

# What I Believe

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## Introduction

THIS BOOK IS A WORK OF CLARIFICATION, a deliberately accessible presentation of the basic ideas I have been defending for more than twenty years. It is intended for those who have little time to spare: ordinary citizens, politicians, journalists, perhaps some social workers or teachers who may be in a bit of a hurry but who want to understand and possibly to check things out. Rather than entering my name in a web search engine (and coming up with the million links that mainly report what others have written about me) or being content with the so-called free virtual encyclopedias that are in fact so biased (like Wikipedia, where the factual errors and partisan readings are astounding), I give readers this opportunity to read me in the original and simply get direct access to my thought.

In recent years I have been presented as a “controversial intellectual.” What this means is not quite clear, but in effect everyone admits that a controversial intellectual is one whose thought does not leave people indifferent: some praise it, others criticize it, but in any case it causes them to react and think. I have never kept to a single field of intervention: I have not dealt only with the “Islamic religion,” although it is important

to note that one of the areas I work on is indeed theological and legal reflection starting from within Islamic references. I do not represent all Muslims but I belong to the reformist trend. I aim to remain faithful to the principles of Islam, on the basis of scriptural sources, while taking into account the evolution of historical and geographical contexts. Many readers who have not yet looked into religious issues or who have limited knowledge of the subject sometimes find it difficult to understand my approach and methodology. Unlike literalists who merely rely on quoting verses, reformists must take the time to put things in perspective, to contextualize, and to suggest new understandings. To grasp this reasoning, readers or listeners must follow it from beginning to end: if they do not they may misunderstand its conclusions and consider that there are contradictions or that it involves "doublespeak." Things should be clarified: doublespeak consists in saying one thing in front of an audience to flatter or mislead them, and something else, different in content, elsewhere, to a different audience or in a different language. Adapting one's level of speech to one's audience, or adapting the nature of one's references, is not doublespeak. When addressing my students I use elevated language with philosophical references that they can understand; when speaking before social protagonists or manual laborers, I also use appropriate speech and illustrations; and if I speak to Muslims, my language and references also take into account their level of discourse and their universe of understanding. This is a necessary pedagogy. To avoid doublespeak, what matters is that the substance of the discourse does not change.

Regarding Islamic references, my approach has constantly been to develop themes in three distinct steps. First, I quote the sources: here is a verse or a Prophetic tradition (*hadîth*) and this is the literal meaning. Second, I explain the different readings offered by scholars in the course of history as well as the possibilities available for interpreting the said verse or *hadîth*, because of its formulation or in light of Islam's message. Third, starting from the verse (or *hadîth*) and its various possible interpretations, I suggest an understanding and implementation that take into account the context in which we live. That is what I call the reformist approach.

For example: (1) There are indeed texts (one verse, and hence some Prophetic traditions) that refer to striking one's wife: I quote them because Muslims read and quote those texts. (2) Here are the interpretations that have been suggested, from the most literalist, which justify striking women in the name of the Quran, to the most reformist, which read this verse in light of the global message and contextualize the verse and Prophetic traditions as well as taking their chronology into account. (3) In light of those interpretations and considering the example set by the Prophet, who never struck a woman, I say that domestic violence contradicts Islamic teachings and that such behavior must be condemned.

If my readers or listeners stop at the first step in my development (or if a reviewer, willfully or not, quotes only part of it), they cut short my reasoning; they may even claim that I say the same as the literalists and accuse me of doublespeak. Of course I quote the same verses as the literalists, but my conclusions are different! And it is because I systematically start from

the sources and their interpretation that Muslims listen to my lectures, read my books, and relate to them.

I have also focused on philosophical, social, cultural, and political issues (at both national and international levels). All those fields of study are of course linked in one way or another, but I have always been careful not to confuse orders. Because of the confusion I observe in contemporary debates about societal issues (identities, religions, cultures, insecurity, immigration, marginalization, and so on), I have attempted to deconstruct and classify problems, though without disconnecting them. I hope the present work will confirm this commitment and this approach and methodology.

