

POLITICAL ISLAM AS A REACTION AGAINST WESTERN SYMBOLIC DOMINATION

Burgat F. Comprendre l'islam politique: Une trajectoire de recherche sur l'altérité islamiste, 1973–2016. – Paris: Editions La Découverte, 2016.

François Burgat is a French political scientist who has developed *in vivo* knowledge of political Islam both by studying it "by the book" and through extensive fieldwork. While working as a researcher at the CNRS (the National Center for Scientific Research) since 1983, he successively worked "in the field" in Algeria for his thesis, having lived in Yemen, Libya, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. The time he spent as a traveller, inhabitant and also as the Head of the French Institutes in Damascus and Beirut gave him a very deep insight into the variety of the Middle Eastern cultures and societies.

This makes him different from other French researchers who have mostly studied Islam from Europe and the United States (Gille Kepel) or in and from non-Arab countries (Olivier Roy who studied Persian and worked on and in Central Asia). Burgat's expertise was also heavily shaped by the fact that all the Middle Eastern countries he lived in went (and some are still going) through destabilization, armed conflicts or other socio-political upheavals, such as the Arab Spring, just before, while or after he stayed and worked there.

Currently a member of the European Council on Foreign Relations, he is considered as one of the most influential researchers of the "French School" on the subject of political Islam, or Islamism, in both non-violent and violent forms even as his views sometimes spur hot debates and upset critics.

Burgat published a book on each of the countries he lived in. "*Comprendre l'islam politique*" can be seen as a global analysis based on his experience and research. The book was launched at the time when France is trying to come to terms with the growing terrorism phenomenon, building a new security policy and restoring secular republican ideology in a dramatically changing political landscape. Published in 2016, "Comprendre l'islam politique" addressed national misinterpretation and fear of the Muslim population, after mass-casualty terrorist attacks in Paris (November 2015) and Nice (July 2016) and in the middle of the electoral season.

I. A comparative approach based on lifelong fieldwork

This book is not only a study of Islamism, but also a personal tale and political posturing. From a young French boy to the political scientist, we understand Burgat's viewpoint as we read and discover how he met the Arab culture living through the violent and unstable events that occurred in these countries.

The first part of the book is composed of eight chapters guiding a reader along the path Burgat has taken himself since the 1960s, from one place to another, and building a mind-map to understand his views. He explains how he learnt the relativity of the cultural and social codes in the young independent Algeria. He demonstrates how local culture, religion, language and any other field that is worth researching have been

downgraded to the traditional zone, "folklorized" (p. 52–53) and replaced by the Western and "legitimized" culture of the French settlers.

Then comes his early research in Libya, right after he joined The National Center for Scientific Research and also started to work at the Center for Economical, Legal and Social Studies and Documentation in Cairo (Egypt). He first wrote about Libya in 1962, including on how Muammar Gaddafi framed his power in an anti-imperialist way, using the Islam symbols (green flag, vocabulary, symbols) as a source of legitimacy. This is an example of how Burgat states that the vocabulary and symbolism of Islam can be used in a variety of different ways.

From his time in Egypt and Yemen he explored the mechanism of their respective governments to turn upside down the relations inside religious communities to discredit the moderate Islamist opposition or other political groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Both countries have showed evidence of a multiethnic society with "several religious communities and an autocratic power supporting the Palestinian case and other anti-imperialist left parties"¹ (what he calls "the Pinochet arabes"). He also studied the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, inter alia, came out with a persistent impression that Western secular governments were, overall, afraid of disturbing their links with Israel and with what he explains as "the triple domination" Palestine had to suffer: the Israeli domination, the Fatah move to disqualify the Hamas in 2006 and the ambiguity of the European policies.

When the domestic protests started to spread in Syria as part of the Arab Spring in early 2010s, he looked into the role of the religious factor in the Western powers' approach to the crisis.² For him, the Syria case illustrated how French politicians used a politicized version of the 1905 secular law, both to whip up political Islam and gain popular support. "Followed by a double political retrieval: Bashar al-Assad criminalizing the whole political opposition as ISIS entered the playground, and the European political parties using this threat as an electoral opportunity".³ So far, Syria was the latest part of his comparative study.

II. "Le parler musulman" (to speak "muslim") : a symbolic resource for an identity quest

The rest of the book focuses on the disclosure of the mainstream culturalist approach in France widespread in both academia and political sphere. For this to be understood, he provides a thorough analysis of Islamism, terrorism and their symbolic resources in France. According to Burgat, political Islam in France is rooted in the Western political actions and in the mistrust of and disbelief in religious concepts by a secular society.

A prevalent approach in France, however, is still that of Gilles Kepel who is currently more in the public eye due to his greater exposure to and engagement with the media (mediatization) and popularization of his work – e. g., in weekly podcasts on radio France Culture.⁴ "The world according to Gilles Kepel". He also created and holds the Sciences Po Chair for the Middle East. Gilles Kepel triggers the culturalist viewpoint, focusing primarily on "radicalization of Islam" and self-victimization of Muslims themselves. This approach places the main blame on the Muslim religious communities in France and on external influences on them, including foreign funding, but deemphasizes other social and political drivers.⁵ For Burgat, however, the blame lies as much on both the colonial legacy and contemporary intrusive Western actions in Muslim countries portrayed as attempts "to bring peace or democracy". These "external actions" by the West, in his opinion, undermined internal order and culture in local Muslim

societies and dismantled the tribal organization, depriving these societies of their own historical, religious or other homemade cultural symbols.

