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Hakim El Karoui, *L'islam, une religion française*. Paris: Gallimard, 2018. 289 pp. Notes and tables. €24.00. (pb). ISBN 9-782072-696909.

Review by Loumia Ferhat, Farouk Jabre Center for Arabic and Islamic Science and Philosophy, American University of Beirut.

Hakim El Karoui makes clear in the introduction that his book stems from a need to take responsibility and speak up as a Muslim French citizen following the Paris attacks, ostensibly carried out in the name of Islam. He recounts the shock of the attacks experienced not only as a French citizen but also as a Muslim. This resulted in a paradoxical duty with regard to French values: to come out publicly as Muslim in a society that considers religion a private matter. In fact, successfully becoming French requires the erasure of any particular religious and foreign cultural signs within the public sphere. Is the solution to this injunction to become a “paradoxical” citizen? The paradox remains only if one considers Muslim and French values as contradictory, and these latter as immutable and sacrosanct. As Karoui reminds us, the principle of *laïcité* has been distorted and French identity is far from being immutable as the result of countless assimilations. The conclusion that could be drawn, although Karoui does not do so explicitly, is the need to make more room for Islam in France. If French citizens are asked to take responsibility, as Muslims, in condemning the attacks, reciprocally the presence of Islam cannot be ignored further. Against the so-called antagonism of Islam with French values, Karoui resorts to polls he undertook for his study, which highlight concretely the fact that French Muslims are actually more integrated than we think, showing that Islam is not incompatible with French values.

This book follows the Montaigne Institute’s study on Muslims, the very first one in France, which itself stems from the necessity to have quantitative data on Muslims and particularly on the grip of fundamentalism within the Muslim community. In undertaking this research, Karoui has been accused of either essentializing Muslims by targeting them in a poll or of asking biased questions. It is indeed easy to manipulate the questions and paint the picture one wants. Yet Karoui’s initiative is understandable. Given the heightened debates on Islam, Karoui’s strategy in all the noise is to tackle the problem from a different angle by resorting to numbers. The idea was, among such passionate debates, to start with data, not only to debunk some stereotypes but also to show the diversity of the Muslim community. The very fact that Karoui feels compelled to mention that Muslims mostly want the same as any other non-Muslim French citizen is quite revelatory.

Karoui's book proactively suggests some solutions after trying to establish the state of Islam in France from the poll. Hence, it resembles more a snapshot of the current situation with some historical shortcuts than an analysis of Islam or even of the complex process of assimilation by North African immigrants. Attempting to do so would have required more attention to socio-economic aspects. For a book addressing Muslims in France, Karoui slides a little too quickly over the socio-economic conditions of young people at the margin of society, who are more likely to be seduced by radical ideologies. This is particularly evident when he discusses victim mentality. Although he acknowledges, here and there, the living conditions of immigrants and the reality of ghettos, he does not return to the subject while discussing victim mentality. Likewise, he seems to downplay the structural aspect of xenophobia by mentioning how "some" people do indeed face racism. Yet he fully acknowledges, using statistics, the difficulty faced by young Muslim men in getting job interviews and, even more importantly, the structural nature of xenophobia as a potential flipside of universalism, the underlying philosophy of the enlightenment championed as a French value (pp. 127 and 133).

This is characteristic of Karoui's writing on many issues he raises: he sometimes drives his point home but lets us connect the dots at other times. On the question of Islam and Islamism, given that it is the heart of the heated debate, one might regret that once again he moves too quickly through the history of Islamism, missing the opportunity to emphasize the ironical development of reformism in Islam. Indeed, the first reformers of Islam, which gave rise to Islamism, were trying to break away from superstition while at the same time enforcing the idea of an unmediated relation to God, as Karoui mentions. In short, the idea of *ijtihad*, which can be translated as independent reasoning, turned into *taqlid*, blind trust in authority. This is a shortcut, but if Karoui shows how some proponents of secularism have turned into fanatics, given his appreciation of mirroring phenomena, he could have brought to light how here the initial impetus to regain autonomy turned to blind obedience (p. 68).

Karoui's book is diffuse since he tries to tackle many subjects: the lived reality of French Muslims, the condition of women, the debates surrounding Islam, a short summary of France's history, of Islamism, and of the interference of foreign countries. As a result, he is analyzing, in turn, Islam as a mark of identity within a certain socio-economic context, as a religious phenomenon, and as an ideology and a political tool for foreign interference. Being eclectic in order to cover the complexity of the topic is not a flaw in itself, but the discussion would have gained in clarity if Karoui had hierarchized more clearly the different aspects of such a reality and showed how they are interconnected. It is even more important to be clear given the misunderstanding and confusion surrounding Islam. The confusion partly stems from Karoui not always distinguishing when he is simply exposing an idea and when he is subscribing to it: a stronger voice and more emphasis on his arguments would have strengthened his analysis. If the book really is concerned with Islam in France, was the chapter on intellectuals "speaking to themselves about themselves" and losing the object of their discourse really that necessary (p. 148)? As important as it is to mention these debates, a chapter discussing them may be feeding the current noise and losing the object of the book. A brief summary may have been enough, although it is tempting to debunk the caricatural position of Eric Zemmour who Karoui notes, not without humor, has become the Salafist of the Republic (pp. 176-180).

