

## Understanding Islam in the West: Can Professional Journalism Help More than Overconfident Academia?

*Heba Raouf Ezzat*

Gilles Kepel, *Allah in the West: Islamic Movements in America and Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 273 pp.

Adam LeBor, *A Heart Turned East: Among the Muslims of Europe and America* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 322 pp.

Understanding Islam and the West is not as easy a task as it might seem. If one attempts to study Muslims living in the West, one is faced by millions of people who are divided among different states, come from different ethnic origins, adopt different schools of thought and understanding within their belief system, and incorporate a realm of perspectives, movements, subcultures, and contradicting positions toward the West.

Conversely, if one chooses to study the West in *Dar al-Islam*, one is bound to face a past full of conflict and confrontations, a present of intellectual hesitation and unbalanced power relationships, and a future of confusing choices and questions on the prospects of democratization and the gains/losses of increasing globalization. Hence, scholars choose to focus on one aspect. Recent attempts include studying Islam in relation to the West on a purely philosophical level (e.g., Khuri), the compatibility of Islam and democracy, the future of the process of democratization in the Islamic world (e.g., Esposito and Voll), and studying the response of Muslim intellectuals to the questions and concepts of modernity, (e.g., Cooper and Nettler).<sup>1</sup>

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Heba Raouf Ezzat is a teaching assistant in the Department of Political Science, Cairo University, Egypt.

The two books reviewed here focus on the relationship in its most recent dimension, namely, the Islamic presence in the West in the form of millions of Muslims in Europe and America. Coming from two different backgrounds, distinguished French scholar Gilles Kepel and professional journalist and correspondent Adam LeBor deal with the issue from different angles and use different levels of analysis.

## Allah in the West: A God Rediscovered by Frustrated Ethnic Minorities?

In his book, Gilles Kepel tries to understand not only the Islamic presence in the West and its implications, but also the Islamic resurgence among Muslims in the West as a socioeconomic phenomenon. His analysis is based on the assumption that these minorities turn back to their religious identity because of economic crisis, unemployment, poverty and marginalization. The movements, hence, are regarded as social movements of protest.

Kepel regards religion as a mere tool for mobilization. No attempt is made in his analysis to discuss Islam as such, its history in the West, and its internal dynamics. Religion is a dependent variable, not an independent one. He notes in the introduction that these movements are interesting for the researcher in this field for two reasons: first, because they try to foster a collective identity within a postmodern/postindustrial context; second, because they represent the forefront of Islam internationally since they are located in Western countries where there is greater freedom of expression and action more than in the areas where Islam traditionally has been present.

In three chapters he aims to analyze and contextualize the assertions of Islamic identity in the West today, of which the "Islamization" of American black ghettos, the Rushdie affair in the United Kingdom, and the veil incidents in France are the most spectacular and controversial expressions.

The first chapter, titled "In the Wilderness of North America," begins with the Black Muslims in the United States. Their identification with Islam has nothing to do with an inherited culture; rather, it stems from a free choice and the invention of a genealogy which, through the slave trade and slavery, restores a collective history and therefore personal dignity. In this process the hierarchy of values of American racism is inverted with the demonization of white people, and, in addition to calls for the construction of a community identity, are pushed to their extreme form, that is, separatism.

Kepel traces the emergence of the Nation of Islam from its formation by Elijah Mohammed, through its empowerment by the figure of Malcolm X to its present rising influence under the leadership of

Farrakhan. He indicates how it has invented the modes of social action and mobilization which can be found among a good number of Islamic groups in Western Europe in the 1990s: the fight against drug dealers and addiction, the rehabilitation of gangs by converting their members, the break with dominant norms in order to mark out a strong community identity, and the autonomous assumption of responsibility for the protection of those living in the ghettos who remain marginalized from the labor market without any hope of integration and who face only poverty and exclusion.

If other Muslim minorities call for acceptance within their societies, the Black Muslims reject integration into "white America," seen as the source of all evil and a deadly trap. Claiming the status of the ultimate victim as descendants of slaves, they have clashed violently with members of the Jewish community, who feel that this status belongs first and foremost to them. Although their discourse and action is Islamically oriented, they have managed to gain influence within the non-Muslim black communities, the Million Man March being an indicator of their wide-ranging influence among blacks generally.