As mentioned above, some people have claimed that I used doublespeak without ever providing clear evidence. A rumor has been fostered and journalists repeat it: "He is reported to use doublespeak, and so on." This is easy criticism: it is often the unverifiable (and unverified) argument of those who have no argument and have verified nothing. It is also frequently a clever reversal performed by those who, deliberately or not, have a "double hearing" and hear very selectively. I will not waste my time here trying to defend myself: I have no desire or time for this. It is nonetheless important for the reader to understand why what I say can give rise to such passion and reactions. I know that I disturb and I know whom I disturb. When speaking about religion, philosophy, or politics, I have necessarily, in these times of troubles, crises, and doubts, opened fronts of intellectual and ideological opposition and often highly emotional ill feelings. At the end of this book, as the reader will see, I identify seven different objective "oppo-

nents": in effect, all their criticisms, echoing one another, cast a haze of doubt and suspicion over my discourse. Some people read such criticisms without reading my own writings, without even trying to find out who their authors are, and end up taking what they say at face value. If there is smoke, there is fire, the saying goes. That is quite true, but one should find out what the fire is, and who lit it.

Yet, what really matters lies beyond this smokescreen, which must absolutely be cast aside to grasp the essence of my thought and of my approach. In the present book, I deal with the issue of identity crisis and of the doubts that assail each and every one of us. I state firmly that we have multiple, moving identities, and that there is no reason—religious, legal, or cultural—a woman or a man cannot be both American or European and Muslim. Millions of individuals prove this daily. Far from the media and political tensions, a constructive, in-depth movement is under way and Islam has become a Western religion. Western Islam is a reality, just like African, Arab, or Asian Islam. Of course there is only one single Islam as far as fundamental religious principles are concerned, but it includes a variety of interpretations and a plurality of cultures. Its universality indeed stems from this capacity to integrate diversity into its fundamental oneness.

It is up to Muslim individuals to be and become committed citizens, aware of their responsibilities and rights. Beyond the minority reflex or the temptation to see themselves as victims, they have the means to accept a new age of their history. For those who were born in the West or who are citizens, it is no longer a question of "settlement" or "integration" but

rather of “participation” and “contribution.” My point is that we have now moved, and we must move, to the age of “post-integration” discourse: we must henceforth determine the profound, accepted meaning of belonging. This is the new “We” that I have been calling for, and that is already a reality in some local experiences.

One should not be naïve, however. Important challenges remain: I have drawn up a list as far as Muslims are concerned (the relationship between religion and culture, gender issues, the training of imams, contextualized religious education, institutionalizing their presence in society, etc.). Western and European societies, their politicians and intellectuals, must look realities in the face and, sometimes after four generations, stop speaking about the “immigrant origin” of citizens who “need to be integrated.” They must reconcile themselves with politics and not act as though, in the name of culture or religion, status or social class had become inoperative or outdated references: social problems should not be “Islamized” and such issues as unemployment, social marginalization, and others should be addressed politically. Curricula must also be reassessed (especially in history but also in literature, philosophy, etc.) to become more representative of a shared history and include its wealth of remembered experience. The West must start a dialogue not only with “the other” but also with itself: an earnest, profound, and constructive dialogue.

I will deal with those issues throughout this book. I have attempted to be as clear as possible while remaining simple and methodical. This is a book of ideas, an introduction to what I believe, meant for those who really want to understand

but who do not always have enough time to read and study all the books. Being an introductory work, it may not suffice to convey the complexity of a thought (which may moreover have evolved and gained in density in the course of time) but it will at least, I hope, help start an open, thorough, critical debate. This is greatly needed.

## 4

## Interacting Crises

THE PROBLEM OF MUSLIM PRESENCE IN THE WEST is often presented as a problem of religions, values, and cultures that should be addressed through theological arguments, legal measures, or by highlighting some indisputable principles and values. It is wrong, however, not to take into account the psychological tensions and emotional environment that surround and sometimes shape the encounter between the West, Europe, and Muslims and Islam. Critical debate over systems of thought, values, and identities is a necessity and it must be carried out scrupulously, critically, and in depth, but its omnipresence on the European scene conceals other preoccupations that must be taken into account to avoid going after the wrong target.

