

Does Jihadist Terrorism Have Religious Foundations? Jihadist Attacks and Academic Controversies in France (2012-2017)¹

René Lévy

Diretor de pesquisas do CNRS, França

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A onda de ataques terroristas na França nos últimos anos provocou vários debates, mas muitas questões continuam sem resposta. Uma grande controvérsia diz respeito ao papel que a religião desempenha no envolvimento de pessoas no jihadismo. O objetivo de **O terrorismo jihadista tem fundamentos religiosos?** **Ataques jihadistas e controvérsias acadêmicas na França (2012-2017)** é situar a forma como o debate sobre essa questão tem sido estruturado. A primeira parte examina o jihadismo contemporâneo como um objeto de conhecimento no contexto intelectual francês. A segunda parte analisa o debate que surgiu entre os intelectuais franceses sobre o papel da religião no envolvimento de jovens adultos e adolescentes franceses com o jihadismo. A terceira parte apresenta algumas reflexões críticas sobre essas questões.

Palavras-chave: França, terrorismo, jihadismo, islã, secularismo

The wave of terrorist attacks in France in recent years has provoked a great deal of debate but many questions remain unanswered. One major controversy concerns the role religion plays in people taking jihadist action. The aim of this article is to resituate how debate on this question has been structured. The first part of the article examines contemporary jihadism as a knowledge object in the French intellectual context. The second part analyses the debate that has emerged among French intellectuals regarding the role of religion in the drift towards jihadism of young French adults and juveniles. The third part presents some critical reflections on these issues.

Keywords: France, terrorism, jihadism, islam, secularism

In recent years France has undergone a wave of terrorist attacks more or less closely linked to the situation in Iraq and in Syria. These have naturally provoked a great deal of study and thought but currently there are few proper empirical research studies and many questions remain unanswered. One of the most burning controversies concerns the role religion plays in people taking jihadist action and the aim of this article is to resituate how debate on this question has been structured for readers who are relatively far from these preoccupations.

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To briefly situate the events which are the subject of the debate I intend to discuss, I shall reiterate that between 2012 and the present France is the country which has been subjected to the most jihadist attacks² in Western Europe. It is generally agreed that the



current sequence of attacks began with the murders committed by Mohamed Mehra between the 11th and the 19th of March 2012 when Mehra killed 3 soldiers then attacked a Jewish school where he killed 3 children and the father of two of the children in cold blood while filming himself with a GoPro camera before being killed himself by the police in the siege of his home. Since 1996, there had been no Islamist terrorist attacks in France.

Some of the recent attacks are among the most murderous in the last 50 years. In this macabre classification, obviously the attacks on November 13th 2015 in Paris (130 dead, 414 injured) and Nice on July 14th 2016 (85 dead and 201 injured) stand out. However it should be pointed out that France is not the main target for this terrorism. It is estimated that in the two years following Isis's declaration of the "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq in June 2014 over 200 terrorist acts were committed by the organization or its "branches" in 28 countries with over 3000 people killed (AUDUREAU, ZERROUKY and VAUDANO, 28/07/2016)³.

The characteristics of the perpetrators of successful attacks are better known than those of people who left France to join terrorist groups or who were prevented from doing so by the authorities. According to the Paris state prosecutor, it is estimated that at the end of 2017 around 700 adults (400 men and 300 women⁴) from France were still in Syria/Iraq along with around 430 minors (thirty of whom were listed as combatants). Some 265 people are said to have died there (including 8 women) and a similar number of people have come back to France. The average age is estimated at 25 with 25% of those who left being religious converts. Around a thousand departures were prevented while 15,000 people are said to have been listed by the security services as supposed to support the Islamist movement.⁵

Among the 22 terrorists who attacked France between 2012 and 2016, two thirds are known to have been born in France or held French nationality, 60% of them to have served prison terms, 30% to have left for Syria/Iraq and that 90% of them had been previously known to the French and/or Belgian police (LAURENT, 29/07/2016).

Even though the question of the exact link between the jihadists and the organizations they claim to belong to (Al Qaeda and its branches or Daesh) remains a subject for discussion in certain cases, the perpetrators of the attacks all claim in one way or another to follow Islam and even a version of it which they present as being the purest. And yet, university studies show that evidence of the link between the attacks, the perpetrators and the Muslim religion is far from accepted or is at least the subject of virulent controversies.

Before presenting these, I would like to discuss what seems to me to differentiate between the current wave of terrorist attacks and previous attacks and how this specific feature makes it more complicated to attain knowledge of the phenomena. This will be the subject of the first part

of my article. I will then examine French intellectual debates in the light of this difficulty in the second part before concluding with a critical examination of these controversies.

Contemporary jihadism as a knowledge object

The specific nature of contemporary jihadism

In a review published around twenty years ago, the political scientist Isabelle Sommier made a distinction between four main types of terrorism which were community-based (irredentist or nationalist movements); revolutionary (far right or far left movements); state terrorism either domestic (against the state's own population or part of it), or external (manipulation of terrorist groups for external political goals); and finally, religious (SOMMIER, 2000, p. 44s.).

We know that terrorism – as a *method of action* aimed at “creating a climate of insecurity to blackmail a government, to satisfy hate of a community, country or system”⁶ – is not a new political phenomenon and can be linked to very diverse causes. Historians generally date the start of terrorist attacks back to those committed by Russian nihilists and anarchists at the end of the 19th and the start of 20th century⁷. In recent decades, France has been subjected to all these different forms of terrorism with varying degrees of deadliness including religiously inspired terrorism. This form appeared in the middle of the 1990s and foreshadowed in some ways the current wave of terrorism (particularly with the involvement of young delinquents of Maghrebi origins from the poorer suburbs). However it could also be seen as the extension of an exterior conflict namely the Algerian civil war and to be “in the name of Algerian political interests and important issues” (see KEPEL, 2000, pp. 304-307)⁸.