The development of the Black Muslims represents a major contribution to the worldwide expansion of Islam at the end of the twentieth century, but it is also a symptom of the disintegration of the U.S. social system in the postindustrial age. Kepel considers it quite significant that the Black Muslims have taken over mass modes of cultural expression, such as rap and film, making such a figure as Malcolm X into a universal, visual Muslim hero in the dispossessed urban areas of Europe and the Third World alike.

In the second chapter, titled "The Britannic Verses," the effect of the mass media in an age of global simultaneous broadcast also played a significant role. Strong images of Muslims burning Salman Rushdie's book in the center of Bradford were seen by millions all over the world. Before it was appropriated by Khomeini, the affair brought to a head the contradictions within the British model of systematic community organization (communalism). However, before dealing directly with the crisis of *The Satanic Verses*, Kepel devotes two thirds of his second chapter to grasping the roots of conflict between the Muslim minority and the British Empire, tracing the clash to historical and cognitive issues in the roots of the relation during the British rule of the Indies. During that period Islam faced, for the first time, being in a minority and losing power. It was back then, in the face of this unprecedented challenge, that Islamic modes of resistance against the onslaught of foreign modernity were developed. Decades later, they were transposed almost intact onto the situation in the Muslim districts of British industrial cities.

The model of withdrawal into the community for fear of adulterating religious identity within an open society was consistent with the doctrine

of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative governments, which sought to relieve the state as much as possible from the responsibility of dealing with social problems, but it was also able to adapt to the electoralism of the Labor Party, some of which saw the *imams* of mosques as efficient suppliers of votes.

This complex picture of historical analysis, British political context, and communal identity within this minority explain the Rushdie affair. Many Muslims felt *The Satanic Verses* to be an insult to their beliefs and it prompted religious leaders, who saw an opportunity to unite the Islamic community under their leadership in a radical direction, into an increasingly vocal condemnation of the book and mobilization of the faithful.

The most extreme consequence of this mobilization was the symbolic proclamation of a "Muslim Parliament," intended to sit in opposition to the Westminster Parliament. This attempt pushed further the contradictions inherent within a political system giving priority to the existence of separate communities over individual integration.

In the third chapter, "France, Land of Islam," Kepel examines the third case, in which, compared with Britain, the policies and principles of the Republic categorically reject the formation of separate communities and favor their withering away within a secular society. Nevertheless, French society has had to face a widespread assertion of Islamic community identity, although this phenomenon first attracted attention in 1989, the year France celebrated the bicentenary of the Revolution. The assertion of community identity, symbolized in the case of Muslim schoolgirls who insisted on covering their hair to attend school, marked the meeting point between the network of Islamic associations of the 1970s and 1980s. A section of young people of Muslim origin who had been born and brought up in France felt disillusioned by the antiracist mobilization and the *beurs* movement of the previous decade. Kepel states in the second chapter that one cannot understand the assertion of Islamic identity in Britain without the context of the relationship between Islam and British rule in India; he also believes that Islam in France in the 1990s has developed within the wider context marked particularly by events in Algeria. The appearance and staggering success of FIS has shaken up the whole system of values associated with Islam, not only in Algeria but also more generally in France, whose Muslim population comes mainly from Algeria and its North African Muslim neighbors.

The impact of FIS on the organizations of Islam in France was enormous. The example set by the FIS, the new relationship it defined between Islam and political power, the social work projects it carried out to combat poverty and despair of the young, and the cultural war it waged against French values imposed a mass "Islamist alternative"

which strongly promoted an Islamic identity based on rejection of the West.

It is in the light of these complex national and cross-Mediterranean relations that Kepel approaches and analyzes the “*voile*” crisis and looks at the way Islam *in* France became Islam *of* France through the veil affair. Finally, in the last section of the third chapter, he examines how this Islam *of* France is linked with the youth movement of discontent and social protest in the aftermath of the Gulf War, just as the civil war started in Algeria. He tries to examine how far French Islam fits in with new international social, cultural, and religious cleavages.

