadan, a pioneer of critical Islam, are not necessarily opposites and are even complementary: “It’s an ethical vision. Islamic ethics means that you have to achieve values. This is exactly what we have in our legislation in the European countries. We have a constitution, a vision and the laws trying to implement this. In Islam it is just the same. Many of these ethical achievements are just the same between Islam and the West. This is why it is wrong to oppose them” (2009c). In another interview, Ramadan explains what it means to be an Islamic reformer: “It is the ability to marry the fundamentals of my religion with the contemporary world” (2009a).

[17] One of the crucial moments from the Habermasian perspective, though, is that religious discourse should be capable of preserving its intelligibility. A religious authority is an important locus of legitimate messaging because s/he is the producer of context-transcending arguments. Religious discourses lose their identity if their interpretation is so loose that it transforms the religious experience into something else. That said, religious discourse is, according to Habermas, one of the numerous modern discourses, and its main struggle is participating in a scientific discussion in a way that keeps its language authentic and intact. A discursive translation is important, then, because it adjusts the religious contents to the shared rational communicative stance of the public sphere. As Austin

Harrington notes, “discursive translation ‘liquefies’ religious contents without ‘liquidating’ them” (552). Certainly, an attempt at such a moderation and liberation of the religious dogmatic corpus comes from the pioneers of critical Islam. Still, Habermas needs to answer whether it is reasonable and fair to demand that the believers of a religious creed fully submit to pluralism. If religion is only one perspective among others, who has the legitimacy to determine the boundaries of the discursive framework within which the translation of contents (religious ones, among others) is to take place?

[18] Tariq Ramadan, a significant Egyptian-Swiss Islamic philosopher and theologian and pioneer of critical Islam, is one of the major intellectual figures who have appeared on the international scene due to the Internet, television, and recordings. Ramadan’s personal website, for example, is a kind of informational portal that assembles and transmits in several languages information, videos, lectures, debates, and controversies that concern global Islam. The site is also a public forum, where issues from theology to social practices, from Islam as spiritual horizon to Islam as sexual practice and lifestyle, are contested and discussed (see Ramadan’s personal website at <http://www.tariqramadan.com>).

[19] Ramadan’s articles in the Western press, originally written in relation to the “headscarves affair” in France, have become central to public debates in Western societies. Questioning the legitimacy of secularism and republicanism, Ramadan is also concerned with the education of European and Western Muslims in the ethics of citizenship based upon Muslim principles (2003). Ramadan is the perfect example of the diasporic intellectual because his ideas are not limited to spatial or territorial sovereignty. By overcoming “soil” and “place,” the ideology of critical Islam consolidates around trans-local principles of solidarity and offers a collective religious idiom for the framing of a post-national Muslim identity.

[20] Clearly, Ramadan’s political agenda is projected as a new, critical re-thinking of a thousand-year-old perspective on the construction of the critical subject and citizen who acts on the trans-national level. Many Muslims living in the West have experienced an authentic intellectual revolution nourished by their historic responsibilities and resuscitated by the opportunities and challenges they have confronted. The citizens of democratic states enjoy higher levels of education and have become more critical in their dedication to faith, ethics, and tradition; new generations of men and women populate the political landscape of Western countries (2009b).

[21] Though Ramadan’s reflections appear analytical, they are also, like most political discourses, a program, a call to mobilize critical Muslim voices to adopt democratic methods of action, starting on the local level. This appeal aims to lighten the burden of traditional Islamic authority by taking advantage of decentralized and competing modalities of Islamic traditions and institutions. All such attempts, however, face the difficult task of achieving a balance between reconstructing and democratizing tradition on the one hand and acknowledging the bitter vulnerability of Europe and the West on the topic of secularity on the other.