The specific nature of the current sequence of jihadist terrorism lies above all in the fact that it claims to be an eschatological movement whose members – generally young men – are aiming at “martyrdom” (death) by killing in the name of their faith. The victims of Daesh in France are thus perhaps the first victims of religious fanaticism since the wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe. Historians specializing in this period have not been slow to point out the analogies between then and today⁹. In a short book written just after the January 2015 attacks, Denis Crouzet and Jean-Marie Le Gall reiterate that “the eschatological imaginary dimension is inherent to the religions of the Book” (CROUZET and LE GALL, 2015, p. 30) and point out the striking analogies between the apocalyptic spoken exchanges between Protestants and Catholics in 16th century Europe and Daesh’s current rhetoric and also the extreme violence which accompanied such discourse in both eras (Ibid., pp. 1-49).

In a short book published around ten years earlier entitled *Les religions meurtrières (Murderous Religions)*, the historian of religious wars Eli Barnavi had put forward a similar point of view summed up in around ten “theses” (BARNAVI, 2006)¹⁰. In this book, he defined a particular form of religious fundamentalism specific to the monotheistic religions which he called “revolutionary fundamentalism”. These religions of revelation (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) indeed fulfil the three conditions necessary for the development of this kind of movement – the existence “of a corpus of sacred texts which express the divine word and on which people can *base themselves*”; the belief in one God with a universal vocation which creates a separation between the faithful and infidels and can lead the former to want to impose the “truth” on the latter; finally, the historical character of these religions based on a linear conception of time with a beginning and an end, the Last Judgement. For certain believers, the extreme anxiety it causes leads them to want to make the conclusion happen sooner and contemporary jihadism is based on this after many other historical examples in all three religions. However, Barnavi considers that historical circumstances enabled the jihadist potential within Islam to develop and primarily – as early as the 17th century and the defeat of the Turks at Vienna – the realization that the despised Western world had gained the upper hand over Islam and the inability in the 20th century of modernizing nationalism to catch up (from Atatürk to Erdogan through Bourguiba and Nasser).

This idea is also present in Gilles Kepel’s book, *Jihad, expansion et déclin de l’islamisme (Jihad, the Expansion and Decline of Islamism)*, published in 2000. He situated the emergence of what was still called “Islamism” in the 1970s – with the turning point of the Khomeinist Revolution in 1979 and the expansion of Saudi Arabian Wahhabism – and noted the first signs of its weakening at the dawn of the millennium. Despite the book’s title, at the time the subject was not the murderous jihad so spectacularly revealed by the September 11th attacks (which Kepel naturally could not predict) but instead the aspiration to replace the secular form of nationalism which had achieved decolonization in most of the Muslim countries with a new fundamentalist ideology (KEPEL, 2000)¹¹.

The contrary view to this historicization of jihadism is put forward by certain authors such as Ephraïm Herrera who consider jihad – which is by essence military action coupled with a religious obligation – is not a derivation of Islam but instead “a notion which has guided Muslims since the beginning of Islam and still continues to guide them in the present. Its surprising mass renewal now is in no way a deviation from the orthodox line or the history of Islam. It is rather their natural continuation after a short period of hibernation which was a consequence of the colonization of Islamic countries by Western powers. Jihad involved and still involves acts which we consider profoundly cruel – murders, massacres, enslavement of women and children, rapes and pillaging, all in the name of religion” (HERRERA, 2015, p. 357). In other words, Islam is a conquering religion of which jihadism is the military expression and which continued in different parts of the world until the abolition of the

ottoman Caliphate by Atatürk in 1924 (*Ibid.*, p. 117). It could be said that this vision of Islam is consistent with the view of jihadists themselves who consider they defend the only authentic Islam.

This type of thesis naturally primarily preoccupies Muslim religious leaders who try to distance themselves from fanatics by claiming that attacks have “nothing to do” with the religion. This debate generally ends in a dead end involving the existence of a “good Islam” (moderate and peaceful) and a “bad Islam” (intolerant and violent), a distinction which Herrera vigorously refutes (*Ibid.*, p. 129)¹². A variant of this debate involves the question of whether all tendencies of fundamentalism are equal. Thus the question is whether quietist fundamentalism inspired by Sufism (and judged as heretical by Daesh) or even non-violent Salafism act as firewalls against or conversely footboards leading towards jihadism (KHOSROKHAVAR, 2014, pp. 131-132)¹³.

Secularization as an epistemological obstacle

Whereas it can hardly be disputed that jihadism is a variety of Islam, although deviant, debate is raging as to whether the religion plays a driving role in the passage into terrorism.

In my view, this controversy is largely due to a specific national characteristic: in a society which is as deeply secular as in France, the fact that religious motivation can be at the heart of current events is actually *beyond understanding* unlike previous waves of terrorism which were inspired by motives which were secular and political or geopolitical in nature even if their legitimacy could be debated. Jean Birnbaum summed this situation up well when he wrote that “for secular thinkers, anyone who is mad about God is simply mad” (BIRNBAUM, 20/07/2016).

Here we are dealing with a true “epistemological obstacle”¹⁴ and, as I shall explain further on, there are quite a number of researchers who find it hard to admit that faith could be the main motivation for jihadism¹⁵. This situation has been highlighted by Crouzet and Le Gall who points out “religious exculturation” as preventing us from “understanding the strength of religion in a society” (CROUZET and LE GALL, 2015, p. 18)¹⁶.

In his essay “Un silence religieux: La gauche face au jihadisme” (*A Religious Silence: The Left Faced with Jihadism*, 2016), Jean Birnbaum puts the blame on a generalized form of deliberate blindness: “Henceforth, not only are we convinced that religion belongs to the past but the very idea that it could have its own political force seems extravagant. When men invoke God to spread terror in the heart of Paris, we are quick to describe their actions as absurdity or madness which should no longer exist” (BIRNBAUM, 2016, p. 34). However, Birnbaum makes the political and intellectual left politically and intellectually responsible for this attitude: “wherever there is religion, the left sees no trace of politics. As soon as politics is involved the left claims this has

‘nothing to do’ with religion” (*Ibid.*, p. 40) as the main heads of state have claimed after each attack. He also stresses the extent to which this idea “that it has nothing to do with it” – which is initially an attempt by political leaders to avoid any generalized stigmatization of Muslims in France as well as possible revenge attacks – tends to obscure Islam’s internal conflicts and greatly weakens the position of those Muslim intellectuals who indeed fight fundamentalism like Abdelwahab Meddeb (Professor at Paris-Ouest Nanterre University and specialist on Islam who passed away in 2014) who, in his book *La maladie de l’islam* (*The Illness of Islam*, Seuil, 2002) wrote: “Fanaticism was the illness of Catholicism, Nazism was Germany’s illness and similarly then it is sure that fundamentalism is Islam’s illness”¹⁷.