In the introduction Kepel confirms that over and above the Islamic question itself, the claim to community identity expressed in Muslim discourse constitutes a prism through which “we can observe how, and around which, constructions of identity, our post-industrial societies are structured,” but his study offers little toward this end. His conclusive remarks on the need to re-examine concepts of citizenship in the light of those movements’ denial of citizenship and their exclusive identities do not offer the deep examinations needed for the enlightenment promises and their limited success in this respect.

The politics of secularism also needed the author’s attention, especially given that the three cases addressed in the book reflect three different versions of Western secularism.

## When the Heart Turns East: Islam in the West, or Western Islam?

While Kepel’s approach is that Islamic movements in the West have emerged because of socioeconomic circumstances—reaching to the colonial past as in the case of Britain and France, or to the ideologically constructed identity as in the case of Black Americans, in order to understand their roots—Adam LeBor asserts from the beginning that it is “Western Islam” one is actually dealing with, rather than “Islam in the West.” Although they are part of the ummah, he sees Muslim minorities as part of Europe, concentrating rather on their present dilemmas of full citizenship, a citizenship they have not rejected but rather have been denied.

Although he is a journalist who professionally reports on current events, LeBor gives the reader a deep sense of the long historical relations between Europe and Islam. As far as he is concerned, those relations go further back than the colonial era and are rooted in the soil of Europe rather than in the distant colonies. Hence, one is not surprised by the first two chapters (out of ten) in his book.

The first begins in Sarajevo and rediscovers Bosnia’s identity. Not satisfied with writing a book on the war as academics would do later when

it is safer to go there with questionnaires and recorders, LeBor covered the events of the Bosnian war as a correspondent. It was there that Islamic nationalism was reborn as Serb shells rained down on Europe's ancient "Muslim heartland." Serbs saw themselves as the new Crusaders against a wholly imagined Islamic threat, and they launched the most effective propaganda campaign since Goebbels's work for the Nazi cause. The international community did very little to stop the destruction of Muslim Bosnia—its buildings, its culture, its people, and even its history—a history, LeBor points out, that is as much European as it is Islamic.

He traces this Serbian ultranationalism to nineteenth-century Serb poetry threatening to tear down the minarets and mosques. Analyzing the events of recent years, he concludes that this war was planned well in advance; aided by their Yugoslav allies, Bosnian Serbs were able to seize over half the country in just a few months. Arms were smuggled in, openly imported, or simply handed over to the Bosnian Serbs by the Yugoslav National Army. One of the more shameful aspects of the Bosnian war has been the encouragement that the Serbian Orthodox Church gave to its congregation as they set about destroying every vestige of Islam in Bosnia.

LeBor notices that the first brigade of Sarajevo trained to fight back was composed of grinning teenagers, tattooed bruisers, and a lot of middle-aged men with grimmer faces. He observes that the great majority of Bosnian Muslims at the time the war started were secular unbelievers. Only their genocide brought back their identity as Muslims, and the position of Europe, to whom they belonged, gradually made them doubt its claims of enlightenment and respect for freedom and human rights.

The second chapter deals with this change in the minds and hearts of the Bosnia Muslims. Yet beyond Bosnia, Europe had a forgotten Islamic heritage, a heritage deliberately ignored and even intentionally destroyed. In the third chapter, LeBor starts a three-year search into the heart of "Muslim Europe and America," a description he carefully chose (compare this to the "Islam in the West" starting point of Kepel). He demonstrates the cultural effects and far reaching impact of the Ottoman rule in the Magyar lands (Hungary), Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania. Compared to the Western writings on the Ottomans accusing them of all kinds of horrible deeds, LeBor states that Ottoman Islam offered a civilized lifestyle for its minorities, Christians and Jews, at least by the standards of the time and compared to other Christian European territories. He believes that Europe's less developed countries could develop an Islam that combines the heritage of the sultans with the demands of the modern age.