[22] A delicate moment in the argument of critical Islam is the need to reconcile the appeal for democratic participation with the reconstruction of sharia in a way that will allow the application of *fiqh* (Islamic law) in a form suitable to practicing believers in Western societies

(Salvatore: 140-41). According to the approach of critical Islam, the stake is not limited to establishing order in the lives of Western Muslims; it also presupposes the implementation of practical platforms for the inclusion of Muslims as citizens on the basis of a “common good” shared with non-Muslim citizens. In other words, Muslim law should not define the dimensions of “good” and “bad” only for Muslims; the law should be interpreted in a way that encompasses humanity in general. Ramadan argues that such an approach would prevent the ghettoizing of Muslim communities. Thus, the concept of sharia as the supreme law connecting all Muslims is not negated; rather, it is interpreted in ways that emphasize connectedness through the “common good” over the casuistic essence of the key normative Islamic platform.

[23] The universality of the Muslim *ummah* together with an acute sensitivity towards a need for reform similar to the reform impulses that mobilized the Islamic world during the nineteenth century inspired Tariq Ramadan’s engagement with the question of the compatibility of Islam and modernity. A key moment for Ramadan, however, is that the spirit of Islam has penetrated Europe, which implies not only the successful integration of Islam into the secular universe of the West but also the West’s acceptance of an Islamic spirit that has already deeply penetrated European societies. At the same time, being a European Muslim for Ramadan means an indispensable dedication to the Islamic tradition.

[24] A completely different articulation of Islam, though still unorthodox and approached from a new angle on the Islam-modernity relationship, is that of Malek Chebel: “Love itself. The capacity to love, that is one of the aims of my analysis. In other words, the capacity to enter into relation” (quoted in Mas: 282). The audience that Chebel’s work (written in French) addresses is generally the Franco-Maghrebi population of the French republic. Having deviated from the norms of conservative Islam, the Franco-Maghrebis are, in the words of Tariq Ramadan, “European Muslims without Islam” (1999: 182), who ethically and culturally do not belong to the Arabic and Islamic hinterlands. At the same time, it is important to mention that the social and cultural practices of the French Maghrebi population, no matter how deviant and emergent they may seem as a result of their immigrant compromises, maintain a high profile in the dominant French culture. Apart from the historically strong public influence of the French orientalist school, the figure of the Islamic intellectual has occupied a special place in the French reading and writing elite since 1989, an important year in the international coverage of Islam due to two significant media-intensive events, the *fatwa* issued against Salman Rushdie by Ayatollah Khomeini and the “headscarf affair” in France. After 1989, the Islamic intellectual crystallized into four distinct types in the French public sphere. The vanguard intellectual who acquires popularity through artistic and political activity is an important category, populated by public figures converted to Islam and intellectuals from the Muslim world. Youssouf Leclerc, Jean-Loup Abdelhalim Herbert, Vincent Monteil, Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch, Mohamed Dib, Mohamed Harbi, Nasser Pakdaman, Haytham Manna, Shunsuddin Guzel, Lotfallah Soliman, and Abbas Baydoun are some of the members of this category. Another category, the one of most interest to my analysis, is the so-called “intellectual reformer”; Tariq Ramadan, who did not emerge from the French intellectual elite, is an example of this because of his frequent and significant presence in French media. However, although they follow different professional pathways, intellectuals such as Fatima Mernissi, Abdelmajid Charfi, Nasr Abou-Zeid,

Youssef Seddik, Abdul Karim Soroush, Abdou Filali-Ansary, Abdelwahab Meddeb, Malek Chebel, and Farid Esack are thinkers who are prepared to reform Islam from “the inside.” The Maghrebi thinkers are so well represented that Algeria, Tunis, and Morocco are considered “the Islamic soil where the voice which calls for a new approach to the religious phenomenon is the most distinct” (Walleckx). The works of Chebel, Benslama, Muhammad Arkoun, Abdou Filali-Ansary, Fatima Mernissi, and Rachid Benzine are exemplary in their insistence that the Maghreb re-appear as a critical and intellectual alternative to orthodox Islam. The other two categories of Muslim intellectual, important as they are, could be defined as intellectual-representatives of French Islam (as are Sheikh Abbas, Abdullah Ben Mansour, and Farid Abdelkarim, the leaders of France’s mosque federations) and Muslim intellectuals who are socio-political leaders in France (as are Herlem Desir, the president of the NGO *SOS Racism*, and Fadela Amara, a feminist writer, a minister in the cabinet of Nicolas Sarkozy, and a leader of the civil movement *Ni putes ni Soumises* [Neither Whores nor Oppressed]).¹