‘The Islamization of radicalism’ or the ‘radicalization of Islam?’ – a false debate?

Leaving to one side the minority of specialists who see jihad as a natural manifestation of Islam, at least three approaches to this question can be discerned: (a) those who think adhering to jihadism derives from young people’s radical aspirations – a position which can be subsumed with the expression “the Islamization of radicalism”; (b) those who think jihadism is the result of a deliberate strategy of movements which advocate violence and thus the phrase “the radicalization of Islam” is used; (c) finally there are those who reject the two previous standpoints. Before examining each of them, it should be noted that these debates refer to French or Western jihadists who are only a minority among all those who have joined the theatre of war in the Middle East.

The Islamization of radicalism

This position is based on the paradoxical observation that, although jihadist movements claim to have a fundamentalist conception of Islam based on what they consider to be a literal reading of the Quran, on the other hand it is a well-established fact today that, despite frequently having Maghrebi background, the actual religious knowledge of aspiring jihadists and their knowledge of Arabic are extremely rudimentary. Many have never regularly practiced the religion and do not respect ritual rules about food, alcohol or sexuality at all. Therefore a legitimate question can be asked about the place of Islam in the trajectory of jihadists and this has led to many researchers using this observation to reduce the role played by Islam in people becoming jihadists or even to deny the religion has any influence at all. This is the case of three books from 2016 by Alain Bertho, Raphaël Liogier and, in a more nuanced style, by Olivier Roy. The first is a

sociologist specializing in urban protests and riots, the second is a specialist of the sociology of religions and the third is an Islamologist who specializes in Central Asia rather than the Levant.

In his book *Les enfants du chaos: Essai sur les temps des martyrs* (*The Children of Chaos: An Essay on the Times of Martyrs*, 2016) Alain Bertho¹⁸ adopts a macro-sociological and international standpoint in which jihadism is just one aspect of the crisis caused by globalization and characterized by three main features – the rise of riots throughout the world; a crisis of states' legitimacy deriving from their “permanent use of lies” (BERTHO, 2016, p. 62); and the correlative search for such States of new legitimacy in law and order policies stoked up by the veritable rise of terrorist attacks throughout the world (Ibid., p. 69).

From this perspective, jihadism is only an outlet: “This is not a radicalization of Islam but instead the Islamization of the anger, distress and despair of the lost children of a terrible era who find meaning and weapons for their rage in jihad” (Ibid., p. 13). Jihadism “is a long-lasting and strong strategy against globalization and the powers which direct it. Through terror, it affirms an identity with a universal vocation serving a religious power, the Caliphate, with no less ambition (than globalization)” (Ibid., p. 99). In this way, it proposes a trans-national alternative “to the deadly unification of the markets” by proposing “a collective and individual meaning, strategy and ethics” (Ibid., p. 101) for the “lost children of the chaos caused by devastating globalization” (Ibid., p. 17). This is also one of the consequences of the debacle of revolutionary communist ideology. This has left a void which the jihad proposes to fill with “a truly political solution involving the conversion of the self, the end of history and martyrdom as liberation” (Ibid., p. 206). To combat this, Bertho calls for a new form of “contemporary radicalism” capable of giving new meaning to the dispersed and disparate revolts which are multiplying.

Clearly from this standpoint, the actual Muslim religious dimension of the phenomenon of adhering to jihadism is completely secondary. It is only one solution among others to a certain form of despair or certain aspirations of young people (because it is accepted that the large majority of affiliates from other countries than those directly concerned are young). The prime factor is the radicalism of a faction of young people which is borne of the situation into which they have been put. In Marxist terms, this would be called alienation.

Similarly, Raphaël Liogier's¹⁹ book *La guerre des civilisations n'aura pas lieu: Coexistence et violence au XXI^e siècle* (*The War of Civilizations Will Not Take Place: Coexistence and Violence in the 21st Century*, 2016), has a much broader subject than jihadism alone to which he only devotes around ten pages. However in the book, he mentions “jihadism without Islam” (LIOGIER, 2016, p. 195) whose adepts are initially attracted by a taste for adventure or for warrior exploits (“a radical version of tourism of the extreme” (Idem). For him, European jihadists “convert directly to jihadism without first passing through Islam” (Idem) and religious fundamentalism only appears

subsequently “because this is part of a legionary’s panoply” (*Ibid.*, p. 197). In his view, “the new jihadists are recruited rather than indoctrinated” (*Ibid.*, 198). However, unlike Roy – and in a rather counter-intuitive manner if one considers the final destiny of murderous jihadists – he sees no nihilism because he considers that “terrorists are not motivated by the desire to die but to live more intensely, like radical vegans, pietistic Salafists or neo-Buddhists”. In this, they are part of a much broader movement involving the renewal of fundamentalism of all religions but which is characterized by the individualism of modernity: “This is a hypermodern infiltration of Islam rather than an Islamic infiltration of modernity” (LIOGIER, 04/10/2016).

The anthropologist Scott Atran (15/12/2015) shares Liogier’s point of view when he writes:

what inspires the most lethal assailants in the world today is not so much the Quran or religious teachings but rather a thrilling cause and a call to action that promises glory and esteem in the eyes of friends. Foreign volunteers for the Islamic State are often youth in transitional stages in their lives – immigrants, students, people between jobs and before finding their mates. Having left their homes, they seek new families of friends and fellow travellers to find purpose and significance.