In the fourth and fifth chapters the Muslim presence in Britain is highlighted. Not only are ethnic minorities and the Rushdie affair examined,

but also the Arab political asylum seekers and their active campaigns, in addition to the concerns and problems of the second generation. LeBor quotes the imams, the activists, and professional barristers, who are young and ambitious and who represent the second generation of British Muslims. He gives them a voice in his book by reflecting their concerns and their aspirations.

Moving to the French example, LeBor discusses the reaction of the French authorities to the emerging Islamic identity rather than the FIS role and influence. He stresses that these young Muslims are French but that they enjoy neither equality nor fraternity. Compared to France, the British are far more "enlightened."

The case of Muslims in Germany is even more sensitive. If girls were merely prevented from wearing the veil at school in France, Muslim women in Germany were actually burnt alive in a country where citizenship legislation still draws heavily on the Germanic Nation concept. The West could focus on the burning of Salman Rushdie's book for months but fail to give the burning of Muslims by neo-Nazi activists more than a few days' news headlines. In his interviews, LeBor is not keen to meet Islamic activists. These do not form the majority of young Muslims, but he meets Turkish rap singers in Berlin and young French-Algerian artists in Marseille. They are German and French by their upbringing and identity, but also want to be recognized and respected as Muslims.

In a chapter on Turkey, the former capital of Islam and fortress of secularism, that has been recently overtaken by an Islamic resurgence, he finishes his long search for understanding by meeting with Refah supporters, worried brothel owners, Alevi intellectuals, and veiled TV presenters. Islam in Turkey is so multifaceted that one cannot expect an Ottoman *khilafah* to be reestablished as easily as the Western media loves to depict whenever commenting on the Refah's increasing role in society. Held at arm's length by Europe, nervous over increasing Russian influence in the Balkans (formerly part of its empire), and immersed in the complications of developing links with the former Soviet states of Central Asia, Turkey is searching for its place and role in the world.

Chapter nine deals with the United States, the super power that is a homeland to millions of white and black Muslims, a comparatively new minority in the United States in this century. Their numbers have been growing rapidly during the 1970s and 1980s reaching an estimated six million. But Islam is no stranger to America. Many of the African slaves uprooted from West Africa and brought to America were Muslims. The first African Muslim slave was set free as late as 1807. Black Americans are rediscovering their forgotten ties to Islam, and the Muslims of other ethnic groups want the second generation to be exposed systematically to the religion of Islam.

But unlike Kepel, LeBor tries to discover the other faces of the Muslim presence in the United States. He deals with the issue of jihad, the case of the convicted Shaykh 'Umar 'Abd Al-Rahman, and the frustration of poor Blacks in deprived urban areas as well as the highly organized and sophisticated groups who seek to influence the corridors of the White House and the Congress, such as the Council on American Islamic Relations in downtown Washington, D.C.

The outcome of all these circles might be turning the United States, in the long run, into a society based on Judo-Christian-Islamic values. In the conclusion, LeBor's last words call for challenging the stereotypes, discussing briefly those related to women and non-Muslim minorities. He refers to Muslim contributions to human civilization throughout history and reminds the reader of the role of the *Andalus* (Muslim Spain)—a subcontinent that was in its time a melting pot for Christians, Jews, and Muslims under an Islamic rule—in the history of science.

It is interesting to compare the approaches of the two authors, the scope of their case studies, and their manner of dealing with the same case. Although Kepel's *Allah in the West* is polished by the rigor of academia and one of its distinguished scholars, LeBor's *A Heart Turned East* is more authentic. LeBor's ideas are fresh, and his insights and brief references to European history are more informative and explanatory. Both the scholastic approach and the down-to-earth journalistic one remain essential for an understanding of the topic. Yet one cannot but wonder about the limits of the academic mind in this field, limits that LeBor does not restrict himself to and therefore produces (in the reviewer's opinion) the superior book.

#### Note:

1. R. K. Khuri, *Freedom, Modernity and Islam: Towards a Creative Synthesis* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998). John Esposito and J. Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). J. Cooper and R. Nettle, *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond* (London: Tauris, 1998).