Western societies in general and Europeans in particular are experiencing a very deep, multidimensional identity crisis. Its first expression stems from the twofold phenomenon of globalization and—in Europe—the emergence of the European Union, beyond reference to the nation-state. Former landmarks related to national identity, the country's memory, or specific cultural references seem to be wearing away: everywhere tensions can be felt, structuring national or

regional identities are being reasserted. In addition, migratory phenomena, already mentioned above, intensify the feeling of being carried away and trapped in an irreversible logic: Europe is getting older and it needs immigrants to maintain the strength and balance of its economy; the United States, Canada, and Australia are facing similar needs—with, in addition, a long tradition of immigration. Yet, those immigrants threaten cultural homogeneity, which is already endangered by the globalization of culture and communication. This is akin to squaring the circle: economic needs are in contradiction with cultural resistances and obviously those resistances will never be strong enough to prevail. This is the second dimension of the identity crisis: here, onslaughts from outside weaken traditional landmarks. But that is not all: within societies themselves, new kinds of citizens are emerging. They used to be Asians, Africans, Turks, or Arabs, and now they are French, British, Italian, Belgian, Swedish, American, Canadian, Australian or New Zealander. Their parents used to be isolated and had come to earn a living (probably intending to go home), but now their children are increasingly “integrated” into society and more and more visible in streets, schools, firms, administrations, and on campuses. They are visible through their color, their dress, and their differences, but they speak the country's language and they are indeed French, British, Italian, Belgian, Swedish, American, Canadian, Australian, or New Zealander. Their presence from within disrupts representations and gives rise to sometimes passionate identity tensions ranging from puzzlement to sectarian or even racist rejection. Another phenomenon “from within” has emerged in recent years:

not only has insecurity or violence been found to increase in some areas or suburbs because of poor social integration, but a global phenomenon threatens national securities. From New York in September 2001 to Madrid in March 2004 or London in July 2005, the Muslim presence now imports international demands through violent, extremist Islamist networks that strike out at innocent citizens. Violent extremism strikes from within, since most of the perpetrators of those attacks were either born and raised in the West or immersed in Western culture. The experience of this violence completes the picture of this deep identity crisis: globalization, immigration, new citizenships, and social as well as extremist violence have palpable effects on Western societies' social psychology.

Doubts and fears are visible. Some far right political parties take advantage of those fears and use reassuring, populist arguments stressing nationalism and the need to revive and protect identity. Their main points are rejecting immigrants, enhancing security, and stigmatizing the new enemy that Islam stands for. Populations naturally respond to such rhetoric and all parties have to take position over those sensitive issues. This phenomenon brings about strategic shifts within former political groups: tensions emerge on right and left between those who refuse to respond to the identity crisis with stigmatizing, sectarian, or racist discourse and those who find no other means to have a political future than responding to people's fears. Lectures, debates, and books are increasingly numerous: people everywhere try to define French, British, Italian, Dutch, American, Australian identity, to identify the roots and values of Europe, America, or Australia, to find out whether cultural

pluralism and multiculturalism are viable, and so on. Those questions reveal fears as well as doubts.

Similar questionings can be observed among Muslims. The identity crisis is a reality that also takes on multiple dimensions. On a global level, numerous, far-reaching questions emerge: in face of globalization, of global culture perceived as Westernization, the Muslim world is undergoing a profound crisis. Muslim majority societies mostly lag behind economically, they are generally undemocratic, and when they are rich, they fail to contribute to intellectual and/or scientific progress. It is as if the Muslim world, perceiving itself as dominated, cannot live up to its claims. Moreover, the experience of economic exile adds the concrete dimension of tensions and contradictions to this vague general feeling. The fear of losing one's religion and culture at the core of Western societies has led to natural attitudes of withdrawal and self-isolation. All immigrants have gone through similar experiences in terms of culture, but for Muslims religious questionings are also often mixed with such cultural considerations. The first generations (who were usually from modest social backgrounds in Europe, though not in the United States or Canada) experienced deep tensions, and still do: the feeling of loss regarding their original language and culture, being torn between two languages, uneasiness with the Western secular environment where religious values are so little referred to (except in the United States), relations and communication with their own children who are steeped in the Western environment, and other tensions. The identity crisis runs through generations. Here again it has to do with fears and sufferings: the fear of

self-dispossession, of losing one's landmarks, of colonization of the inner self, and of daily contradictions, with all the personal and psychological suffering this experience entails.