[25] Chebel’s general point is that Islam is plural in form, practice, and content. For Chebel, Islam is the main constituent of a complex and originally multiple Arabo-Islamic, Mediterranean Oriental civilization comprised of a mosaic of populations such as Arabs, Berber tribes, Latinized and Christianized segments, and Jewish minorities. Islam is an extremely important prism for understanding the essence of this civilization according to Chebel, but he believes it should be thought through the prism of this inherent plurality that diversifies and multiplies its face from the inside. What is more, Chebel considers the discourse of love primordial in discussing Islamic alterity and the radical Other. In his seminal book *The Arab-Islamic Imaginary*, with a tentative and nuanced dedication, Chebel elaborates on the complex amalgam of concepts and practices that constitute Islamic love. First of all, love in Islam is a triad that unites, sometimes awkwardly, affection (*houbb*), passion (*ichq*), and desire (*chawq*) (1993: 306). Deviating from the purely Quranic reading that defines divine love as *houbb*, Chebel’s ambition is to intertwine the love of Allah (*mabibba*) with the completely heterogeneous and immanent dimension of Islam’s visions of human love and sexual practice. This theoretical *démarche* is further developed in Chebel’s 1995 *Encyclopedia of Love in Islam* and in his 2001 book *A Hundred Names of Love*, which are not only dedicated to the Islamic Eros but are also a bold wink from the author to the ninety-nine names of God in the Quran. Especially severe is Chebel’s critique of Islamic jurisprudence’s restrictions on sexual practices, insisting that literalist interpretations create an oppressed world of love, eroticism, and sexual indulgence that nourishes an Eros at the margins, a universe of “sexual perversities and marginalities” that is deviant but nonetheless fundamental to the plurality of Maghrebi Islam (1995: 32). This particular perspective leads Chebel to reflect on the demystification of heterosexual love as an ideal and the thesis that the persecution of homosexuality in Islam and the sacralization of female virginity are ignorant of the multiple practices of love in Islam’s royal societies and literary tradition dating as far back as the poetry of Al-Jahiz (775–869). In fact, the Quran, the hadith tradition, the life and example of the Prophet himself, and the rich poetic and literary

¹ This whole categorization is an artificial construct developed for the needs of various analyses. A comprehensive study of the methods that legitimize it can be found in Walleckx.

heritage of Islam provide testimony that “there is nothing vile in taking interest in bodily things when the spirit and the soul are bursting with religious conviction and nourished with sincere faith” (quoted in Mas: 288). Chebel’s whole “theology” is inspired by Mu’tazilite readings, more particularly by their belief in the createdness of the Quran and its openness to hermeneutic interpretation.

[26] Certainly, Chebel’s work has had strong political reverberations in France. Unlike Tariq Ramadan, Malek Chebel strongly supports the French government in its attempt to ban all public religious expression and is one of the proponents of the thesis that the *hijab* is nefarious to female dignity. Usually reproached as a traitor by interlocutors such as Ramadan and accused of being a defender of the radical, militant version of French secularism, Chebel engages with Islam in a way more complicated and worthwhile than press labels and narrow political clichés. Chebel is clearly of the view that Islam has no other option but to diversify and subject to historical-critical analysis its basic tenets and prescriptions. However, it would be extremely simplistic and unfair to ignore Chebel’s profound criticism of the Western project of modernity that crystallizes in between the lines of his preoccupation with Islam. Chebel does not privilege secularist over religious reasoning (as Ruth Mas does, for example) but rather explores their entanglement in the complicated project of modernity from a post-structuralist perspective.

