

“A look back at experiencing the radical discourses which forged the imaginations of young Europeans in the 2000s and beyond: the Salafist preacher Anwar Al-Awlaqi’s resources, based on his conferences at the University of Nottingham”

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Introduction

As I was raising questions about the “Charlie Hebdo” murders, which occurred on January 7th, 2015, and reflecting on their causes, to overcome incomprehension, I was led to look back at my own research experiences in the early 2000s in the UK. In my research on European Islamist milieus, I worked particularly on Muslim currents developing a political interpretation of religious texts while (more or less) referring to a Utopia. I have to come back later to the significance of such currents for radicalism, but, here especially, I suggest rethinking how certain radical religious discourses sometimes become so appealing and are liable to lead to violent action.

This article will focus on analysing the discourse of just one speaker, the preacher Anwar Al-Awlaqi, whose speeches I attended while carrying out my research stays and conducting dozens of interviews about the milieus connected to the Muslim Brotherhood in Belgium, France and Great Britain. My main research objective was to understand their complex organisational frameworks and their ideology: above all I was inclined to present that ideology in terms of a shared ethos, beyond a few common principles, as great many members rather draw individually on distinct elements from their own collective traditions in terms of their personal sensibilities and contexts to justify their actions¹. Among those field experiences carried out in the Muslim Brotherhood milieus, where discourses of very diverse natures are pronounced, sometimes contradicting one another, I am referring here particularly to the annual FOSIS summer camp (The Federation of Student Islamic Societies in the U.K. and Ireland), which comprises an ensemble of Islamic associations present in British universities and, like the Brotherhood, claims to bring as many Muslims as possible together. This Federation was partially created by the Muslim Brotherhood; it remains close to it even if it has gradually been detaching itself from it since the early 2000s. This camp was organized in boarding facilities from June 19th to 22nd 2003, in the rather prestigious surroundings of the University of Nottingham, on topics involving the role and responsibility of Muslim students in the 21st century. From the outset, its organizers accentuated their aim to transform the attendees so that they might become “better, more determined persons”. And as the accent was placed on discipline and organisation to the advantage of Islamic activism, the ideological priorities displayed during the event remained very Brotherhood oriented despite what certain organizers might have said, trying, in a way that was really too insistent to be believable, to make me think that, actually, the Brothers had almost no role in the camp.

A mixed audience of approximately 300 young Muslim university students, men and women, of every ethnic-national origin, already engaged in some fifteen Islamic university associations (an elite who work inter alia for a better Islamic representativeness in

¹ See among others : B. Maréchal, *The Muslim Brothers in Europe*, Brill, 2008 (in French: *Les Frères Musulmans en Europe*, Paris, PUF, 2009) ; B. Maréchal, “The European Muslim Brothers’ Quest to Become a Social (Cultural) Movement” in R. Meijer, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Europe*, London, Hurst-Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 89-110 ; B. Maréchal, “The Historical and Contemporary Sociology of the European Muslim Brotherhood Movement and its Logics of Action” in *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, Leyden, Brill, n°4, 2015, pp. 223-257.

institutions, for charity projects, etc.) were thus addressed by a few Muslim associations invited there to promote their activities, in addition to some ten Muslim speakers. The latter represented various Muslim sensibilities although the majority of them had more a tendency to Islamic militancy. Among the speakers were Zahed Parvez, a former president of Young Muslims U.K. and subsequently president of the Islamic Society of Britain, which ardently calls for the construction of a society based on Islamic values, and the American Imam Abdul Rashid, who came to speak on Malcom X (whose heated remarks openly decried the Western lifestyle) as a symbolic actor for youth activism, presented in an essentialized manner in both cases. In contrast, the remarks of Sheik Suhaib Hassan, president of the Islamic Sharia Council, of Sheik Ibrahim Mogra, coming from the Islamic Deobandi tradition, of Hani Al-Banna, founder of the humanitarian organisation Islamic Relief, and of Sarah Joseph, a convert-editor of the magazine Emel which dealt with Islamic lifestyles and, notably, promoted interreligious dialogue, presented rather serene Islamic discourses. As for the preacher of Palestinian origin Azzam Tamimi, who spoke of the “hopes and despairs of the Umma” in order to stimulate Islamic engagement of the young, and Anas Al-Tikriti, who accentuated the necessity of political involvement, they both appeared to be charismatic figures of pragmatic militancy, at once critical and respectful of European societies. Tamimi and Al-Tikriti are Muslim Brothers, affiliated to the Muslim Association of Britain, the official organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Great Britain, which is nonetheless presented here specifically, or even as relatively autonomous from that international movement since it follows “the ideas of the Brothers and their way of thinking while incarnating a broader organisation than the Brothers” (while in no way indicating what that might mean).

