Considering Islam from the West

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Richard W. Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 192 pp., $24.50 (hb), ISBN 0231127960.

Henry Laurens, *Orientales II. La IIIe République et l'Islam* (Paris: CNRS éditions, 2004), 376 pp., €29.00, ISBN 2271062071.

William E. Watson, *Tricolor and Crescent: France and the Islamic World* (London: Praeger, 2003), 295 pp., £31.99 (hb), ISBN 0275974707.

But there is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes, and knowledge that is part of an overall campaign of self affirmation. There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control. It is surely one of the intellectual catastrophes of history that an imperialist war confected by a small group of unelected US officials was waged against a devastated Third World dictatorship on thoroughly ideological grounds having to do with world dominance, security control, and scarce resources, but disguised for its true intent, hastened, and reasoned for by Orientalists who betrayed their calling as scholars.[1]

A productive but controversial field of studies

Writing on Islam and Muslims is no longer exclusively reserved to experts and scholars: 'Books offering new looks at Islam – this one included – appear every month' (Bulliet, p. 115). Everybody feels entitled to say something on this issue, and it thus became less comfortable to be a specialist in Islam and Muslim societies in 2005 than ten years previously. In television programmes, newspaper articles and symposia, academics working on the Middle East sit alongside journalists, opinion makers and consultants. In one way or another experts' opinions are systematically used to explain contemporary issues and in particular phenomena such as terrorist attacks and bombings, just as if the key to understanding the motivation for the attacks in New York (9 September 2001), Madrid (3 March 2004) and London

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1 Edward Saïd, 'Preface to Orientalism', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 750 (7–13 Aug. 2003), quoted by Laurens, *Orientales II*, 102.

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(7 July 2005) would be found by looking at the origins of Islam and the way in which Muslim leaders organised the expansion of their territory of influence from the seventh century onwards. Unsurprisingly, essentialism became the hallmark of contemporary understandings of both Islam and Muslim societies by non-specialists. With regard to 9/11, Alain Roussillon reminds us of the real risk of confusing Islam itself, in its diverse historical realisations, with the use that actors make of religious references in producing meaning about the situations they are living in, here and now. Of course religion cannot be kept out of the attempt to understand certain conflicts, but then the question is posed: 'Est-il nécessaire d'avoir lu le Coran, de connaître les péripéties du moment fondateur de l'islam à la Mecque et Médine, de savoir distinguer les écoles doctrinales ou juridiques pour comprendre les soubresauts les plus contemporains des sociétés d'islam?'[2]

Did 9/11 change something in the field of Middle Eastern studies? Part of the answer lies in national traditions of knowledge in this field, regardless of discipline. In the United States, as described in Bulliet's *Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*,[3] Middle East expertise in the post-Second World War period universally disregarded Islam.[4] Independence had a direct effect on scholars working in the field of non-European politics and helped the development of two streams of study: on the one hand on nationalism and on the other on the access to modernity of this 'Muslim world'. The emphasis was on how the newly independent Arab and Muslim nations could achieve Western standards of democracy. Bulliet was a student at that time and he remembers 'modernity as path to a luminous future' (p. 107). Western democracy still pretty much functions as the unique criterion in establishing whether or not countries are on their way to modernity. For instance, the post-independence military coup was regarded in positive terms as demonstrating the emergence of a middle class, with promising government potential. Islam was considered by scholars as a historical relic, and therefore 'Islamic activism went unobserved and unanalysed in the early days of Middle East studies' (p. 112). In the 1980s, political Islam appeared to be a promising route to a democratic future. But a binary vision of good and bad, who to talk to and who to eliminate, never entirely left the US-influenced way of considering these countries. Western democracies should support certain categories of men who can take the Middle East in a Western (good) direction. Parameters have changed, explains Bulliet, and communism is no longer the priority threat. But, seeing political Islam as the new threat, US decision-makers still believe in helping Muslims to become 'like us'. 'We want Muslims to love us for our values. But we refuse to countenance the thought of loving them for their values' (p. 116).

2 Alain Roussillon, 'Islam et mondialisation. État des lieux (provisoire) des débats suscités en France par les attentats du 11 septembre 2001', *Maghreb-Machrek*, 174 (October 2001), 75–89, at 78.

3 See ch. 3, 'Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places'.

4 On the US situation, one book is central for understanding the emergence of these sections of regional studies: Mark Tessler, *Area Studies and Social Sciences: Strategies for Understanding Middle East Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); see also the introduction by Steven Heydemann in *idem*, ed., *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

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One book published after the attacks against the United states made the discussion vivid.[5] Kramer's *Ivory Towers* was written before 9/11. It was conceived as a very strong criticism of certain US scholars (from all the social sciences disciplines but in particular political science) and launched a wave of criticism and debate about the state of Middle East studies in the United States. Essentially, Middle East specialists were charged with misunderstanding and misrepresenting the region of which they were supposed to have expert knowledge. Kramer in particular accuses scholars of Middle Eastern Muslim societies of having ignored and underestimated the 'religious risks' for the last forty years. According to Kramer they looked for elements of democratic opening where alarming signs should have been reported to decision makers. They had a too idealistic perception of what actors from political Islam told them, to the extent that Middle East specialists have kept most US administrations blind and ignorant of the real danger exemplified by 9/11. To put it another way: if militant Islam is the problem, moderate Islam is the solution. Kramer says no word on the way in which 'democratisation was sacrificed in the name of protecting democracy from political Islam,'[6] nor does he comment on the longevity of authoritarian regimes in the region.