[27] A major fact for Chebel is that the Enlightenment, modernity, and secularism have all been catalyzed by religion. It is impossible to understand his critique of Islam without accepting that Islam itself could be a form of demythologization, a means of truth. No matter how powerfully Islam is subject to assimilation and secularization in the Western milieu, it cannot be stripped of its social, cultural, and philosophical role: partial, plural, heterogeneous, and multiple, Islam is nonetheless a call to universality, a reservoir of humanity’s hope amidst its most deeply felt injustices. Even though the practices and truths of Islam are plural for Chebel, the Islamic religion is neither functionally superfluous nor incapable of being a remedy to the acutely felt malaise of modernity. Multifarious Islam in the final analysis means the multifarious operation of reason and memory and a delicate escape from reason’s instrumental and strategic action.

[28] It is well known that both Malek Chebel and Fethi Benslama belong to the post-structuralist and postmodern intellectual branches of French academia. As post-structuralists, their “reading” of modernity contradicts that of Jurgen Habermas. For Habermas, as truly enlightened individuals, we must confront the world’s disconsolateness with hope in the rationality of communicative action. The very concept of God, insists the German philosopher, should be reformulated: “The idea of God is transformed into a concept of a *Logos* that determines the community of believers and the real life-context of a self-emancipating society. ‘God’ becomes the name for a communicative structure that forces men, on pain of a loss of their humanity, to go beyond their accidental, empirical nature to encounter one another *indirectly*, that is, across an objective something that they themselves are not” (1975: 121). God is the substance that gives coherence and unity to the lifeworld, but his thickness as a generator of meanings for Habermas resides ultimately in the linguistification of the divine, in turning God into communicative rationality (the *Logos*). The solidarity coming from God in traditional societies is linguistified and liquefied into the

rationally built solidarities of the modern world: modernity lives the transcendence from within; the transcendence is in this world.

[29] However, the intellectuals whom I have chosen to present, disenchanted with the project of modernity, initiate a critique that is less a rejection of religion than a re-appropriation of it. One of the main utopias of the modern world is one where societies and individuals may choose between Athens and Jerusalem, between the rationality of ancient Greece that has informed the historically convoluted path of secularization in the West and faith in the One as encoded in Christianity. Obviously, the question that “critical Islam” asks, although indirectly, is where is Mecca in this configuration? The Islamic cosmopolis of Tariq Ramadan is one possible answer, while Malek Chebel’s “geography of love in Islam” is a different type of engagement. Fethi Benslama is the only one of the three thinkers who dares to ask this question overtly in his writing.

[30] *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam* takes as a theoretical prism the experimental tradition of the psychoanalytic construction. The aim is to open and explore in a non-banal way the vast literary, ethical, theological, and ontological archive of Islam. Central for Fethi Benslama is the problem of origin, where Islam is placed in a historical, theological, and philosophical affinity with the Judeo-Christian monotheistic tradition. However, a significant difference between Islam and Judeo-Christianity is the fact that the God of Islam is not a father. This means for Benslama that Allah, excluded from the logic of paternity, functions as an absolute sovereign, as an absolute *différance* with no human reference whatsoever. Abraham is the “real” father of Islam since his first-born son, Ishmael, stays at the origin of the Arab genealogy (2009a: 104-105). An especially provocative moment is Benslama’s observation that Ishmael becomes an Arab when Muhammad names him as such: only in speech does Ishmael become the head of the genealogy of Islam, meaning that fiction marks the very beginning of the original narrative.