This sufficiently diversified panel also included the Yemeni-American Imam Anwar Al-Awlaki, who is the particular object of study of this article. Special attention was paid to this speaker at the FOSIS camp, in particular because he appeared in 3rd position on the advertising poster, after Tariq Ramadan (who however did not attend) and Imam Abdul Rashid, mentioned above. Concretely, his contributions were significant: he spoke on four occasions from June 20th on. Al-Awlaki has had more time to speak as he benefited from the absence of certain participants, among which Ahmed al-Rawi ; the latter is president of the FIOE, Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe – a European Federation which assembles and oversees all the Brotherhood organisations -, who had left for the burial of Mahfoud Nahnah, the founder and leader of the Algerian Islamist Movement Hamas, as of 1997 become the Movement of Society for Peace.

Beyond his atypical origins, there appears to be a direct link between Anwar Al-Awlaki and what occurred at Charlie Hebdo. He was born in the United States in 1971 where he lived until the age of 7 before having to return to Yemen with his family for eleven years. Returning to the United States in 1991, he began engineering studies followed by other studies relating to education leadership and finally studies in human resource management, parallel to a gradual commitment in the community life as an Imam. On the religious level,

Anwar Al-Awlaqi manifested above all a Salafist posture (which was to evolve in his case into a Salafist-jihadi posture following the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003)² but, under certain aspects, he appears to be close to the Brotherhood: following the Brothers' example, he certainly stresses the need to take the context into account and would hardly be described as showcasing a high range of religious knowledge (as certain Salafists may do) but, unlike the Brothers, he scarcely mobilizes political justifications as bases for action but rather, above all, develops a certain idea of the purity of Islam and Islamic principles which he attempts to maintain at all cost³. A. Al-Awlaqi who, having left the United States, then staying in the United Kingdom between 2002 and 2004, was killed by an American drone on September 30th, 2011 as an ideologist of the AQAP, the Al-Qaeda branch in the Arabic Peninsula and Yemen, an act assumed a posteriori by the United States as an act of war. However, it is precisely also this person and this last organisation AQAP which was referred to by Chérif Kouachi of the perpetrators of the Charlie Hebdo attack in his phone interview with the BFMTV journalist: Kouachi claimed Al-Awlaqi financed his stay in Yemen in 2011, which notably provided him training in handling weapons.

Based on Anwar Al-Awlaqi's radical speeches, summarized briefly here, we shall thus attempt to establish some elements of analysis able to shed light on the fundamentals of their success potential with young people. Rather than ignore the contents of his discourses on the grounds that they straightaway appear unreasonable, outrageous or that, on the contrary, they represent simple stylistic devices or gratuitous stagings, we would definitely do well to take the meaning and weight of these religious conceptions seriously in order to grasp their lines of strength and weaknesses. That remains until now too little underlined and carried out and not enough attention has been paid to this so far.

Let us note from the start that discourses as radical as A. Al-Awlaqi's are marginal in the Muslim Brotherhood mouvance (and that moreover I encountered these radical discourses only in Great Britain, even if the circulation of ideas is virtually limitless). However, these radical discourses construct and/or consolidate horizons of meaning which have consequences: not only in more or less violent acts that shock the public, which are the subject of vehement condemnations from Muslims and non-Muslims alike, but they also, surreptitiously, affect behaviours and poison relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. In the background of these analyses aimed at understanding the inner workings of these discourses, I will thus also point to certain articulations of Anwar Al-Awlaqi's radical Islamist discourses with others coming from the Muslim Brotherhood mouvance. In analysing these discourses, it is important to grasp convergences and divergences at play, and to realise that beyond the tensions inherent in this field of Islamism, sometimes muffled, sometimes virulent, authoritative structures are working themselves out at the heart of the construction

² Haroro J. Ingram, *The Charismatic Leadership Phenomenon in Radical and Militant Islam*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2013, p. 211.