The sociologist Smaain Laacher is more categorical when he affirms that “we are not dealing with “radicalization” but with “political violence” (LAACHER, 31/07/2016)²⁰.

However an article by Olivier Roy published in *Le Monde* in November 2015 (ROY, 23/11/2015) called “Le djihadisme est une révolte générationnelle et nihiliste” (*Jihadism is a generational and nihilistic revolt*) and then developed in his book *Le Jihad et la mort (Jihad and Death*, 2016)²¹ brought this point of view to the attention of the general public, particularly as it led to controversy with Gilles Kepel. For Roy (2016), jihadism is a kind of adolescent revolt which affects two precise categories in France – either those of the “second generation” who were born in France or arrived when very young in France or converts who are in a generational revolt against their parents “or more exactly with what their parents represent in terms of culture and religion”. In the first case, they reject their parents’ culture (whether Muslim or not) and the “Western” culture they grew up in without actually having any attachments to the traditional practice of the Muslim religion. They are like “*born again*” believers who are proud to take back “for themselves an identity which they see their parents as having debased: they are ‘more Muslim than Muslims’ and particularly than their parents. (...) As for converts, they choose Islam because it is the only solution on the market for radical revolt. Joining Daesh is a certain way of terrorizing people”. He therefore rejects the idea of a “radicalization of Islam” and affirms the idea of an “Islamization of radicalism”.

In his recent essay which aims to develop this point of view, he adopts a more qualified standpoint. He places more emphasis on the religious nature of this form of revolt: “(...) obviously

the choice made by radicals to identify with jihad and claim to be part of a radical Islamist organization is not a mere opportunistic choice. The reference to Islam is central to their decision to act and makes the whole difference with other forms of violence among young people” (p. 61). Later he writes that “it is nevertheless clear that these young radicals are sincere believers. They think they will go to heaven and their references are profoundly Islamic” (p. 73) even if this is a *sui generic* Islam particularly because of its apocalyptic and nihilistic character.

What Roy calls “nihilism” – and defines with a phrase like “the inanity of life” (p. 93) – is at the heart of his point of view as the title of his book indicates:

Living in an Islamic society does not interest jihadists on the contrary to those who just come to fulfil the *hijra* [*living in a Muslim land*] because the radicals come to die rather than to live. This is the paradox – these young radicals are not utopians they are nihilists because they are millenarians. (...) This is the *no future* generation (p. 93).

He believes jihadists see themselves as an avant-garde which attain the level of the Prophet through death in an “apocalypse [which] will in any case annihilate all which was created by Man” (98)²².

The radicalization of Islam

Gilles Kepel (2015) opposed these theses in his extremely well-argued and researched book about the Paris terrorist attacks and their origins called “Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West”²³. For him, contemporary terrorism is situated at the crossroads between the evolution of Muslim fundamentalism (on the international scale) and the specific characteristics of the situation in France. Jihadism's murderous violence is an integral part of the history of a certain form of Muslim fundamentalism, “jihadist Salafism” which was theorized and spread throughout Europe in 2005 by the Syrian Abu Musab al-Suri who committed the Madrid terrorist attacks (March 2004)²⁴. He identified a first victorious Islamist wave in Afghanistan in the 1980s followed by a second wave incarnated by al-Qaeda in the 2000s. Both these waves failed to involve the Muslim masses and he attempts to go beyond this strategic failure by creating the theory of a “3rd wave” consisting of “a local form of jihadism with a reticular system which infiltrates the base and no longer the summits of the enemy societies which must be destroyed” and is intended to lead to “civil war in Europe led by badly-integrated and rebellious young immigrant Muslims when they have been suitably indoctrinated and given military training for a local battlefield” (KEPEL, 2015, p. 52). Kepel believes that the development of social networks spread these ideas over the next decade while the later decomposition of the Syrian, Iraqi and Libyan states created favourable conditions for these ideas to be implemented through the proximity of the battlefield with Europe.

For Kepel, the genesis of French jihadism can be found in the convergence in the 1990s of the “repercussions of the Algerian civil war, the vector of armed Salafism” and “the first effects of Saudi preaching (...) which advocated a radical break with the values of infidel French society but without violence”. This situation led to a first phase of terrorist attacks which ended with the police killing the main protagonists in 1995-6, although the underground development of radicalization networks went on (Idem, ibidem, p. 119). These networks found a favourable breeding ground in “the third generation of Islam in France” (Idem, ibidem, p. 29), the children of post-colonial immigration, which emerged politically around 2005 and which “for the first time in the short history of French Islam involved a large majority (...) of educated French citizens born in the country and who are native French speakers” (Idem, ibidem, p. 48) but many of whom felt they were not recognized as such by French society²⁵. Salafist movements then jihadist groups managed to recruit people among the disappointed and those who were left behind in this generation by offering them “an imaginary solution to change society’s dead ends which was even more attractive because it managed to combine in part pre-existing far left and far right radical utopian ideas or to replace them as is shown by the unbelievable increase in conversions” (Idem, ibidem, p. 30).

As can be seen, the disagreement between Kepel and his detractors involves less the expectations of aspiring jihadists – about which nearly everyone is in agreement – than the underlying mutations of Islam which he accuses such detractors of not understanding and not wanting to study for fear of being accused of Islamophobia (KEPEL and ROUGIER, 14/03/2016). Particularly and unlike Liogier, he sees a form of continuity – nevertheless without determinism – between the supposedly non-violent variety of Salafism and jihadism. This position has also been supported by intellectuals from Muslim countries like the writer Kamel Daoud or Abdelwahab Meddeb. In short, the idea which most blatantly opposes Kepel and his detractors is that he believes that religious radicalization precedes and explains why people commit terrorist acts²⁶.

Political Islam

François Burgat, the “third party” in this controversy, has had less media attention than the two discussed above. He is however a recognized specialist of Islamic studies and particularly of political Islam. He wrote several press articles during the controversy and published a very interesting book in which he recalls his career path and thinking while explaining at length the objections he has to the ideas of Roy and Kepel who he ends up viewing as interchangeable²⁷.