[31] The God of Islam is not the result of sexual relations, insists Benslama, nor does God appear in the Quran through symbolic filiation. Allah is incommensurable with any reference from this world; he withdraws, and, through his withdrawal, the place of the father is opened. Therefore, Benslama’s point is that God in Islam is actually the original withdrawal of the father (2009a: 125-26). It is precisely this peculiarity in the very mechanism of the functioning of the divine, this “limit of writing the origin” (2009a: 132) (as God is not the father but, paradoxically, at the very origin of Islam is the naturally conceived son of Abraham and Hagar) that constitutes the radical alterity of Islam. Allah is the complete, irreducible Other. This absolute sovereignty of God is further manifested in one of the Arabic expressions for God, *huma huma*, which literally means “he is another self in himself”: He is He (2009a: 274-76).

[32] How does the nature of “He” become knowable if God does not participate in the man-father relation? If the father is not God, then, an important characteristic of Islam is the impossibility for man to identify with God’s essence; the divine is always external to the human. However, the God-man relationship is even more complicated than this preliminary reading suggests because the Arabic word for “essence” and “identity,” *humiya*, is derived from the third-person singular *huma*, which is, as mentioned, one of the names for God. Identity and essence are therefore brought by recourse to the divine, which seems to be

radically divorced from any human reference. For Fethi Benslama, this radical alterity of Islam, this double bind that exists in Islam in the essence of the relationship between man and his God, puts the individual believer in the absolutely new situation of identifying with something impossible. The Islamic God cannot be achieved: he is a potentiality that the individual and historical believer strives to achieve incessantly in his immanence and imperfection, but the final achievement of the divine is always suspended; it is, in the end, impossible.

[33] In a 1998 text called *The Veil of Islam (La voile d'islam)*, Fethi Benslama initiates a psychoanalytic commentary on the condition of women according to Islam. His engagement was provoked by the ardent debates in France over the ban of religious symbols, a topic that has commanded public attention and passion in Europe since 1989. Benslama's analysis begins with a remark made in 1994 by the Minister of Education, Mr. Francois Bayrou, who, while expressing deep respect for Islam as a religion and cultural system, declared in *Libération* that “the face of France” was in danger due to the widespread public visibility of the *hijab*. The Islamic veil is thus a synecdoche here for the “face of France” and functions in these debates as a synonym for integralism (fundamentalism) versus integration. A significant misunderstanding in the French debate concerns the nature of the Islamic veil as a religious symbol. From a strictly theological perspective, the veil is not a sign but an anti-sign, as it is not the veil but the female body that indicates too much. “Veiling is thus the operation of the negation of the body of a woman. Through this operation, woman is elevated into a forbidden or sacred thing, that is to say, into an ideality which at the same time preserves a sensible existence” (2009b: 16). Furthermore, Benslama recalls the paradigmatic story of Muhammad and Khadija: Khadija is the first Muslim because she is the first one who believed in the Prophet and his message. Through Khadija, Muhammad entered into certitude about his God because she was the first one to recognize the speech of Archangel Gabriel as the truth of the Other. She is veiled while Muhammad shares his possession with her, but the moment of unveiling makes the angel flee, a testimony of his truth. In the final account, Khadija re-veils herself as a gesture of acceptance and obeisance before this same truth. In fact, initiating a close reading of theology means acknowledging that being woman means being complicit with the truth of the Other, which she reaffirms through the veiling that suspends her and the Other vis-à-vis one another in the mystery of the Quranic revelation. The “semiology” of the veil is further complicated when Ayesha, Muhammad's favorite wife, separates from the tribe in order to look for a necklace in the desert. Followed by Safwan, with whom Ayesha had an affair before becoming Muhammad's spouse, her separation throws the Prophet into the torment of jealousy. After Ayesha's clearing, the veil becomes a whole social order that structures not only the female body but relations between people, the public, and private space.