³ In his talks at Nottingham, he also underlined how, after having privileged (only) references to the Koran and the biography of the Prophet, *the sira*, 'realizing their importance', he subsequently reintroduced the prophetic traditions, *ahadith*, tending to show how important this prophetic example is for him and tending to bring him closer to Salafists than the Brotherhood.

of individual and collective identities. Above and beyond the many remaining questions to ask, we are henceforth obliged to understand these dynamics affecting us all, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, as our common destiny in our plural societies appear challenged and shaken off today.

1. A text corpus that is limited but useful in better understanding the rationality at work

Anwar Al-Awlaqi's talks at the annual FOSIS camp in June 2003 are worth studying for three reasons. This corpus, firstly, deals with a period when Anwar Al-Awlaqi was not very well known in Great Britain and was seeking to disseminate his ideas in an expanded manner, which thus supposes that he had to manage to sensitize a diversified public, including people who were discovering him for the first time. Secondly, to my knowledge, this corpus has not been indexed as to contents: it has seldom been recorded and retransmitted publicly whereas this speaker went on to develop a real communication strategy, via multiple channels where dozens of conferences were accessible on YouTube – most of which were removed by Google in 2010, even if some of them have been preserved or have resurfaced – whereas a blog and Facebook page have been maintained, as well as articles published in the magazine Inspire published by the AQAP. Yet all of these productions, most of them are dated later than the Nottingham discourses, are subjects of proven interest, despite, or even thanks to, his assassination which, for some, granted him the status of martyr⁴ but also because it appears that Al-Awlaqi maintained ties with the authors of numerous attacks, among which the perpetrators of attacks of London (2005), Toronto (2006) and Fort Hood (2009)⁵. Thirdly, the Nottingham discourses are specific because Al-Awlaqi seems to have gradually modified the content of his discourse from 2003 on, with the American invasion of Iraq and then also probably, on the one hand, in connection with the affair of the caricatures of the Prophet of Islam, published by the Danish newspaper Jylland-Posten in 2005 and, on the other hand, also in connection with his eighteen month imprisonment in Yemen, following the kidnapping of a Shiite, where he was very much inspired by his reading of Sayyid Qutb in 2006. In relation to Al-Awlaqi's later discourses, and their contexts, the relative subtlety of his speeches made in 2003 in Nottingham seems to me particularly rich and worth exposing and analysing. In this specific context, the very sensitive and emotive question of a revenge to be taken for what is lived as a blasphemy and dishonour, is not (yet) present – and which will be seen by many as an insult to the Prophet (which will indeed be the argument directly stated by one of the Kouachi brothers coming out of Charlie Hebdo, crying out "we have avenged the Prophet").

And Anwar Al-Awlaqi also appeared to circulate freely in Great Britain at that time benefitting from the increasing recognition certain peers in British Islamic milieus were granting him, inviting him to speak. Among others, the Muslim Brotherhood, seeking a

⁴ See A.J. Chavar and S. Shane's video, "Dead but not Forgotten", *The New York Times*, August 27, 2015.

⁵ See the hundreds of newspaper articles about him. Yet most of the articles came later: they date from the early 2010s and are thus after these attacks. For example, A. Meleagrou-Hitchens, "Anwar al-Awlaqi's Disciples: Three Case Studies" in *CTC Sentinel* (Combating Terrorism Center, Westpoint, July 1, 2011 (online article).

pragmatic opening to any Muslim, showed little hesitation in inviting virulent speakers, both to try to include as many as possible in their global project and to differentiate themselves as the only moderate voice of Islamism, which would seem to make any study of radicalism that much more complicated. So, isn't the time right to understand how such discourse manages to take root outside of crisis moments and thus better understand the ideological soil of jihadi actions? Isn't it the right time, in fact, to understand how such discourse manages to make itself heard and sensitize co-religionists who, far from being 'the shiftless and idle' here, as one might be led to believe, are rather educated and wealthy people?