Disciplines matter: keeping a distance from politics

Among social scientists historians constitute an exception as far as the obligation to speak about contemporary events is concerned. The knowledge of Islam set out by Western historians seems currently to be following at least two paths as reflected by the three books under scrutiny in this review. The first remains to a certain extent loyal to a 'post-orientalist' tradition, based on systematic work in the archives and mastering the appropriate linguistic skills, and illustrated by a stimulating erudition. History here is the discipline allowing distance and objectivity in thinking as to the tie binding knowledge and policy making. Laurens's *Orientales II* may be considered as a paragon of this first style of historical examination of Islam and Muslim societies. In such postcolonial studies, history also suggests an epistemological reflexivity towards the use of concepts and a consideration of the tie binding colonialism and forms of knowledge. Finally, it considers the European versus the American definition of the area. For instance, the 'Oriental question' and the Middle East (a term first used in 1902) are not coterminous although both mostly refer to the political history of the ex-colonial powers. During the late nineteenth century, the 'oriental question' incorporated both the eastern Mediterranean region and the Balkans. After Bonaparte's Egyptian campaign, 'the Orient' meant that region under European domination. The need to distinguish this from the British policy of

5 After 9/11, and in particular in the United States after the publication of Martin Kramer's book (*Ivory Towers on Sand*: *The Failure of Middle East Studies in America*, Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001), the blacklisting of scholars suspected of being too close to their subjects (in particular sociologists and political scientists) became more systematic, as did the Internet campaign denouncing the conversion to Islam of particular academics.

6 See the response to Kramer's position by Steven Heydemann, 'Middle East Studies after 9/11: Defending the Discipline', *Journal of Democracy*, 13, 3 (July 2002), 102–108, at 106.

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conquest in India brought about the need to distinguish between the 'Near East' and 'Far East'. By 1900, the Middle East materialises as the region between the Red Sea and British India. However, the current use of 'Middle East' (also called the MENA region – Middle East and North Africa) is a post-1945 phenomenon, and the term now covers the area from Morocco to Pakistan, and it may also refer more globally to the idea of a 'Muslim world'.[7]

The second path may end up being more slippery for the authors and more dangerous for the readers. This is the one chosen by historians willing 'to do something useful and give access to specific knowledge to a non-specialist audience', to quote Bulliet's preface, and is usually based on a '*longue durée*' perspective, classifying facts and changes chronologically, and so presenting a linear history. The structure of Bulliet's book, for instance, follows the organisation of his teaching at Columbia with a conventional periodisation of 600–1000 as the era of conversion, 1000–1400 the era of conflict within Islam, 1400–1800 the era of resistance to Christian expansion, and 1800–2000 the era of destruction of various Muslim social syntheses in the course of confrontation with the West (p. 137). In his case, however, the chronological goal is magnificently achieved and the reader is impressed by Bulliet's stylish illustration of the common roots and similar evolutions of Christian and Muslim societies. A fresh look at history permits 'finding new ways of articulating old hatred' (p. 15), drawing parallels from what have usually been constructed as opposites. In that particular example, the historical perspective serves to reframe the understanding of contemporary events. It is pedagogic and useful. But referring to the past in order to better understand the present may also end up in caricature and reductive analysis. Watson's *Tricolor and Crescent* is somehow delusive. The highly detailed account and numerous anecdotes which sustain the author's project – telling the story of 1400 years of France's relations with Islam and Muslims throughout the world – are undermined by his main hypothesis.

> Despite an ungraceful end to the French Islamic Empire in the 1950s and early 1960s, France's experience of empire imparted significant knowledge of Islam and of Muslim populations in two regards – the ability to continue to exercise decisive foreign policy within the Islamic world (for example in the Sahara), and the capacity to infiltrate radical Islamic terrorist organisations.

Watson then concludes his introduction by emphasising that 'despite the presence of Muslim terrorist organisations like the "Roubaix gang" and al Qaida on French soil, French intelligence agencies have managed to stave off September 11-type attacks on French targets. Much can be learned from the history of French contacts with Islam' (pp. xxii–xxiii).

As expressed by Bulliet in his *Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*, there are almost no options for scholars working in 2005 on the Middle East, Islam or Muslim societies, other than connecting their academic interest with the international events that have

7 Laurens usually prefers to talk about the 'Orient arabe' as a geographical domain including the Machrek and the Maghreb. The definition of the commonality of that region is in this case based not on politics but rather on human dimensions of religious plurality. Henry Laurens, *Le grand jeu. Orient arabe et rivalités internationales depuis 1945* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1991).

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made Islam a common global issue on which everyone feels entitled to comment. The methodological tools to do this are not restricted to a single technique. A dominant global narrative emerged in the aftermath of the widespread adoption of Huntington's concept of 'clash of civilisations'. The second and third Gulf wars, 9/11, the terrorist attacks in Madrid and in London are further links in the chain of tragic events. The 'cosmic proportions' assumed by Huntington's three words have reformulated an old dominant idea: Islam as religion is the only dangerous challenge to 'Western culture'. The strength of Huntington's influence on the US establishment partly explains this. As a reaction to the systematic use of Huntington's concept as embodying Islamophobic discourse, it has become imperative for scholars and experts in the fields of Islam and Muslim societies to justify their intellectual interest. In other words, they would rather explicitly state their distance from Islam and Muslims in order not to be suspected of 'love for the enemy' and, by extension, of lack of objectivity. In that context, the idea that Western civilisation should function as a synonym for Judaeo-Christian civilisation and systematically exclude any commonalities with Islam remains highly questionable, says Bulliet. The need to challenge this idea of Judaeo-Christian civilisation reflects the fact that their cohabitation was more often tragic than constructive. In reply to the dominant narratives constructing Islam as the eternal opponent of Christian-Judeo-Western civilised world, Bulliet suggests a challenging notion of 'Islamo-Christian civilisation', which would consist of a narrative incorporating both Islamic and Christian ways of telling the story of humanity. The basis of the project is the idea that Christians and Muslims, in their respective territories and settlements, have experienced common challenges in parallel time frames, but have developed different answers.[8]