[34] Why are Benslama's interpretations of basic moments in Islamic theology important to the debate where Islam and modernity meet in the European secular public sphere? It is obvious that two regimes of truth are competing for the same space. On the one hand, there is the “truth” of the French state as embodied in its various educative and public institutions that define as their aim the “defense of the face of France” through the reinforcement of the French laicity and the rights of man; on the other, there is the truth of the Muslim girl who wants to preserve her modesty before her God. Meanwhile, we know that the Islamic God is

incommensurable with any mundane order and is an ideality that suspends its finalizing in the human world incessantly. Therefore, we have all the players needed to stage an epochal drama in the *mise-en-scène* of the rational, secular West: the narrative of the identity myth of the modern West retold through the prism of the “Rights of Man” and French secularism, both of them claiming to be blind to all sexual difference, versus the narrative of the so-called “traditionalist” Islam, which manifests itself through the ever-unfulfilling service to the radical Other. The clash of these two universalisms is the kernel of the conflict. Moreover, this conflict generates an image of the Other on the other side of the barricade through various prohibitions and institutionalizations that are primordial for the functioning of any community. As Benslama puts it, “There is no other without the prohibition that makes him other to himself and to the other. Prohibition is the institution of the other” (2009b: 24).

Conclusion

[35] While the narratives of two types of universalism prosecute a war over the public legislation of their models of truth, the voices of intellectuals, journalists, ordinary believers, and non-believers somehow diversify the public sphere, filling it with content that exceeds and particularizes any universal claim. I find the role of such intellectuals as Benslama, Chebel, and Ramadan extremely important in this respect. If people like them cannot enrich theology with interpretations that are valid to the passionate believer, they can at least open the message of Islam from inside and popularize its questions, internal tensions, and hesitations for audiences that are originally external to Islam. This analytical and political step, which I have chosen to call “critical Islam,” could rehabilitate the Muslim populations of the West, thus assuring them a place as legitimate interlocutors in the public sphere. Only after the Muslims of Europe and the West manifest their faith as an open archive of knowledge, a metaphysical claim, and an open hermeneutic horizon of complex historical and cultural heritage will they be allowed to choose legitimately either to occupy the margins or the forefront of the social battles. What is more, the Western secular public sphere, developed around the myths of the Enlightenment and, more specifically, the concept of universal humanity as embodied by a universal community that actualizes itself (as for Habermas) through rational communication, is in crisis. The reasons for secularism’s crisis in the West are not connected only to the rising visibility of Islam and religious partiality in general. The more profound problems in the secular systems reside in the internal structure of the universalism they advocate: the project of Enlightenment envisaging universal solidarities in the cosmic dramatization of the “prohibition of the other” (the West versus the rest) has never provided answers to the questions of how its own *dispositif* of truth works, what language its message is written in, and how its strategies of justice acquire universal significance. In other words, the master language of the modernity built around Enlightenment ideals is in crisis; one possible optic for observation of its twists is the staged “encounter” between Islam and modernity. This is not a new phenomenon. A brief quotation from Levi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques* is a confirmation of a century-long deployment of arguments in the dramatic dialogue between Islam and the West: “If the West traces its internal tensions back to their source, it will see that Islam, by coming between Buddhism and Christianity, Islamized us at the time when the West, by taking part in the crusades, was involved in opposing it and therefore came to resemble it, instead of

undergoing – had Islam never come into being – a slow process of osmosis with Buddhism, which would have Christianized us still further, and would have made us all the more Christian in that we would have gone back to Christianity itself. It was then that the West lost the opportunity of remaining female” (409).

[36] However, beyond the lamentations that put Islam on the path of the West to rejoin its Eastern pole, in between the lines of Enlightenment and identity mythologies, the various and heterogeneous voices of Islamic intellectuals appear as a distant critical whisper reminding us that, first, the demise of the enlightened humanist utopia opens up space for a more conspicuously religious turn for modernity (residing only in the critical exegesis of fundamental religious texts and practices) and that, second, after the ashes of all universalisms cover the lands of our shared world, still *to God belongs the East and the West*.

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