Beyond his oratory competencies, his command of the English language, his simple and yet quite particular style as a charismatic leader - unanimously attested to - in fact in my view it is above all his great skill in rationally and variously making existential and religious elements resonate together that gives Anwar Al-Awlaqi a certain aura. It is that characteristic which, more than all the others, based on my experience in situ, especially seemed to nourish the vast range of his dogmatic remarks to the greatest number. It is notably the fact of having observed the often far from critical reactions of the young Muslim militants and noted the extent to which their questions were aimed at obtaining details (including practical ones), without really questioning the foundations of his speeches and their sources of legitimacy, which here represent a priceless contribution to better understanding the range of the remarks made. Despite certain dissensions or some uneasiness expressed by some attendees after the public debates, Al-Awlaqi's positions indeed appeared generally acceptable and defensible in the milieu they were addressed to, without the development of any real backlash and also without the organizers seeming to feel the need to intervene to put the Al-Awlaqi's discourse in context. For all these reasons, this text corpus is thus interesting in its own right, even if it must later on be placed in broader research works, which would, notably, allow a more precise dating of transformations in this speaker's discourse, for the latter, like any other discourse, needs to be understood in its own context.

2. Promoting the importance of saving your soul and the triumph of Islam, followed by the rejection of non-Muslims

Anwar Al-Awlaqi gave two approximately half hour talks, entitled "Humanity at death's door: the ascent and descent of the Ummah" and "The Revival of the Ummah: the responsibility of believers" as well as participating in four debates, right after his presentations and at two other moments in the plenary sessions. The key ideas and the general spirit appealed to fundamental dimensions of existence like the meaning of life and death, whose specific conditions are envisioned with a view to managing to become fully human. Two major ideas in particular emerged here.

On one hand, there is the overall question of ardently promoting the importance of engaging in the struggle for God (fighting for the sake of Allah), in the name of love but also out of fear

of him: not only to ensure one's personal access to paradise, to save one's soul (which only a small minority will succeed in doing), but also to ensure the Muslim community's rebirth and march to a kind of triumph (while remaining firm in the application of one's own principles), even if the specificities of the "victory" are not clearly specified in his speeches. This struggle above all opposes any commitment which would be carried out to acquire personal satisfaction, particularly from earthly goods. The world here below is presented as of no importance to God (since only the life hereafter counts): it is precisely what makes life in the hereafter morally superior knowing that Islam is envisaged here as the unique truth, the only - immutable - path to follow. This mobilisation of the ethos of struggle and engagement is very current in Islamist milieus in general; Al-Awlaqi hardly stood out in this. In contrast, at that time, a French speaker, Farid Abdelkrim, still a Muslim Brother - some ten years before leaving the Muslim Brotherhood - explicitly promoted "an art of living" versus "the art of death" promoted, as he recognised, among certain young Muslims⁶.

On the other hand, Anwar Al-Awlaqi fostered an intensification of relationships with other Muslims and loyalty towards them. For him, solidarity and benevolence are called for in all situations, in problematical as well. But maintaining relations with non-Muslims is criticized by him, and even condemned and/or rejected. His arguments in effect consolidate the idea that they are above all to be avoided aside from (incidental?) collaborations in the eventuality of joint charity projects (like helping the weakest) and that the major political posture of Muslims should rather be on the side of opposing the system. In arguments running through all his speeches, non-Muslims are dealt with in a non-nuanced manner and above all incarnate either a make-up and/or a foil for Muslims to position themselves against. Roughly speaking, according to Al-Awlaqi, dealings with them may be summarized either as preaching relationships leading to conversion, and if not their submission in paying a tribute, or else their annihilation in a fight to the death (the last is only mentioned in using the Arab term "qâtal", to fight, whereas the whole speech is in English, seemingly indicating that this expression is addressed more to insiders in taking the sensitivities of others into account). As for American troops sent to Afghanistan, some of whom are trained with Muslims, mention is made of the fact that fighting side by side with unbelievers generates a chaos to be avoided at all costs, associated with a kind of original sin ("siding with non-believers is a form of fitna"); those Muslims' rupture of loyalty, here considered irreversible in A. Al-Awlaqi's eyes, justifies fighting them unremorsefully. In other instances, non-Muslims, described as non-believers (kuffâr, who "reject the truth"), are also labelled "liars" who should be hated ("love the one who loves Allah and hate the liar") in the name of the assumption that they would deny that human rights (already) existed in Islam. On the basis of these remarks whereby non-Muslims are judged via reference to classical Islamic interpretations, we note that Al-Awlaqi takes it upon himself to propagate a rather new posture with regard to non-Muslims if put in the context of the Muslim Brotherhood milieus.