Bulliet suggests an alternative to the black and white reasoning that usually prevails when it comes to comparing the historical trajectories of Muslim (decline, stagnation of the Muslim world) and Christian (success, emancipation of political institutions from religious authority, modernity) societies. If we consider the first period of evangelisation, Islam certainly won, consolidating Muslim belief in defined territories, before declining. After 1500 the competition between Islam and Christendom was displaced to other arenas; dissimilarities between these 'sibling faiths', as Bulliet designates them, went on developing during 1500–1900. The organisation of religious authority is central to Bulliet's understanding of why the two universes took different paths at this point. Again, both Christian and Muslim societies were confronted by similar processes, in particular the general movement in the Christian world from the cloister into lay society and the obligation of religious authorities to focus on real people's needs. People started to ask for a more immediate religious authority to deal with their daily lives and to provide an emotional link to religion. That is, according to Bulliet, one of the explanations for the success of mysticism and Sufism in Muslim societies, and for the development of mendicant orders in the Christian ones. Similarly today's societies show profound similarities: in both

8 A similar concept is developed in Gabriel Martinez-Gros and Lucette Valensi, *L'islam en dissidence. Genèse d'un affrontement* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

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Muslim and Christian societies some wish to be ruled by more religious leaders, while others defend a purely secular model of government and argue against the legitimacy of the other. The sibling relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims continues even as Islam is almost exclusively perceived as being militant rather than liberal. And similarly, adds Bulliet, there is no place for ethics and morals as civic qualities in the way in which Muslim societies represent US citizens. 'Neither sibling seems capable of seeing itself or its twin in a comprehensive and balanced fashion, because neither is prepared to recognise itself in the mirror' (p. 45). Challenging perceptions of reality is thus a reciprocal necessity that historians may help to bring about.

Tackling the several myths (forced conversions, proselytising religion, intolerance, the confusion of politics and religion) that today help to structure Islam and thus Muslim societies in Western public opinion, Bulliet uses a historical perspective to make his point. On the issue of conversion and proselytism for instance, he emphasises the centrality of conversions in the history of the Muslim world as the option chosen by Muslim rulers in reaction to the presence of polytheism in the territories they were conquering. Conversions were, in this early period, rather a cosmetic process. It was then that the Islamisation policy helped people to convert heart and soul. Christians had a radically diverse reaction to polytheism. While on the Muslim side conversions were considered to be the solution, on the Christian side the destruction of idols and temples was systematic. Centralised religious leadership and the rapid growth of bodies of religious scholars in both religious systems – ulamas on the one hand, monks on the other – offer another path to be studied in parallel. The social organisation of these religious authorities is different. Christians remove themselves from the world, while Islam is characterised by personal acts of piety. While there is no hierarchy for Muslim authority, the Christian community defended centralised authorities and at the same time deployed missionaries. Bulliet's central project is therefore to demonstrate that, confronted with the same crisis, Christians and Muslims were specific in the different responses they gave to it. Moreover, the influence of Muslim culture on Christian societies during the Crusades affected widely differing domains, from cuisine to medicine or philosophy. In his recent *Islam in Europe*, Jack Goody remarked on the obvious omission from European historical narratives of this important transference not only of people but also of values, beliefs and knowledge from the Muslim towards the European shore of the Mediterranean.[9] In the contemporary study of geopolitics, however, priority is still very much given to violent conflict rather than to cultural borrowing.[10] Goody and Bulliet thus agree on the need to promote a vision of Islam that goes alongside the evolution of Christendom, based on the reality of similar developments in geographically distant areas. It is just a matter of reorganising

9 Jack Goody, *Islam in Europe* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

10 See the recent book by Claude Liauzu, *Empire du mal contre Grand Satan. Treize siècles de culture de guerre entre l'Islam et l'Occident* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2005).

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contemporary historical thought, not seeing the dead hand of Islam behind every supposed failure.[11]

On Bulliet's part, reorganising contemporary historical thought can be done simply by asking the right question. Again, in parallel to Huntington's hegemonic position in public discourses on Islam and Muslim societies since 1993, Bernard Lewis's question, 'What went wrong?', seems to set a yardstick by which the compatibility of Islam with Western values is measured (the 'civilisational litmus tests').[12] 'What went on?', Bulliet prefers to ask, aware that the yardstick for evaluating good behaviour remains based on relatively recent developments in west European democracies, such as equality (of, for example, gender and ethnicity).