It finally becomes clear at the end that Karoui is more interested in treating fanaticism through a theologico-political lens, which explains his focus on the macro level and the solution he suggests: as Islamism has been imported, proactively organizing a French Islam is the way to

block the subversive ideology disseminated by foreign interference. This explains why Karoui relies on the work that has been produced in the social sciences when it comes to socio-economic factors, not adding yet another book analyzing the reasons behind the success of Islamism in the French suburbs. What is needed is to take action, and his book is a call to action. Why not, then, give a glimpse of such a counter-narrative in his own book? Although this is not a book on Islam but on Islam in France, given Karoui's theologico-political inclination, taking the time to devote at least a paragraph on another reading of some interpretations in Islam seems crucial, particularly when such an interpretation became the official doctrine, as in the case of the Mu'tazila under the rule of the caliph Ma'mun in the ninth century. For instance, Karoui recounts how Mohamed ben Abdelwahhab, the seventeenth-century founder of Wahhabism, rediscovered the fundamental principal of monotheism by reviving the theories of another ninth-century theologian, Ibn Hanbal. He mentions how, for Abdelwahhab, the understanding of God's unity, or *tawhid*, translates as the necessity to serve God's unity by being part of a community and strictly abiding by the norms and rules of Hanbalism (p. 70). Here, when talking about *tawhid*, Karoui could have mentioned a radically different take on *tawhid*, or God's unicity, in the Mu'tazila, a theological school renowned for its defense of human free will and whose proponents called themselves *ahl al-tawhid*, the people of God's unicity. The goal is not to portray this rationalist movement as ideal since it triggered a vogue of repression against detractors of the Mu'tazila. Quite the contrary, it would emphasize the flexibility of any theological movement, even one such as the Mu'tazila, heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, when turned into a political instrument.

In Karoui's defense, one can sense that this book has been written with a great sense of urgency: the urgency to take action following the Paris attacks in the form of a study of Muslims, followed by the necessity to justify the poll and to reply to accusations. Hence, aside from offering practical suggestions about the organization of Islam in France, Karoui's book seems also to be a reply to his detractors and, through a reading of the poll, a way to debunk the theory of the "great replacement" defended by far-right theorists. Aside from the poll and its reading, the book is geared toward a solution that takes the form of a centralized organization of Islam in France. For Karoui, the state's neutrality has been used as a theoretical caution for disinterest toward Islam. As a result, the state has relied on the countries of origin of Muslims to take care of the religious. To counteract foreign interferences, Karoui suggests the creation of two institutions: a cultic Association musulmane pour l'islam de France (AMIF) and a cultural Fondation de l'islam de France (FIF). Given the law of 1905, the former will exclusively focus on organizing and financing, while the foundation will focus on disseminating and supporting a progressive understanding of Islam. Although Karoui reminds the reader that if it were not for the unfair code of *indigénat*, Islam would have been part of the concordat—a regime that still prevails in Alsace-Moselle and organizes the prominent religions—he considers that it is possible to finance privately the centralized organization of Islam. Indeed, Karoui argues that private money can finance the Muslim cult if the AMIF can centralize the lucrative economy of halal and the pilgrimage to Mecca. Karoui also advocates for the establishment of a Great Imam, in the same vein as the Chief Rabbi of France. The solution is interesting and does not seem difficult to implement if not for the resistance he may encounter within the Muslim community itself, as this latter may be reluctant to welcome these innovations. Some may deny the existence of a Great Imam in Islam and insist on the universal characteristics of the *oumma* or the community of believers. Yet, Karoui paves the way by demonstrating quantitatively that there is de facto something like a French Islam, or the integration of Islam with the French landscape. One only needs to be reminded of the cultural variety of Muslims from North Africa to South East Asia

and throughout the Balkans. The variety of Muslim expressions exists de facto but the establishment of a Great Imam may have to be justified de jure for the Muslim community and this is where a theological justification is needed.

Despite some flaws, Karoui is faithful to the initial impetus that he recounts in his introduction: to reply to the paradoxical demands inherent in taking a position as a Muslim French citizen and in so doing to show that the contradiction of such a paradox is only superficial. As mentioned earlier, his political gesture translates into his book at two levels: first by offering a reading of the first poll on the Muslim community and secondly by suggesting a solution to a problem that he identifies as being mostly theologico-political. The object of Karoui's work is not to define Islam but to analyze how Islam in France is the French manifestation of a broader theologico-political phenomenon. This is the case when he shows that Islamism in France is not only a reaction against the uniformization of French citizens, but it is also very French insofar as it harbors a certain flamboyant embodiment of identity. Yet, one can wonder, if the heart of the problem is the interference of foreign countries exporting their nefarious ideology, then why not outline different orientations by going back to Islamic sources or by mentioning the work of scholars engaging in reviving Islamic thought? At times the book seems to be caught in the crossfire of taking part in a polemical debate—for the sake of setting the record straight—and a much more constructive endeavor which would have benefited from greater development.

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