⁶ Farid Abdelkrim, a paper presented on understanding Islam at a seminar on engagement organised by the Islamic Educational and Cultural Centre of Verviers (Centre Educatif et Culturel Islamique de Verviers), Belgium, December 29, 2002.

Compared to the sort of discussion which is usually encouraged in Muslim Brotherhood circles on relations with non-Muslims, Anwar Al-Awlaqi's discourses appear minority because we find rather more moderate conceptions to generally prevail in these milieus. That is to say, non-Muslims are considered to be fellow-citizens with whom common challenges have to be met. For example in concluding his talk at the Salon du Bourget in April 2004, at a time when the prohibition of headscarves in public institutions was being politically legitimized, the Imam Ahmed Jaballah, an important figure in the UOIF, the Union of Islamic Organisations of France, close to the Muslim Brotherhood, affirmed his intention to bring Muslims and non-Muslims closer together in stressing that our "Muslim identity should not separate us from the rest of society for there are other facets which attach us to others". And the former president of that same organisation, Lhaj Thami Breze, at that same delicate moment, also recalled the importance of "the fraternity of mankind". Al-Awlaqi's discourse amounts to saying that non-Muslims are considered fellow-citizens a bit apart, who rather have a defect you have to deal with as need be; this is also somewhat the answer of Ahmed Miktar, also a UOIF member, to a question he was asked in a mosque in Lille, on March 13th, 2005, where he felt he had to clarify his thought in saying: "we don't hate our fellow-citizens, but we hate the kufr" (i.e. unbelief). Generally speaking, we note that if mobilisation of the term kufr is the subject of more or less varied nuances, the term nonetheless remains current and the subject of many misunderstandings. That moreover is not just typical of Muslim Brotherhood milieus since the sheik of Indian origin Ibrahim Mogra felt obliged to dot the 'i's during the above-mentioned FOSIS conference where he recalled more or less in these terms the importance of a restoration of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims: "Non-Muslims are human beings who may potentially be better than me. We need compassion for others. Granted they are non-believers, but who is going to bring them around to God if we hate them?". Indeed a major terrain of misunderstanding remains in Muslim communities on this subject, in relation to which the Muslim Brotherhood sometimes appears critical and sometimes laxist ; this concept of kufr is maintained in a rather current way in their ranks without being clearly debated (even if it is gradually being replaced there by stating a negation: the term non-Muslims) and that in other Muslim milieus, it causes uneasiness or is already, in some contexts, completely put side. Yet doesn't it in some sense remain unchallengeable as long as many Muslim speakers, all milieus taken together, regularly appear to accredit, as does Ahmed Miktar, the idea of the "miracle of this perfect religion which thus couldn't bother the others"?

3. The many power tools of persuasion in Anwar Al-Awlaqi's discourse

Regarding the methods of persuasion put to work, we note that from the start Anwar Al-Awlaqi places the young people at odds with their declared or asserted identifications, to better lead, or even to force them, to assume the Islamic character of their identity more fully, envisioned here as all encompassing. Already well aware that their time spent at the

FOSIS camp is aimed at reinforcing the religious dimension of their existence, the speaker takes it upon himself to sow the seeds of doubt: he challenges them directly on their identity claims in letting them know just how demanding the real implications of their membership in that religion are, perhaps involving a total sacrifice of themselves: “We’re claiming we’re Muslims; That’s a big claim... (..) and there will be lots of troubles (..). When you love Allah, you sacrifice for him – your wealth and life for him – (..) it’s a full-time relationship and not only for weekends”.