> The marvel of Europe at the outset of the twenty-first century is that despite the horrors of the preceding two centuries, it has said goodbye to empire, set aside national rivalries and military confrontation, made a universal commitment to democracy and civil liberties, and recognised, at long last, the fundamental equality of all human beings. (p. 50)

There is nothing predictable in that. And, in the end, most leaders of Muslim and Arab countries have also sought equality and wealth. However, their project ended in the implementation of authoritarian regimes based on their unlimited personal powers, in some cases passing these on to their sons (for instance Assad in Syria, Moubarak in Egypt, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq before the intervention of the United States). The place of religion is relatively marginal to this rise of authoritarianism. In fact, dictatorships in the Middle East tend to be secular ones that base their legitimacy on the suppression of religion as political force. For the citizens, victims of these dictatorial regimes, the concrete experience of tyranny (by way of taxation, imprisonment, torture, the limiting of civic rights) establishes religion on the side of justice. One can even affirm, following Bulliet, that rivalry between political power and religious authorities within the most controlled public spaces has ended in the radical suppression of any criticism stemming from a religious source. And again, the political wish to limit the authority of religious circles in matters of law is common to both Muslim and Christian histories. Whereas in Europe Christian churches were more or less supportive of rulers' authoritarian tendencies, religious Muslim authorities ended up being strongly opposed to reform carried out by would-be-dictators and embodying the resistance to both those domestic reformists and foreign occupation. The examples of rebellions led by religious figures are numerous. After the abolition of the caliphate by Atatürk in 1924, religious scholars offered most resistance to his policy of reform. But the interpretation this is given from outside is rather unilateral: a backward-looking clergy is strongly opposed to the access of Muslims to modernity. The existence of a 'religiously led resistance' made religion a 'bulwark against foreign and domestic authoritarian rule. Muslims in

11 Earlier major publications in this area include Daniel Norman, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960), and Hichem Djait, *Islam and Europe: Cultures and Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

12 Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong?, Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 12.

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distress accepted the notion that men of religion should lead them' (p. 72). Generally, as Islam receded from public life, authoritarian rule increases, notes Bulliet. 'Railing against Islam as a barrier to democracy and modern progress cannot make it go away so long as tyranny is a fact of life for most Muslims' (p. 93). Islam cannot be dismissed as a factor in the public life of Muslim societies. It comes as no surprise, however, if authoritarian rulers in the Muslim world wish their citizens to follow conventional interpretations of Islam and help this dynamic by suppressing divergent local opinions. But at the same time Muslim societies witness a proliferation of sources of authority and advice on Islam. Printed media play a central role in the promotion of new authority, paradoxically helping in the diffusion of knowledge as the authoritarian regime is aided in establishing its authority and control over citizens in and outside their country. Today, more and more, religious authority does not come exclusively from religious training. 'The new technology enabled authors to become authorities simply by offering the reader persuasive prose and challenging ideas' (p. 81). The establishment of secular education systems in most Muslim contexts partly explains the loss of influence of classical religious authorities in the public sphere and the emergence of new profiles of religious leaders. Here Bulliet could have emphasised the role of migration and the significance of such an evolution in the Muslim diaspora.

How central is 'Islam'?

Bulliet's *Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* has to be read as a general discussion of the legitimacy of making religious criteria central to the rational explanation of history. Does Islam make Muslim societies and politics exceptional?[13] The book demonstrates the necessity of a '*longue durée*' approach able to reveal continuities and discontinuities in the political history of the 'Muslim world'. The book as a whole questions the different ways in which Islam is typified in figures such as Osama bin Laden. It crosses various periods of time, agglomerating general statements that sometimes should be refined as to the use of concepts or notions that remain unclear throughout the text (one thinks for instance of multiple references to a 'Muslim political theory' and even to the systematic and naturalised use of 'civilisations'). Bulliet never gives proper space to the impact of the definition of Muslim nations or to the various political cultures that have developed after independence.

Henry Laurens's *Orientales II* echoes Bulliet's book, even if the Western context differs (France and colonial Europe for Laurens, the United States for Bulliet). Laurens occupies a particular position in French scholarship on Muslim societies, holding the chair of contemporary history of the Arab world at the Collège de France. This chair was earlier held by Louis Massignon, one of the most prominent figures in French *orientalisme*. This volume, the second of a series of three,[14] collects together articles and chapters that were previously published elsewhere. Each chapter is preceded

13 Mark Tessler, 'Islam and Democracy in the Middle East: The Impact of Religious Orientations on Attitudes towards Democracy in Four Arab Countries', *Comparative Politics*, 34 (April 2002), 337–54.

14 *Orientales I. Autour de l'expédition d'Egypte* and *Orientales III. Parcours et situations* (Paris: CNRS éditions, Moyen Orient, 2004).

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by an introduction in which Laurens briefly presents the circumstances of its first publication and the reason why he wrote the text. The period covered by this second volume is that of the Third Republic (1871–1940), though Laurens also includes a chapter on the short Fourth Republic, centred on the highly controversial figure of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin-el Husseini. The time frame of the volume helps the author to focus on the construction of a Muslim policy ('la politique musulmane de la France') and to emphasise the very specific and complex tie which binds together orientalist knowledge and political power. How does the Arab policy of previous French governments become a Muslim policy? Laurens's *Orientales II* offers an exhaustive perspective on what could be called the tradition of applied Islamic studies that emerged from the internal contradictions of French colonial administration. That particular dimension of the book has an immediate resonance with the current state of academic discourse, until recently still very much dominated by political scientists in France.[15] The volume has many excellent qualities, the most impressive of which is Laurens's intimate knowledge of original texts, diplomatic correspondence, parliamentary debates and public archives. As in his previous works, he couples this systematic approach with the fluent prose, erudition and style that have become his hallmark. Another notable feature is Laurens's talent in connecting small episodes and anecdotes to broader narratives and so to shed light on the complex relationships between contemporary France and Islam without limiting it to the single colonial blueprint. His chronicle of the 'Arab revolt' in Kerak (December 1910) is a masterpiece. The final result is a masterly analysis of French colonial administration and a reflexive look at the French orientalist tradition (in which Laurens has his place), torn between an affection for Muslim societies and a sense of duty towards the Republic's interests.