In this book, he sets out his point of view in the very first lines: “the tensions which affect relations between the Western and Muslim worlds have much more political than ideological origins” (BURGAT, 2016, p. 5). According to Burgat (Ibid., p. 7), the rise of Islamism since the

emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 reflects a “process of reconquest” after the “culture of the losers” in colonization faced with the “symbolic universe of the colonizer” and more broadly the West (for countries which avoided direct colonization). He stresses that the force of the attraction of this “rediscovered Muslim vocabulary” is more to do with its “*endogenous* character” than its “*sacred dimension*” (*Ibid.*, p. 8). In his own terms, Burgat’s views do not differ from those of Barnavi or Kepel regarding the reactive character of Islamism but he sees a phenomenon in this which is more cultural (“identity-based”) than religious and stresses that the generalized adoption of the “Islamic vocabulary” does not lead to uniformity in political practices which can actually remain extremely diverse (*Ibid.*, pp. 11-12). In other words, use of the “Islamic vocabulary” is profoundly identity-based in character and its objective is to “put an end to symbolic European supremacy” but the causes of this movement are non-religious and “do not derive in any way from particular inherent features of the Muslim culture or religion” (*Ibid.*, p. 12).

Through a “process of *cultural reappropriation*”, a sectarian form of radicalization can develop on this Islamist base which is “the most often reactive in nature” and whose “most profound motive is prior violence”²⁸. Burgat therefore rejects Kepel’s thesis that sectarian radicalization “is allegedly the precursor or the cause of political radicalization” (*Ibid.*, p. 13) and suggests that on the contrary it is the product thereof (which brings him closer to Roy’s ideas). Moving on from this point, the understanding of this phenomenon requires “the responsibility which is essential and nevertheless too often neglected of non-Muslims in the creation of jihadist violence” (*Ibid.*, p. 256) to be taken into account.

Without going into details about his disagreements with his two colleagues – who he ironically thanks for “having given him the irrepressible desire to express other convictions” (*Ibid.*, p. 23) – his criticisms can be summarized as follows²⁹. He criticizes Kepel for “a formalist drift in ideas” which under the cover “of the meticulous listing of its diverse formal characteristics leads to the active and oppositional dimension of the Islamist phenomenon being hidden” (*Ibid.*, p. 266). He considers that Kepel gives disproportionate importance to “hypothetical intellectual genealogies with founding landmark doctrinal or programmatic texts which are linked by human or technological vectors” (*Ibid.*, p. 267) and neglects the impact of the North/South domination on the phenomenon. In other terms, he considers that Kepel concentrates on “how” jihadism comes to pass while neglects “why” this is the case and his merely book-based approach leads him to exaggerate the influence of the theoreticians of Islamism and to look for the cause of the phenomenon therein and particularly in the Salafist version of Islamism. And yet, for Burgat, definitively stating that Islam is the cause of jihadism represents a form of culturalism (*Ibid.*, p. 12, 279) which is a real anathema in the French social sciences and can be surprising from a person who himself insists on the “identity-based” character of Islamism.

He is equally critical of Roy for partly different reasons. He disagrees with Roy's view "that the rise of European jihadism is just due to a sort of psychosocial tension of individuals in a state of relative historical and social lack of belonging to their environment" (Ibid., p. 281) and also objects to Roy replacing a political explanation with a "paradigm of the *racaille* (lower class scum)" which portrays "individuals who are socially deprived and intellectually and politically spineless and whose most important characteristic is that they are radically cut off from the thinking of Muslims from France or elsewhere and only motivated by an individual pathology qualified without further details as *nihilism*" (Ibid., p. 281). Burgat refutes this view which he views as psychologically shallow and considers that it cannot explain the Daesh phenomenon as a whole by taking into account its European, Syrian and Iraqi dimensions. For Burgat, Roy therefore tends to extrapolate and make one of the phenomenon's facets a principle for an overall explanation while ignoring (like Kepel) "the relations of domination to which the Muslim part of the population are submitted thus masking what I personally consider to be the profound roots of the problem" (Ibid., p. 284). Similarly, he estimates that the case of converts – "*last minute passengers*" of jihadism "who got on a train which had already departed" (Ibid., p. 287) – has a specific explanation which possesses no decisive explanatory capacity.

To sum up, then, for Burgat, the two theses of Kepel and Roy are linked insofar as they "exonerate our policies from almost all responsibility" (Ibid., p. 290) both concerning the living conditions of Muslims in France and French foreign policy and military intervention in the Middle East.

Jihadism: an excess of ideas and a deficit of data?

The debates which I have just discussed oppose, as we have seen, a relatively limited number of protagonists and the controversies involved – exacerbated by the media – also involve long-standing personal rivalries and even territorial arguments which tend to harden the respective positions of those involved. However these divergences also derive from disciplinary orientations and different research experiences. To mention only the recognized specialists of Islam: Kepel is a political scientist who initially specialized in Egypt and Middle Eastern countries and who has also studied the situation of Islam in France a great deal. He speaks Arabic; Roy is an anthropologist, a specialist on Central Asia (Iran and Afghanistan in particular) but studies the question of religions in general. He speaks Persian but not Arabic; Burgat is a political scientist who speaks Arabic and is a specialist on Islamism, the Maghreb, the Middle East and the Gulf.³⁰

Given these conditions, which significant points should be retained from these controversies?