As he straightforwardly destabilizes these young people, Anwar Al-Awlaqi carefully endeavours not losing them, and not discouraging them given the radicalism of his remarks; Al-Awlaqi counterbalances the hardships to be overcome by the easiness of the concrete solutions he proposes to implement, presented as quite accessible as soon as you go after them body and soul. Al-Awlaqi uses different rhetorical devices to persuade his audience: wouldn't it simply be enough to put one sole hadith to work, as he clearly suggests, like the one of loving God above all else? Or wouldn't it be enough, for example, to remain firm with regard to those who reject the truth⁷ ? So isn't his whole project binding on the young people as soon as they just decide that they want to be consistent and coherent with themselves, in terms of the choices they've already made, even before arriving at the camp, but a fortiori in the light of the direct confrontation they are subject to through the exhortations of Anwar Al-Awlaqi? And aren't the consequences of such remarks all the more inescapable in that this preacher, far from being guru-like, simply seems to establish a recall likely to insuflate the original impulse, thus leading these young people to assume their personal responsibilities and fashion their own destinies? As for the many shadowy zones he leaves in his talk, don't they all represent doors opening onto any interpretation whatever, likely to suit various sensibilities and so appeal to the greatest number?

Another particularity of A. Al-Awlaqi's discourse further testifying to his rhetorical skills of talking to young people, relates to the sources of legitimisation he mobilized: the somewhat vague references to the Islamic heritage are above all founded on a deliberate ramping up of tension between that heritage, the young people's context and competitive referential systems. He constantly invokes those references to better situate his own remarks in opposition, by the way showing young people that he knows those other references - which are theirs too - and that it is precisely for that reason that his final opinion carries still more weight. On several occasions, one is reminded of the extent to which, on the principles level, Islam is incomparable with anything else and so constitutes a self-sufficient system that is much more just and effective than any other system: from the outset judged to be the object of deviations in connection with private interests: « Islam is unique (..) There is no Marxism, socialism, democracy in Islam. There is Islam. Islam is unique. The truth. We do not need to borrow anything from outside. Islam is different from all other systems that allow

⁷ Concerning the dissemination of this idea according to which everything is accessible from anywhere or anything, cf. B. Maréchal, “Universal Aspirations of the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe” in *ISIM Review*, n°22, Leyden, 2008, 36-37.

people to rule the way that suits them". Islam is different from all other systems that allow people to rule the way that suits them". Anwar Al-Awlaqi also denies any Western specificity all in reaffirming what he considers to be the superiority of Islam: illustrating the extent to which human rights and democracy (via the *shûrâ*, the principle of consultation) existed in Islam in a way that greatly precedes anything the West could develop. Al-Awlaqi also undermined the original character of the (alleged) contributions of the West on the level of principles, including a critique of the philosophical posture ("we have to stop philosophizing") or even of any acquisition of knowledge, in the end considering it rather futile since he in contrast prefers reliance on action alone ("what counts is not knowing 10,000 hadiths but applying just one of them"). Then, he added that on the practical level too, Muslims must also assert themselves in following their own path. Any applause aimed at signifying one's satisfaction after hearing a speech is thus proscribed, as it is associated with the unacceptable practices of the idolaters around the Kaaba, favouring instead *takbîr*, a strongly voiced reminder of God's greatness. In the end, rather than simply oppose in opposing, doesn't Al-Awlaqi seem to be more subtle because he also shows his ability to incorporate, even if only partially, certain Western references, and even if it is ever and always just to turn them around in a survalorisation of Islam? Isn't that indeed the case – among others - when he mentions that a concept of "just war" was developed in Christianity too? And in so doing isn't he thus surfing on the wave of a generalized contestation giving him certain currentness, despite his look and apparent discourse, at once both conservative and revolutionary?

