



Commissioned Book Review

Understanding Political Islam by François Burgat (translated by Thomas Hill). Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020. 248 pp., £80.00 (h/b). ISBN 9781526143433

Despite being White, male and French, just as the luminaries Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel, François Burgat has been the ‘other’ of Islamism literature. *Understanding Political Islam* narrates the odyssey of this otherness. The book consists of two parts. Part I, *Discovering the Muslim ‘Other’*, provides a snapshot of Burgat’s journey and transformation as a researcher. These voyages, ranging from Algeria, Egypt, Yemen to Palestine, Syria, Libya and the ‘Home’ – France – not only recount a memoir of a Western traveller but also shed light on the dynamics in the region and among and around the Muslims by telling a relatively unique history of them. Drawing on the experiences mentioned in the first part, Part II, *Political Islam: The Stakes of an Alternative Interpretation*, explores the pivotal moments and facets of this distinguished history-telling with a focus on political Islam. By juxtaposing his work to the dominant scholarship and milieu, Burgat maps the venture of Islamism in those discussions and practices. As a ‘political scientist of the Muslim World’ who retains ‘the deep conviction that remaining close to the field was a *sine qua non* of academic research’ (145), Burgat carries out this mapping through his encounters and their reviews. These encounters vary from the meetings with political actors, activists, journalists, intelligence agents and academics to being a witness or part of crucial meetings, critical exile and exportation processes and unusual exchanges and moments. In that sense, beyond traditional travel memoirs or autobiographies, the book emerges as a critical analysis of Islamism and the relevant literature.

In the light of this account, what differentiates Burgat’s work from the bulk of literature is twofold. Initially, unlike the explanations of

Roy and Kepel, his explanations of Islamism do not conform to French – in general Western – norms of ‘political correctness’ (197). In other words, his approach to Islamism distances him from the Eurocentric and Orientalist Western tradition, which is the dominant one both in the academy and in policy/politics (when there is any separation). The instances of the backlash he has received due to his stance on several issues such as the Algeria war, Palestine, the 9/11 (169–187) and the Charlie Hebdo attacks (212–226) are among the indications of his political marginality and dissent. The reason for this political position is partly related to his second difference. As opposed to the researchers whose foot ‘no longer touch the ground’ (43) due to too much theory, Burgat states that his ‘first contacts in the field of political Islam were sociological and human ones, rather than merely reading-based and theoretical’ (149). This emphasis on the field, ground over or against the theory, iterates several times throughout the book. For instance, while criticizing Roy’s ‘post-Islamism’, he states that Roy’s work ‘more theoretical, or archetypal, than it was sociological or based on observation of dynamics in the field’ (200).

It is undeniable that this sociological and ethnographic approach grants Burgat an exceptional place in the literature. For, as he stated, by enabling him ‘to contextualize, and therefore to humanize, the breach that the players of political Islam represented’ (149), this approach permits him to construe and analyse Islamism in its ‘omnipresent diversity’ (5). On the contrary, paradoxically, it develops as the main limitation of Burgat’s work, for it prevents him from articulating a framework that can explain Islamism as a dynamic transnational phenomenon beyond MENA, the Arab world and occasionally even the nation-state. By reducing the solution to the sociology of knowledge – epistemology – through too much focus on the field, Burgat neglects the need for

a new framework or theory that can produce this knowledge. This field-theory opposition in Burgat seems due to his essentialization of them into their hegemonic versions, namely, the field as mostly MENA but more importantly theory as the Western one. As a result of this fixation, he establishes almost a necessary and exclusionary relationship between contextualization/humanization and field and misreading/essentialism and theory. However, as we know from the early colonialist and Orientalist scholarship, particularly the anthropologic ones, the polar opposite of this claim might be the case as well. While the field can lead to decontextualization and dehumanization, 'merely reading-based and theoretical' contacts can result in contextualization and humanization.

Understanding Political Islam stands as a veracious candidate for such a 'contact' that

can enable the reader to contextualize and humanize the experiences of Islamist. In this respect, the book provides a valuable source for the students of political Islam and MENA, who strive to read an insightful account of the subject, which does not fall within the ambit of Orientalism.

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