Several objections can be made about the denial of the religious dimension by the most radical believers in the theory of the "Islamization of radicalism" like Bertho and Liogier. In

reality, this approach to jihadism consists in opposing jihadists as they really are with how one imagines they ought to be as practising Muslims. Roy does not fall into this trap, particularly in his book. One might ask whether it is necessary to be a theologian to join a religious movement and whether the rudimentary faith of a *born again* believer is not a more effective factor in total adhesion to that movement? Moreover, can we believe that all those who went on crusades or took part in the St. Bartholomew's Day massacres were on both sides actually practising Christians? Is there not a lack of seriousness or a form of arrogance in not wanting to take seriously the religious convictions affirmed by those who are ready to sacrifice their lives for them³¹? This standpoint tends to underestimate the diversity of religious practices and forms of religiosity and also of the fact that by creating a "radical separation between the pure and the impure", religion is an ideological factor which unifies jihadists in the same cause despite their social origins and backgrounds separating them³². It also transgresses the principle set out – in my view correctly – by the sociologist Cyril Lemieux (EHESS) which stipulates that it is not up to sociologists "to categorically state what is the true Islam and claim on this basis that young radicalized people should or should not be considered as true Muslims"³³.

A similar objection can be made to Burgat's views. The theory by which Islamism constitutes in some way an attempt to return to the "identity-based" sources of the Muslim world whose motives and objectives are however above all political makes it difficult to account for the suicidal and deadly nature of the jihadists' range of acts. Moreover he does not discuss this point in depth. For him, the religious reference has an essentially formal character – it is "speech" which can lead to very different "actions" – and faith is not taken into account.

Does this mean that we need to make a choice between the proponents of these different theories? All the authors we have discussed claim to have the key solution to the phenomenon under study. Some position themselves on the side of the expectations expressed by young people (Bertho, Liogier, Roy) while others focus on the ideology on offer and its underlying networks (Kepel, Burgat) and there are also sometimes important differences of opinion on both sides. For some, political radicalization comes before religious radicalization (Roy, Burgat, Bertho, Liogier, Atran) while others (Kepel, Rougier) believe the contrary. And yet it is difficult to see why these different configurations could not exist simultaneously among the population concerned and correspond to different, distinct routes towards radicalization – and perhaps to different roles within the movement – which would need to be studied for their own worth and whose respective importance would also need to be grasped. The real challenge is to understand how the specific offer of violence attracts a public and succeeds in getting people involved which thus leads on to the issue of radicalization³⁴.

The right method therefore seems to attempt to resituate jihadism in the broader perspective of adhesion to "extreme thought" (to use a term formulated by Bronner (2016) or more generally

to political violence precisely in order to isolate its specific features³⁵. The intellectual tools to study the phenomena of radicalization exist and research has been carried out into a wide range of radical movements throughout the world since McAdam's (1986) seminal work on *high-risk activism*³⁶. However, although the French scientific community began working a great deal on the subject after the French terrorist attacks and the mass departure of aspiring jihadists to Middle East³⁷, this empirical research is only beginning to bear its fruits. These studies have very varying scales and ranges and it is not possible to provide a detailed analysis thereof herein. Some of this research has been mentioned in the article however and we shall simply cite others.

Apart from the aforementioned research by Khosrokhavar (2014) and Atran (2010, 2015), we may also cite Benslama and Khosrokhavar's research (2017) based on around sixty cases of female jihadists who left France. They describe the diversity of these women's relations with political and religious commitments. Truong's book (2017), based on a long-term ethnographical study in two districts of the Paris region, gives a well-nuanced portrait of the drift towards jihadism notably referring to Amédy Coulibaly who committed the attack on the Hypercacher supermarket in January 2015.

A certain number of recent studies take court cases as their starting point. This is the case of the work by Crettiez, Seze, Ainine and Lindemann (2017) who interviewed around twenty of those convicted (a third for regionalist or nationalist terrorism and the other two thirds for jihadist terrorism) and analyzed radicalization as a complex process of evolution involving structural determining factors, multiple socialization processes and the psychological dimension of commitment. Other research was based on court case sources like the study by Hecker (2018) who was inspired by Sageman's work (2005) and analyzed 137 judgements involving jihadists to provide an interesting quantitative analysis. This was also the case of the research carried out by Bonelli and Carrié (2018) into 133 cases of male and female minors prosecuted for terrorism or "radicalization". This study stresses the importance of the feeling of being relegated to an inferior status at school in the gradual adhesion to radical forms of Islam.

The research carried out by Galland and Muxel (2018) is even more ambitious and focuses on political radicalism among young people. It is based on a set of quantitative and qualitative surveys involving 7000 secondary school pupils and argues that this radicalism involves a significant minority of teenagers and that the specifically religious and identity-based dimension of phenomenon seems to be more decisive than socio-economic factors.

Clearly then we are only at the start of a vast effort to increase knowledge, the results of which are sometimes contrasting. A summary report of such findings will of course be needed at the suitable moment³⁸. However these first results tend to put the simplistic theoretical oppositions discussed above into perspective and show that the question is more complex than first thought.

Notes

¹ This work was carried out in the framework of the Capes-Cofecub (n° Sh 815-37, 2015-2018) project "Passages de frontières et villes sûres: Enjeux historiques et contemporains" (*Border Crossings and Safe Towns: Important Historical and Contemporary Issues*). This text revisits and goes into more depth on ideas presented at several conferences at the Universidade Federal de São Carlos (UFSCar, Brazil) (September 8th 2016), at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF, Brazil) (IV Seminário Internacional INCT-InEAC, September 13th 2016); see (on-line): <http://www.ineac.uff.br/?q=news/iv-semin%C3%A1rio-internacional-do-inctineac-0>) and during a conference at the UnB Futuro (Universidade de Brasília, September 27th 2016; see (RABELO, 27/09/2016) and at my speech which opened the Vth Seminário internacional "*Violência e conflitos sociais: Criminalização, controle e punição*", Laboratório de Estudos da Violência (LEV), Universidade Federal do Ceará, Fortaleza, November 29th-December 2nd 2016. Translated by Richard Dickinson (Inist-CNRS).

² Between 2012 and 2018, we can estimate that there have been around twenty attacks, over ten attempted attacks and at least around fifty foiled attacks. It is not easy to count the attacks and the number varies according to the sources consulted because of variations in how attacks are counted particularly when the same culprit carries out a series of attacks over a short period (cf. Mehra). The counts also vary when there are simultaneous or coordinated attacks (Paris, 2015) and it is sometimes unclear whether the targets or the operations were counted. Also the distinction between an actual attack and an attempt or between an attempt and a plan is not always clear and the same source can provide different counts at different moments with no justification given.