The notion of the Muslim world ('monde musulman') emerged as a political category in France in the 1880s and helps to redefine what Laurens calls the 'Arab dimension of French destiny'. Colonial expansion, in particular under Napoleon's command, had previously been defined in terms of the 'French Arab colony'. The switch from a French Arab policy to a French Muslim policy can be associated with the consequences of the Egypt expedition of 1798. Broadly speaking, the Napoleonic colonial expansion cannot be isolated from the larger context of defeat and failure in the conquest of the North East (Rhin). The colonial question and the French wish to expand beyond the Mediterranean bear a direct relation to the German victory in 1870. Reasserting historical continuities and putting the past at distance are the keys to elaborating a political culture of French colonialism that cannot be reduced to the failure of the Algerian experience. Laurens, for instance, always considers domestic and foreign policies together, and points out the way in which 'le second XIXème siècle connaît une inversion croissante des discours intérieurs et extérieurs'

15 Valérie Amiraux, 'Expertises, savoir et politique. La constitution de l'islam comme problème public en France et en Allemagne', in Bénédicte Zimmermann, ed., *Les sciences sociales. l'épreuve de l'action* (Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS, 2004), 209–45; Jocelyne Césari, 'L'islam dans l'immigration: un bilan de la recherche', *La Pensée*, July–September 1994, 59–68 ; Fanny Colonna, 'Islam in the French Sociology of Religion', *Economy and Society*, 24, 2 (1995), 225–44.

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(p. 9). In the French metropole, the democratisation process has many dynamics, among them integration by linguistic unification. In their representation of the non-European contexts, the French political authorities developed a rather negative view of the 'orient', far from the 'arabiste' discourse held by Napoléon for instance. Laurens identifies 1882 as the turning point in French policies towards the Arab world (p. 46): from then on the discussion focused on the emergence of a growing Islamic resistance in the Arab countries and on the change in the motives justifying the colonial enterprise, from 'civilisational' (a rather consensual representation of the colonial project at its beginning) to purely economic.

Given the polarised political discussion concerning the legitimacy of the French intervention in Ottoman-ruled Egypt, parliamentary debates in July 1882 reformulated the justification and the legitimacy of the French colonial project. Here Laurens is at his best, describing the polemics and controversies between MPs such as Edouard Lockroy in July 1882 defending body and soul the project of France as 'grande puissance musulmane', or Clémenceau pointing out the strange paradox of mobilising the concept of race to justify the colonial expansion, 'au moment où elles se mêlent de plus en plus et où l'unité de leur caractère paraît singulièrement compromise' (p. 39).

The 'politique musulmane' emerges officially for the first time in political discourses at the beginning of the twentieth century, even if in practice it is older. It can be defined as a new framework for implementing the imperial project and putting it into practice. The conquest of Algeria brought an important Muslim population under the authority of France. Panislamist movements developed in the 1880s, in particular under the leadership of Sultan Abdulhamid, and were actively propagated by Muslim brotherhoods. New identities emerged in the empires (both Ottoman and French). Like Bulliet, Laurens does not isolate the reading of Ottoman reality from the French one: similar challenges and dynamics create a common context. And, in fact, one should underline that the 'Oriental question' debated in the early twentieth century includes both the Ottoman and the Austrian-Hungarian empires. The 'politique musulmane' was no longer conceived as the consequence of the crusade type of conquest, but was rather seen as directly anchored in the permanent contacts France maintained with some Muslim regions. Moreover, the policy incorporated academic knowledge of Islam and Muslim societies. Ex post facto, one can even consider that in many respects this original 'politique musulmane de la France' functioned as a kind of applied Islamic studies.

The centrality of colonialism: Orientalism as an institution

Laurens's precise descriptions of the various episodes that structure his book (from the switch of policy in 1882 to the plan for Palestine's partition) aim to set the pattern for a model of political culture governed by the relations between the Arab-Muslim world (Bulliet's Middle East and Laurens's '*Proche-Orient*') and the West. *Orientales II* offers quite an exhaustive census of the diversity of French colonialist experiences. The French mandates on Syria and Lebanon were at the margins of the French empire. Beside revealing the de facto domination of France in the region (the result of a long history of both cultural action and religious proximity), the mandate charter exposed a

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liberal project in which France was committed to help the state to gain independence. The administration was light and there was no settlement policy. More generally, 'la politique des égards' – as opposed to 'la politique des intérêts' – represented the spirit of the newly implemented 'politique musulmane de la France' that would be carried out in the Tunisian protectorate and, later, in Morocco. This can be said to be the result, on the one hand, of the bad experience and criticism of French rule in Algeria and, on the other, of the specific spirit of individual leaders even before the Third Republic. Laurens thus gives an important place to Bonaparte's memory of Egypt: 'Il nous est impossible de prétendre à une influence immédiate sur des peuples pour qui nous sommes étrangers. Nous avons besoin, pour les diriger, d'avoir des intermédiaires: nous devons leur donner des chefs sans quoi ils s'en choisiront eux-mêmes' (p. 53). Here, Laurens's work confirms Bulliet's view on the role of ulama in resisting today's authoritarian regimes in the Middle-East. Quoting Bonaparte, Laurens explains how his advice to the French administration to rely on religious authorities to rule colonial territories was determined by the 'love for justice' of the ulamas. The visionary intuition of Bonaparte is confirmed by the discourse of Saint Exupéry on his return from Syria and Egypt in April 1913: 'Il faudrait en particulier que la France fût plus tolérante, notre méthode de gouvernement a une mauvaise réputation chez les musulmans . . . Les Mahométants jugent sévèrement le régime de l'indigénat.'