Then he provides an overview of how Islam is considered in contemporary France and, more broadly, in Europe. According to him, the Europeans are heavily influenced by the culturalist analysis of both international events, including in the Middle East, and by a similar approach to Muslim religious communities, including at home. Not only is this analysis the most spread in France but it is also backed by the official representatives of Islam who, as Burgat argues, do not themselves adhere to secular republican values, but at the same time criticize the "fundamentalist" behavior of segments of their own communities.

He differentiates between the Islamist vocabulary and its grammar⁶ and emphasizes the diversity and wide variety of political viewpoints in Islam. Indeed, the same *vocabulary* (e. g. taken from Quran) may be used by different forces to legitimize a range of very different, even conflicting, currents and actions. But the *grammar* is how these terms and sayings are interpreted and for which purposes they are employed. The same word will be used in a very different manner and meaning by al-Baghdadi for ISIS, on the one hand, and by the Muslim Brotherhood, on the other. Thus, he sharply criticizes the "pathologist" viewpoint that Olivier Roy holds concerning violent jihad – an approach that does not take into account any causal relation between political goals or grievances and violent extremism such as terrorism. Roy's explanation is centered on the "lost generation" in France that needs to release some violence that they hold inside them. In that respect, Burgat states that, as the French Muslims cannot live on their own, fully accepted with all their culture in another society or in their own land "à part entière", they will go out of their community to fight and try to live "entièrement à part" (absolutely apart).

Burgat's causal analysis testifies that for many Muslims in Europe, this "Islamic lexicon", or vocabulary, is a way back to cultural and national identities that had shrunk and had been reduced to folklore and traditional culture as opposed to modern and legitimate culture: the one of the colonisers or more globally Western powers.

III. Rejection of religious symbolic domination over Muslims: a marginal viewpoint among the French scholars

The dominant culturalist geopolitical academic and expert discourse on Islam, Islamism, and Islamist extremism and radicalization in France is represented, e. g., by Bertrand Badie and Gille Kepel, both highly influential professors at the Political Institute of Paris, Sciences Po, and in some other Paris-based lead universities and analytical centers (a thing to keep in mind is that French researchers are mostly concentrated in few universities in Paris that also provide the government, especially at its higher levels, with most of its civil servants).

Against this background, Burgat's critique of the dominant paradigm is to be considered seriously, in order to provide more culturally relative and balanced analysis that could and should form the basis for policy- and decision-making in France. As Burgat notes: "Nous aurons les musulmans que nous nous donnerons" [we will have the Muslim population we have built] (pp. 277, 295). This means that European countries, including France, should consider to share economical but also symbolic resources in order to integrate everyone in their societies. Bugrat uses provocative language to denounce the dominant "doxa" in the political and academic field in France, selected through media visibility or by the same jury. He also tries to analyze Islam beyond the group of "three monotheistic religions"⁷ where Gille Kepel puts it. In effect, Burgat

argues that French researchers cannot understand Islam and Islamism by comparing it to Catholicism and Judaism and even less so, by looking back to tense historical fights to establish a secular state.

According to results of the "Grande Marche" survey that Emmanuel Macron launched to write his political platform, 84% of French respondents were strongly supportive of secularism.⁸ Today secularism, however, is understood less in the terms of the 1905 law that protected *religious difference and equality*, but more as a *political tool* to disqualify segments of the French population. Burgat states that, from such an angular viewpoint, it is impossible to understand that Islamist vocabulary could also be used to convey genuine social protest (p. 211), as it only links modernity and progress to the Western-imported state models.

Election of Macron as the French president in May 2017 brought to the forefront of French politics a political platform which tries to synthesize different approaches radicalization and terrorism. Some even thought Macron would start to acknowledge and take into account the pitfalls of French foreign policy in the analysis of terrorism. However he reduced his action to the strict interpretation of the 1905 law as leading to equality between citizens and religions. Thus, even if the executive seems to be posed against "aggressive secularism" and started to codify laws to end the "état d'urgence" that was introduced after the recent series of deadly terrorist attacks in France, one of the main challenges for Macron's five-year term will remain the formulation and implementation of adequate ideological response to terrorism in respect of the democratic principles, but also in recognition of the plethora of underlying factors driving radicalization and violent extremism.

Against this background, François Burgat's work is highly relevant for the French politics today. While controversial, it also goes straight to the point – the point that many in France and Europe do not want to see. This latest book is a gift to those who want to get a more critical and non-biased understanding of Political Islam and terrorism in Europe.

ENDNOTES

¹ Que sais-je?: la Libye. – Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1996. P. 17–83.

² Burgat F., Paoli B. 'Pas de printemps pour la Syrie. – Paris : La Découverte, 2013.

³ Magaud V. François Burgat, Comprendre l'islam politique. Une trajectoire de recherche sur l'altérité islamiste, 1973-2016 // Questions de communication. 2017.

⁴ France Culture's website: URL <<https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/le-monde-selon-gilles-kepel>>.

⁵ Adraoui M.-A. 'Du Golfe aux banlieues: Le salafisme mondialisé. – Paris: PUF, 2013.

⁶ Hanafi S. Burgat François: Comprendre l'islam politique. Une trajectoire de recherche sur l'altérité islamiste, 1973–2016 (Paris: La Découverte, 2016), 260 p // Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée. [En ligne]. Lectures inédites, mis en ligne le 23 août 2017, consulté le 17 décembre 2017. URL: <journals.openedition.org/remmm/9782>.

⁷ Kepel G. La Revanche de Dieu: Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde. – Seuil, 1991.

⁸ Grande Marche national survey. URL: <<https://storage.googleapis.com/en-marche-fr/Diagnostic-mis-en-ligne.pdf>>.