One must also add to this the direct consequences of the tense climate that has developed in the West. Repeated, accelerating crises include the Rushdie affair, the "Islamic headscarf" controversy, terrorist attacks, the Danish cartoons, the pope's remarks: the list is getting longer and longer and each country also has its share of political instrumentalization, sensational news items, and juicy stories reported in the media. Many Muslims experience a feeling of stigmatization and constant pressure: they feel those criticisms and this obsession with "the problem of Islam and Muslims" as aggressions, denials of their rights, and sometimes clearly racist and Islamophobic expressions. They experience this daily: being a visible Muslim in the West today is no easy matter. In such an atmosphere, a crisis of confidence is inevitable: some have decided to isolate themselves, believing that there is nothing to hope for in a society that rejects them; others have decided to become invisible by disappearing into the crowd; last, others have committed themselves to facing the problem and opening spaces for encounter and dialogue. Caught amid the essentially negative media image of Islam and Muslims; the populist, sectarian discourse of some parties; the fears and reluctance of their American, Australian, or European fellow-citizens; and, to crown it all, the crisis of confidence and the doubts assailing Muslims themselves, the challenge is a momentous one.

Such psychological data must be taken into account when starting this discussion: people are afraid; they experience

tensions and doubts that often produce passionate, emotional, sometimes uncontrolled and excessive reactions. The consequences of those interacting crises can be observed everywhere: under the effect of emotion, one listens less, deafness sets in; reflections become less complex and subtle, they are expressed in binary terms and subtlety is perceived as ambiguity. Essentialized stories serve to justify final judgments about the others (one person's behavior is seen to represent all of her or his society or community). High-sounding philosophical or political arguments will have no effect if one does not take into account the real and sometimes devastating consequences of psychological tensions, of mistrust, fear, emotion, deafness, binary thinking, or of focusing on essentialized stories that serve as indisputable evidence to reject or condemn. To run against the tide of those phenomena (which once again similarly affect all parties), we need an educational approach relying on a pedagogy that takes people's psychological state into account, without trying to make them feel guilty (nor to stigmatize them) and which strives to explain, qualify, and think in mutual terms. The evolution of fear and doubt must be answered with a revolution of self-confidence and mutual trust. Emotional rejection and deafness must be answered by intellectual empathy through which negative emotions are kept at bay and subjected to constructive criticism. This requires a long-term, demanding, dialectical approach that can only be developed at the grass roots. It can only be achieved through proximity, and I believe at least fifty years will be necessary for people to get accustomed. That is a long time . . . and yet it is so short on a historical scale.



## 5

## Swift Evolutions, Silent Revolutions

CURRENT PROBLEMS MAY SOMETIMES CAUSE US to lose sight of the historical perspective and lead to unjustified pessimism. In less than two generations, amazingly rapid evolution has been observed both in Muslims' thinking and in their understanding of the Western and European environment. Yet nothing was easy: as noted above, the first generations were often naturally isolated from an environment that they did not know well (as in the United States or Canada) or had a very modest social status and education (as in Europe or Australia). Above all, they carried with them an array of confusions that it was difficult to do away with.

The first natural attitude was to consider Western countries foreign lands where they had to live as strangers. Moreover, their perception of the meaning and fundamentals of secularism stemmed from a historical misunderstanding: for North Africans, Middle East Arabs, Asians, and Turks, secularization meant an imported system imposed by colonists or implemented by such heads of state as Kamal Atatürk, Habib Bourguiba, Hafiz al-Assad, or Saddam Hussein through dictatorial policies. Secularism and religious neutrality have mainly

been perceived as processes of "de-Islamization," of opposition to religion,<sup>3</sup> entailing repressive measures: it was historically and factually impossible to associate "secularism" or "religious neutrality" with freedom and democratization. When arriving in the West, the first generations carried with them those perceptions and that negative burden (and they often still do). This is accompanied by major confusion between cultural elements and religious references: for many of them, being and remaining Muslims meant being Muslims as they had been in Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Pakistan, or Turkey. What mattered was thus to be Moroccan, Algerian, Egyptian, Lebanese, Pakistani, or Turkish Muslims in Europe, and not merely Muslims in the West, even less Western Muslims. For many, especially among Arabs, Turks, and Africans, there could be no question of taking the host country's nationality since some day they would "go home." Some Muslim scholars (*'ulamâ*) confirmed those misgivings by claiming that living in the West could only be allowed in case of necessity: it was a legal exception (*rukhsa*) and there could be no question of settling in those countries where drinking alcohol was allowed and where religious morals were not respected.