'La politique musulmane' worked around a central motif (avoiding the repetition of the Algerian mistake) and reflected on how to integrate Muslims into the French citizenry on the basis of an active collaboration between sociologists and policy makers: no Muslim policy was possible without a social science of the Muslim world (p. 257). This was pioneering in the French context. Indeed, Muslim policy also constituted a unique arena for discussions and opposing views of protagonists of the colonial administration. In 1911, following Le Châtelier's suggestion, the Commission interministérielle des affaires musulmanes (CIAM), a purely consultative body, became the natural site for these discussions on how to rule Muslims under French authority.[16] It is the locus where academics and politicians meet, at least since the beginning of the twentieth century. French Muslim policy is directly motivated by the idea of a sociology of the Muslim world carried out by people such as Alfred le Châtelier, the first to hold the chair at the Collège de France, sponsored at its creation by the kingdom of Morocco.[17] He came from the military, joining the ministry of indigenous affairs in 1878, and was the first to defend a French Muslim policy. Châtelier was the first academic to be negative about the future of Algeria, criticising the French authorities' repression of a people's religious identity without giving them automatic access to French citizenship in exchange. A fair colonial power should be able to manage the influences and groups of interests that characterise indigenous societies. Concerning Egypt, for example, he promoted the idea of independence.

16 On the works and archives of the CIAM, see the recent study by Patrick Le Pautremat, *La politique musulmane de la France au XXème siècle* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2003).

17 The *Revue du monde musulman* was created in this context in 1906.

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In Tunisia, he pushed for more education for the people. French policy-making should rely on academic institutions and universities (such as the Ecole des langues orientales and later, in the 1920s, the Institutes in Damascus, Tehran and Istanbul) in the management of the colonial empire, and in particular for teaching Arabic to diplomats and administrative agents.

Laurens gives prominence to Louis Massignon (1883–1962), le Châtelier's successor at the Collège de France and an advisor to the ministry of foreign affairs in the 1920s.[18] Inspired by Le Châtelier (his former teacher), Massignon was fascinated by Lyautey in Morocco, the founder of the 'politique des égards'. His voice at the CIAM (of which he was a member from 1927) was not always heeded. Travelling a lot, producing a great quantity of reports on his trips to the Arab countries, Massignon actively criticised the French policy of *indigénat* in Algeria. There is no contradiction between what Massignon published as a scholar and what he said as an administrator: in both universes he defended the necessity for a just policy in North Africa. The question of political representation for the indigenous people of Algeria and of their participation in political decision-making became central in the 1930s. Massignon drafted a report in April 1930 which drew attention to the existence of an Algerian elite, the attachment to French culture. He pointed out the importance of personal status to native people, comparing, for instance, the situation of Muslims with the fact that Israelis were accessing citizenship everywhere in the world: 'La France qui a accordé la première le droit de cité à Israël, se doit de prendre, le moment venu, la même initiative pour l'Islam.'[19] He also underlined the civic courage of the hundreds of heads of family a year who renounced their personal status as Muslims to become French citizens. Massignon's report was an isolated voice and was not approved by the Commission. He also led long discussions on the empowerment of women and the education of girls in urban settings, and criticises the French preference for coercion rather than co-operation, for instance in Lebanon. Massignon's sociological work and views were directly embedded in French Muslim policy until 1940. He pushed towards integrating a sociological perspective in the definition of a long-term policy for the administration of Muslim populations, being respectful of Arab culture and in particular of Arabic as a language. He referred to this as a social defence of Islamic culture (sh'a'ir al-Islam) which would also recognise the autonomy of worship. In Massignon's view, a Muslim community should be recognised as a legal entity and entitled to autonomy over its own affairs. Here, Laurens does not mention the non-application of the 1905 law of separation in Algeria, which made Massignon's proposal even more controversial. The control of Muslim authorities was crucial for the military control of Algerian territory. By not applying the 1905 law, the French central government kept control of the administration of worship, including the management of personnel. In April 1939, Massignon even explained how the presence of Muslims in metropolitan France could help in managing the practice of Islam in the empire: 'Il nous faut envisager en France, dans la métropole,

18 Laurens does not discuss Massignon's attraction to Islamic mysticism.

19 Louis Massignon, 'Introduction à l'étude des revendications islamiques', 1920.

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ce que sera l'élément musulman dans la France de demain' (p. 268). But his defence of the Muslims' interests before the Second World War never got to the point of supporting decolonisation. Later, in the 1950s, at the time of intense conflicts over independence, Massignon pleaded for participation, arguing in favour of a science of compassion. By that time he was no longer in the administration but served on committees of justice (France Islam, France Maghreb), promoting a moral condemnation of colonialism.