Finally, what can we say about the importance he attaches to the experimentation of truth by young people themselves, as a source of legitimacy? Isn't there in this an indication of certain perspicacity on his part, one most likely to succeed in managing the sensibilities of young people struggling with questions on how to relate to authority? Indeed, although A. Al-Awlaqi, an ex-student in human resource management, presents many positions as without concession and incontestable, their dogmatic character doesn't seem to be that present in the end. Doesn't that optical illusion rely on the trust A. Al-Awlaqi seems to testify he has in God, a sincerity corresponding well with the kind of authenticity of belief young people are most sensitive to? When, concerning the wearing of headscarves, he calls the young women to take a firm decision and stick to it, "Do what you think is the truth and not what's convenient or easy etc. And even if you do *ijtihâd*, you will be rewarded for it", isn't he testifying to not only his own total trust in God but also to the trust he places in the sincerity of the act of faith to come from the young? And when he stresses that all of this must be carried out independently of any personal interest of the believer (whether it be wealth, recognition, etc.) whereas only the secret (and non-public) recognition by God counts ("you only need a secret recognition from Allah"), isn't he reaffirming anew the full weight of the Islamist ideology - in contrast to the alleged inconsistency of the materialistic value system promoted in the West - which relies on belief in the absolute, unique power of God who is the source of all things?

Concluding remarks: The need to revisit the links between Islamisation and radicalization

In debates aimed at explaining what happened at Charlie Hebdo, as well as in other cases linked to Islamist attacks, a common line of argument amounts to considering that radicalisation precedes Islamisation. Sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar has, notably, endorsed this widely-spread position; Khosrokhavar argues that the “jihadis are often uneducated on the religious level”; according to him, “They have a very selective interpretation of the Koran” and often transition “from non-practitioners to jihadis without going through the “religious radical phase””⁸. Surely, all these social and psychological elements are useful for an explanation of radical acts: the distress and anger of certain young people, their feelings of humiliation, discrimination, loss of bearings in dealing with increasingly complex phenomena, generating an attraction for conspiracy theories or, further, raw and even aggressive emotions, caused by transgressing a taboo. Nonetheless, these aspects still have to be further delved into as we cannot satisfy ourselves with taking all of that on face value without a critical perspective⁹. We would miss a whole dimension by maintaining the blind spot of such discourse (preached by Al-Awlaqi and similar preachers), which has to do with religion’s place in our societies, and, notably, its ongoing capacity to constitute and mobilize a coherent symbolic field, beyond the diversity of sensibilities, able to construct meaning as well as identities and belongings. As we have shown above, that indeed appears all the more stimulating when the religious discourses, as analysed here, are - at least partially – aligned with feelings and contexts but also with rational deliberation; they are thus no longer just reactive and intended for idle people, even if it may hit the mark with them too.

In a context where the sheer magnitude of the Muslim world’s human tragedies persist, of historical liabilities and stinging contemporary geopolitical errors, shared prejudices and misunderstandings, and at a time when we also witness Muslims and non-Muslims managing to appreciate one another day by day, and trying to find ways of living together peacefully, it is essential that we understand the symbolic resources of political movements described as Islamist, and particularly on their radical margins.

What still remains unanswered is the question of knowing if Islamist milieus will manage to take a critical look at parts of their heritage and open up to true divergences, including ones coming from within their ranks. It remains also to be seen if Westerners too will manage to question some of their certainties and practices. In the meantime, many questions remain open relating to the construction of the identities and belongings of young people at the heart of our globalized societies as some reaffirmed subversive certainties appear vehemently stimulating while being banal at the same time, in liberal societies where doubt and contestation have now become the major modes of cultural expression. And, finally, we

⁸ See an interview with F. Khosrokhavar (by A. Brucy, « Face à la radicalisation, l’Europe doit s’unir et se renforcer » in *CNRS - Le journal*, November 18, 2015 (online).

⁹ In a similar fashion to what F. Dassetto has done in attempting to explain the causes of radicalism in his article « Radicalisme et djihadisme. Devenir extrémiste et agir en extrémiste », *Cismoc, Essais et recherches online*, June 2014, 26 pages.

need also to be vigilant, on both sides, not to throw the baby out with the bathwater in order not to cut ourselves off from those who might finally be led to play a crucial role in living together, in building and forging together, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, new resources in struggling against all forms of intolerance and in managing to cope with mounting discontent. Everyone must henceforth manage to question its share of responsibility in what happens, or else it seems hard to consider a serene coexistence in the foreseeable future.