In less than two generations perceptions have changed significantly. The vast majority of Muslims today assert their presence in the West and in Europe. Similarly, their relationship to secularism and religious neutrality has been revisited after scholars, intellectuals, and leaders understood (by studying the principles of secularism) that the separation of church and state did not mean wiping out religions but rather regulating their presence in the pluralistic (and more or less

neutral) public space to ensure equality. The young no longer have qualms about taking a Western nationality, referring to themselves as committed citizens and taking part in their country's social, political, and cultural life. Millions of them are peaceful, law-abiding citizens, while the media and the public seem obsessed with suspecting a problem inherent in Islam because of a few literalists or extremists (who may or may not be violent) who claim not to recognize Western laws. Critical reflection has been started regarding original (Arab, Asian, or Turkish) cultures that do not always fully respect the fundamental principles of Islam: questionable habits, patriarchal reflexes, failure to respect women's rights, traditional practices wrongly associated with religion (excision, forced marriages, etc.) have been reconsidered.

Problems remain, of course, and new migrants are (and will be) constantly bringing to the fore old issues that the Muslims who have been present for a long time have long overcome.<sup>4</sup> It is also true that not all countries have reached the same level of evolution: French, British, and American Muslims have a longer experience of Western societies (American Muslims have not been there so long but are better educated) and they are far more advanced in their reflection and activities. Yet it should be noted that the process is accelerating and that other Muslim communities in all Western countries are benefiting from those achievements and are now developing their understanding of Western realities at a quicker pace. The role of some leaders who are converts to Islam is also crucial to this evolution.<sup>5</sup> Nowadays, people speak of being Muslims in the West and increasingly define themselves as Western or

European Muslims or as Muslim Westerners or Europeans. On the ground, activities are more and more open toward society and many scholars and leaders, women and men, build local or national bridges with their fellow-citizens and political authorities. This is indeed a silent revolution, which does not directly interest the media because it is being achieved on the long-term scale of generations. Still, once again, from the standpoint of the historical time of population movements, such evolutions are revolutionary and extraordinary. They have not been fully measured yet, and it is certain today, as I already wrote in 1996 in *To Be a European Muslim*, then in 2003 in *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*,<sup>6</sup> that the Western and European experience has already had a very important impact on Islam throughout the world and of course on Muslim majority societies—an impact that will be even more considerable in the years to come.

One should not fail to observe the revival of spirituality and of the quest for meaning among Muslim Westerners. Islam is perceived as such a problem today that Muslim scholars or intellectuals are often called upon to explain what Islam is *not* in light of current challenges. However, Islam is first and foremost an answer for the majority of Muslim hearts and consciences, echoing a quest for meaning at the core of rich and industrialized societies. This is hardly ever mentioned, and yet this is where the essence of religion lies: millions of Muslim women and men experience religion as spiritual initiation, reconciliation with meaning, and quest for the liberation of their inner selves in a global world dominated by appearances and excessive possession and consumption. To be a Muslim

Westerner is also to experience the spiritual tension between a faith that calls for liberation of the inner self and a daily life that seems to contradict and imprison it. This is a difficult experience whether for a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim; it is a difficult experience for all human beings who wish to remain free with their values and who would also like to offer their children the instruments of their freedom. It would be worthwhile, at the core of all those debates, not to disregard that essential religious, spiritual, and philosophical dimension.

## 6

## Multiple Identities

### *First an American (a European, an Australian), or a Muslim?*

GLOBALIZATION, MIGRATIONS, EXILE, increasingly rapid political and social change, all these phenomena cause fear, anxiety, and tension. Former landmarks seem outdated and fail to provide serenity: who are we at the core of such upheavals? The issue of identity stems from those deep disturbances. When so many people around us, in our own society, no longer resemble us and appear so different, we naturally feel the need to redefine ourselves. Similarly, the experience of being uprooted, of economic and political exile, leads to this quest for identity at the core of an environment that is not naturally ours. The reaction is understandable but what should be stressed here is that it is above all a *re*-action to a presence or an environment felt as foreign. Thus one defines one's identity by reaction, by differentiation, in opposition to what one is not, or even against others. The process is a natural one, and it is just as natural that the approach should become binary and eventually set a more or less constructed "identity" against another that is projected onto "the other" or "society." Identities defined in this manner, reactive identities, are in essence unique and exclusive, because of the very necessity