Two ways of looking at history to understand the present

It would be unfair to Laurens's volume to go further into the numerous episodes and characters almost brought back to life by his meticulous style. One can only admire the precise use of quotations, the systematic recreation of the multiple circumstances in which all the events and personalities are embedded. I refer in particular to two chapters, on 'Jaussen et les services de renseignements français (1915–1919)' (pp. 143–59), based on the unexpected discovery of notes written by Antonin Jaussen, central figure of the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem, and on 'Jaussen en Arabie' (pp. 161–74), with their implicit comparative perspective that suggests Laurens's attention to 'la geste lawrencienne' and British interests in Palestine. The result is an impressive reconstruction, a colourful picture and a meaningful presentation of complex situations and tense periods in French history. Laurens bases his analysis on the opening of unexplored archives and does not fall into the trap of connecting the current public regulation of Islam in France with his discovery of unread historical material. However, working on French Orientalism in the colonial context, Laurens illustrates the emergence of categories that have contributed to creating a specifically 'French' way of dealing with Islam and Muslims from the former colonies. Laurens makes the link between nineteenth-century Orientalism, the context of colonisation in North Africa, and the institutionalisation of Orientalism by and in the colonial project. It would have been easy to extend the analysis to present-day France and to try to tie together the ex-colonised and ex-colonisers in a system of representation that still frames the issue in terms of domination and control. Laurens never does this. The gap between his cautious but exhaustive use of archives and Watson's understanding of France and its relationships with Muslims since the seventh century and the defeat of Muslim armies on French soil (the victory of Charles Martel at Poitiers in 732) is therefore immense.

Reviewing 1400 years of intense and sometimes close ties binding France to the Muslim world, *Tricolor and Crescent: France and the Islamic World* is rich in detailed descriptions of battles and in political information, and aims at providing an exhaustive, rich and dense accumulation of stories that made France's history. How was the French–Muslim conflict shaped by the crusades, aiming at establishing Catholic Christian dominion in largely Muslim parts of the world? What were the conditions for the later co-operation with the Ottomans over trade and travel, in which conditions the 'capitulations' were negotiated? The second part of the book reproduces in English translation large sections of essential documents (diplomatic

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declarations, agreements, archives and letters). The broader perspective and final conclusions are, however, not particularly convincing, and are in contrast to Laurens's style (at least for the period they both cover). To summarise Watson's view: France has had the longest sustained contact with Islam of almost any Western nation. He identifies three legacies of this long history, as illustrated by names such as Martel and Napoleon[20] and insists that the 'variety of the types of contact with the Muslim world is widening between 700 and 1800'. Watson practises what Seurat ironically called a 'histoire apologétique'.[21] In this reading of French history, Watson aims at demonstrating a long-term intimacy between France and Islam in which the colonial experience is simply one episode among others. This limiting of the impact of colonialism on contemporary France contrasts with the recent development of postcolonial studies among historians in France.[22] This movement is based on a double process: first, the opening of specific archives, and, second, the end of a systematic dissociation of the history of migrations from the historical constitution of the French nation.[23] This diffusion of a new colonial memory which recognises the intimate link between colonialism and republicanism could help to develop new ways of working on integration and identity politics, in particular by introducing new concepts such as race or ethnicity.[24]

Reviewing the successive steps of French colonial conquest (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco) by which France had by 1920 reacquired control of a large part of the former Outremer, Watson remains very elusive on what of this long experience might be relevant to the current situation of Muslim populations in France. The aim of reconnecting past experience with present-day France is clearly presented in the introduction, but Watson's perception remains very fragmented, despite his attempt to resuscitate the continuity of 1400 years of history. Watson is extremely careful when describing French government policy towards the different territories under its authority. Different motives and interests (Barbary piracy as a *casus belli* in particular in Algeria, but more of a moral cause in Syria and Lebanon) led to different methods of conquest and administration in North Africa and Egypt. But he does not elaborate on a typology of France's relations with its colonial Muslim territories, despite his awareness of the singularities of Syria and Lebanon, so totally different from the French experience in Tunisia, Morocco and especially Algeria. The mandates were temporary and there was no settlement of population in Syria and Lebanon; in contrast Algiers was 80 per cent European in the 1930s. Similarly, there was no

20 The three legacies from this period are the French siege mentality, their sense of superiority over Islam gained from the battles won over Muslims and their belief in the ability of France to transform the Islamic world.

21 Michel Seurat, *L'état de Barbarie* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

22 Gérard Noiriel, *Etat, Nation et immigration, vers une histoire du pouvoir* (Paris: Belin, 2001); Mohammed Harbi and Benjamin Stora, *La guerre d'Algérie: 1954–2004, la fin de l'amnésie* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2004).

23 Stéphane Dufoix and Patrick Weil, *L'esclavage, la colonisation et après?* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

24 Nicola Bancel, Pascale Blanchard and Françoise Vergès, *La République coloniale* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003); Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire, *Cultures impériales. Les colonies au cœur de la République* (Paris: Autrement, 2004).