³ See Audureau, Zerrouky and Vaudano (28/07/2016), which is a very complete comparative file on Daesh attacks all over the world (the Excel database is available at this address).

⁴ The place of women in Daesh jihadism strongly distinguishes this movement from its competitors such as Al-Qaeda. Women are said to have represented a third of French jihadists in 2015 (at the highpoint of the wave of departures) which is more than in Germany (20 %), less than in the Netherlands (40%) but well above the European average (10%). Among these women there are more converts and minors than among the men (a third) and they are said to come from poorer backgrounds than the men (BENSLAMA and KHOSROKHAVAR, 2017, pp. 13-15).

⁵ These estimations are based on different sources – government statements, specialist organizations – *International Center for Counter-terrorism* (The Hague), *Combating Terrorism Center* (West Point (USA)), *The Soufan Group*, *Centre d'analyse du terrorisme* (CAT, Paris) – and the press. For estimations, see Hosxe (10/11/2017); for deaths in Syria/Iraq see 20 Minutes (01/09/2017); also see Mouren et al. (21/03/2016) . As this survey carried out by students at SciencePo Paris indicates, the French authorities can only make an estimation of deaths based on indirect information. The survey could only document 68 cases from the 168 estimated deaths at the time (only men) with 53 having sworn allegiance to Daesh. As a comparison the number of combatants from the EU is said to be between 4000 and 5000 with three quarters coming from 4 countries - Belgium, France, Germany, UK (France is first in terms of the absolute figure with Belgium first in proportion per inhabitant). However Europeans are a minority among all the foreign fighters who are estimated at 30,000. It should also be reiterated that volunteers leaving to fight in other countries is a fairly common historical phenomenon (BONELLI, 2015; BIRNBAUM, 2016, p. 177 s.).

⁶ The citation comes from the Larousse dictionary, see (on-line): www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/terrorisme/77478; the expression "*method of action*" refers to the distinction made by Michel Wieviorka between a method and a logic of action. The first refers to the instrumental character of terrorism in the political struggle while the second refers to the "mythical or artificial" relation the terrorist group has "with the cause it supports, with the social, national or religious movement of which it claims to be the highest expression, with the tangible population which claims to represent and which, if it exists, it ignores or rejects" (WIEVIORKA, 1993, p. 610). On the semantic evolution of the notion, see Tolomelli (2016).

⁷ See for example Laqueur (2016), Raflik (2016); on the definition of terrorism, see Rapin (2014).

⁸ According to Burgat (2016, p. 16) these attacks are an example of manipulation by the Algerian powers-that-be.

⁹ As the historian Olivier Christin pointed out in an article for the French newspaper *Liberation* (July 18th 2016), for the Fathers of the Church "*it is not suffering but the cause which makes the martyr* (Augustin, sermon 328)". Similarly according to him the terrorist acts must be able "to be attributed to an ideology and organized movement which must accept that this is the case" and is not defined by "the number of deaths, the abject nature of the means used or ardent but recent religious convictions" (see CHRISTIN, 18/07/2016).

¹⁰ Elie Barnavi is also a specialist of the history of the Jews and Israel. He was the Israeli ambassador in France for a while.

¹¹ As Leïla Dakhli (2016), points out in an article which is extremely useful to understand the university environment concerned, after September 11th 2001 Kepel was sharply attacked for having dared announce a decline in Islamism. The same was true for Roy who argued similarly in 1992 and persisted with the point of view when his book was republished more recently (ROY, 1992, 2015). See Burgat (2016, p. 254 s.) on this subject.

¹² This defensive position adopted by the Muslim authorities in Western countries is frequently transmitted by the civil authorities aiming to avoid amalgams likely to lead to acts of vengeance being committed against Muslim citizens. There is a conspirationist variant of this position which claims that, as Islam cannot by essence lead to such acts of cruelty, they must be the result of a plot to implicate Islam to harm the religion. In this kind of conspiracy theory which began to develop after the September 11th attacks in New York, generally the Jewish and/or Americans and/or the West are blamed. I shall not discuss this second point further as it is the subject of another discussion (see TAGUIEFF, 2002)

¹³ The Iranian writer Chahla Chafiq criticized the distinction between these two variants of fundamentalism in an article entitled "Soutenir l'islamisme c'est entrer dans le djihadisme" (*Supporting Islamism means entering jihadism*, *Le Monde*, August 9th 2016, p. 23). A similar view was expressed by Farid Abdelkrim who considered the Muslim Brotherhood, of which he had been an active member, to be the source of recruits to jihadism (*Le Monde*, September 4th. 2016). Roy puts forward the idea of a common matrix between Salafism and Daesh instead but insists more on the distance between the two both in Daesh's "theology" and in the behaviour of jihadists (ROY, 2016b, pp. 99-110).

¹⁴ On this notion, see Bachelard (1938) and Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron (2006[1968]).

¹⁵ The implications of secularization which concerns all the established religions have been analyzed well by the Islamologist (and specialist of Central Asia) Olivier Roy in his book which is significantly entitled "La sainte ignorance, le temps de la religion sans culture" (*Sacred ignorance – the times of religion without culture*; ROY, 2008).

¹⁶ This point of view is the basis of Barnavi's book (2006).

¹⁷ Cited by Birnbaum (2016, p. 53).

¹⁸ Professor at Paris 8 University and sociologist

¹⁹ Professor at Sciences Po (Aix-en-Provence), sociologist of religions and philosopher.

²⁰ The author of the article is a sociology professor at the University of Strasbourg.

²¹ Roy (2016, p. 15) indicates that he borrowed the phrase "the Islamization of radicalism" from Bertho.

²² In an article published before the emergence of Daesh, Roy (2014) had already put forward the idea of a nihilism based on the feeling of not belonging to a tangible Muslim community and made a comparison with Columbine-like mass murders in the United States and elsewhere (for a criticism of this point of view, see Hassid [2014]).