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single or unique government policy as far as subjection, assimilation and association were concerned. Watson's interest lies in the fact that the French empire was almost entirely inhabited by Muslims. On different occasions he mentions the traditional domination by French scholars of the field of Islamic studies. But the pages dedicated to the people who could have illustrated that tendency are thin and contrast strongly with Laurens's emphasis on the specific role played by individual academics and on the influence of certain personalities in advising policy makers from the 1910s onwards. For instance, Massignon is described by Watson as a man with an affection for the Arab people and thus (logically) criticising French colonial policies in Algeria and Morocco.[25]

Why, though, should the colonial past and the crusades help towards an understanding of the way in which contemporary France manages terrorist networks? Watson's perspective is that of a traditional history of diplomacy and war making. He limits himself to reconstructing past events. His book is nothing more than a synthesis of the long historical link between France and Muslim societies. It cannot pretend to be more: the analysis is limited to historical portions of the national trajectory of France towards Muslims, accumulating events, facts, data, statistics, names and dates. With his aim of covering all areas where France had or tried to have influence on Muslim and Arab countries, what is Watson trying to demonstrate? The reader hesitates. If the purpose is to demonstrate French ambition in keeping control over a region mostly characterised by the presence of a Muslim majority, the result is not brilliant but certainly not a disaster. A look at the bibliography reveals the absence of central references not only to the history of French colonialism and decolonisation, but also to what Watson calls 'contemporary problems' (p. 276).[26] Last but not least, Watson's perspective is implicitly US-centred. Sticking to 9/11 as *the* central event in understanding the fight against terrorism and 'French expertise' in that field, he forgets to underline that, for French public opinion, the main reference as far as terrorist attacks are concerned dates back to February–September 1986 and July–October 1995, even though these produced far fewer victims than in September 2001. The effort to establish connections between the past and present thus remains vague and superficial. On periods such as the Third Republic, and, in particular, on the political conditions for the management of religious identity and political participation, it would have been easy to find connections with contemporary hot and sensitive issues. One thinks of course of the question of *indigénat*, that is, maintaining Muslim inhabitants in a juridical environment different from that

25 The evocation of Massignon is limited to the following: 'This affection for the Arab people drove Massignon to criticize French colonial policies in Algeria and Morocco on more than one occasion. Massignon the mystic became a Greek-rite Catholic priest in later life.' Watson, *Tricolor and Crescent*, 44.

26 For the canonical names on the colonial period, one thinks of Benjamin Stora's numerous publications on Algeria (*La gangrène et l'oubli. La mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991); *Imaginaires de guerre, Algérie-Vietnam en France et aux Etats-Unis* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997)); and Laurens's work of course (*L'expédition d'Egypte* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1989); L*e Royaume impossible. La France et la genèse du monde arabe* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1990)); but also, more recently, Raphaëlle Branche, *La torture et l'armée pendant la guerre d'Algérie, 1954–1962* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

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of French citizens on the basis of their Islamic identity. Watson never touches on the sensitive issues that might help to figure this out clearly, for instance by making connections between the Algerian case and the emergence of a discourse defined by the framework of that colonial experience by the children of migrants. One would also have appreciated greater emphasis by Watson on 'the interplay between the colonial past and the post-colonial present (which) reflects unfinished processes of representation and remembrance'.[27]

Bridging traditions of scholarship

Reading such different types of work in parallel allows us to make important points. First, 'Middle East' has no territorial meaning. In the French long-term perspective, such labels as 'le Levant' and 'l'Outremer' make more sense than the English 'Middle East'. The unification of the region by religion is a direct legacy of British and US policy after the Second World War. The ideas of the Near and Middle East emerged simultaneously, and the latter appears to have been a way of distinguishing between parts of the British Empire. Basically, India was not to be treated together with its Muslim counterparts. The definition of the Middle East as based on a common parameter (religion: Islam) is thus recent. Second, the volumes under review were certainly conceived differently, almost opposites in scope and style. They nevertheless echo each other, referring mainly to the same problematic (how central is religion in explaining policy towards the Middle East?). The three books certainly deal with that argument, but tackle it through different lenses inherited from different traditions of scholarship, targeting various audiences. All, however, share the parameters of contemporary public discussion on Islam and Muslims. Bulliet and Laurens seem convinced that the 'us versus them' blueprint is no longer defensible in understanding Muslim societies and their evolution as regards their relations with the 'Western world'. Here, history may effectively be instructive. One conclusion may be drawn from the parallel reading of these three extremely different texts. Perhaps to a greater extent than disciplinary borders, national traditions of knowledge still continue to determine and shape the scholarly way of reconstructing the past and making it interact with the present.

These national traditions of scholarship are in some case clearly inherited from past academic experience, in particular in its failure or success in influencing politics. In France, Orientalism was a central intellectual enterprise that, during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, became a central resource for colonialism. Orientalism, initially rooted in the linguistic designation of 'the Orient', rapidly became the key for understanding and ruling colonised populations. French traditions of knowledge of the Muslim world slowly turned into an ideological project to rule better, a 'colonial knowledge'. In the US context, post-1945 Middle Eastern studies belong to area studies, more or less directly related to foreign affairs interests.

27 Charles Forsdick and David Murphy, 'Introduction: the case for Francophone Postcolonial Studies', in Charles Forsdick and David Murphy, eds., *Francophone Postcolonial Studies. A Critical Introduction* (London: Arnold, 2003), 1–17, at 3.

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The different experiences related in the three books point out the difficulty we have when dealing with Muslim societies in establishing a pattern of comprehension that distinguishes between culture, politics and religion. In the current context, equality of consideration has a price: you will be accepted and treated as equals if you behave as Europeans or North Americans do – being democratic, voting freely but also eating and listening to the same consumer products. Otherwise, you'll remain as Algerians during the time of French colonial control, the 'colorful denizens of semi-civilized lands' (Bulliet, p. 58). But the July 2005 attacks in London have even disturbed that clear water: nobody would have been able to identify or anticipate anything on the basis of the life styles and behaviour of the four suicide bombers. The newspapers all emphasised the same details adding to the mystery: these men even had a sense of humour and loved cricket.

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