²³ As he speaks Arabic, this gives him direct access to the original texts unlike most of the other researchers mentioned herein (apart from Burgat). This means he can decipher the Salafist re-reading of the past – like for example the choice of symbolic dates for the terrorist attacks – and the multiple religious references in the original versions of propaganda texts.

²⁴ This connection is disputed by Roy (2016, p. 134) and Burgat (2016, p. 267, 278 s.) who believe that Al Suri had no influence on Daesh or on the jihadist base.

²⁵ This is an important disagreement with Roy (2016, p.44) who refutes Kepel's thesis of a 3rd generation. But this is partly based on a misunderstanding because Kepel does not use the term "generation" in a biographical sense (i.e. the grandchildren of immigrants) but rather historically (the first generation educated in France, Kepel [2016, p. 48 s.]). There is still a disagreement about the phenomenon's chronology. Roy considers that there is not a fundamental break between Al Qaeda or Daesh jihadism and thus goes back to the beginning of this wave in the middle of the 1990s unlike Kepel for whom the movement begins in the middle of the 2000s.

²⁶ However, his thinking does not seem so far from Roy's views when he writes: "The objective of jihadist terrorism is make [French society] implode by mobilizing behind its activists and "martyrs" the radicalized children of retrocolonial immigration from the Muslim world. *But also by bringing together all the discontented people who hate a system which excludes them particularly among young people who feel lost and with no future for whom the conversion to jihadist Islamism involves or replaces both far left and far right militancy*". Similar could be said of his view that: "those who claim to be part of 'integral' Islam in its varied forms and move from identity-based overexcitement to actual violence *transform their social fury into a political strategy through their recourse to religion*" (KEPEL, 2015, resp. p. 250 et 316; italics added by the author).

²⁷ See for example Burgat (07/07/2016), Ayad, Hennion and Zerrouky (21/10/2016); and above all Burgat (2016). Also see (on-line) the debate between Burgat and Roy: <http://savoirs.ens.fr/expose.php?id=2602>. Bonnefoy (2017) has proposed an analysis which is quite close to Burgat's.

²⁸ In a recently re-published book Liogier (2012, 2016) also defended the point of view that "the negative perception of Islam was in itself one of the causes for it becoming a standard bearer for deprived young people who are crushed by frustration and the desire for vengeance" (p. 206).

²⁹ Burgat provides a subtle analysis of his ideas which are related to those of Roy and Kepel in chapter 13 of his book and situates the origin of their disagreements in their respective experiences of research. While he recognizes that both authors have certain qualities, this analysis still includes gibes like when he criticizes Roy for his lack of linguistic and sociological knowledge of the Arab world and suggests Kepel has a limited and 'socialite' vision of the "field" in the countries visited.

³⁰ See Dakhli (2016) on this point who shows that the alliances between the main protagonists of these debates can fluctuate according to the moment and the themes involved. To shed light on these disagreements, the recent account given by Burgat (2016, 254 s.) is very useful. See also: Bonzon (06/03/2016), Guillebaud (04/04/2016), Daumas (14/04/2016).

³¹ On the fundamental importance of death in jihadism, see the analysis by Khosrokhavar (2018, p. 551 s.).

³² In this sense, see Birnbaum (2016, pp. 26-27). The quote is by Barnavi (2006, p. 27).

³³ *Libération*, January 31st – February 1st 2015, p. 27; also see Roy (2016b, p. 99).

³⁴ We know that Daesh used an extremely elaborate form of marketing and set up structures which enabled it to attract its "clientele" and lead them where the organization wanted them to go.

³⁵ Sageman (2017), Bonnefoy (2017). Kepel continuously argues in favour of the absolute specific nature of his subject and thus refuses to deal with the problem in this way because "it dilutes in generality a phenomenon, the specific nature of which is forbidden to be thought about – even in a comparative manner" by grouping together The Red Brigades, Daesh and other sectarianisms. Thus no serious survey is required "because we already know the answer". The weakness of this position – which partly seems to derive from a logic of competition between scholars – lies in the fact that it does not really provide an alternative and settles for arguing in favour of the development of new theories and instruments which are adapted to the specific features of jihadist ideologies, behaviour and practices. See his reply to Roy: Kepel and Rougier (14/03/2016); also see Kepel and Rougier (2016, p. 43).

³⁶ As for example, Xavier Crettiez (2006, 2011 a et b) shows by his review of a great deal of research into diverse historical situations. Also see Neumann's anthology (2015).

³⁷ See for example the French National Center for Scientific Research's initiatives which have developed 60 research projects (<https://lejournal.cnrs.fr/nos-blogs/face-au-terrorisme-la-recherche-en-action/comprendre-la-radicalisation>) or those of the Fondation de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme as part of its "Plateforme violence et sortie de la violence" (*Violence and leaving violence* platform) (see [on-line]: <http://www.fmsh.fr/fr/recherche/24279>) and its "Observatoire des radicalisations" (Observatory of radicalization). There has also been a multiplication of scientific events involving this subject. A recent survey found 37 meetings or conferences announcements in France on subjects linked to this question for 2018 (disseminated on the digital mailing list of the Association nationale des candidats aux métiers de la science politique (*National Association of Candidates for Political Science Professions ANCMSP*) by A. Jossin on January 22nd 2018). However the development of this research is still hampered by difficulties in accessing data which the authorities consider too sensitive.

³⁸ For a first comparative summary, see Khosrokhavar (2018) and particularly the concluding chapter of the work.

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RENÉ LÉVY (rlevy@cesdip.fr) é diretor de pesquisas do Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS, Paris, França) e pesquisador do Centre de recherche sociologique sur le droit et les institutions pénales (Cesdip/CNRS/Ministério da Justiça/Universidade de Versailles-Saint Quentin-en-Yvelines/Universidade de Cergy-Pontoise/Universidade de Paris-Saclay). É doutor em direito e mestre em criminologia pela Universidade de Montreal (UdeM, Canadá) e co-líder do projeto Capes-Cofecub nº Sh 837-15.