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BOOK REVIEW: The Idea of European Islam: Religion, Ethics, Politics and Perpetual Modernity

Akbar Nour*

HASHAS, M.: *The Idea of European Islam: Religion, Ethics, Politics and Perpetual Modernity [Idea európskeho islamu: Náboženstvo, etika, politika a večná modernita]*. London: Routledge, 2019. 332 p. ISBN 9780367509743.

In recent decades, Islam and Muslim communities in Europe have been closely associated to recurrent polemics that have accused them of a lack of social inclusion, conflicting identities and religious radicalism, especially after the 9/11 attacks. However, far from these ideological, confrontational and culturalist perspectives to Islam in Europe, various voices among European Muslim thinkers and citizens have come up in public and digital spheres with alternatives narratives on Islam and Muslim communities in Europe.

In this perspective, **Mohamed Hashas** *The Idea of European Islam: Religion, Ethics, Politics and Perpetual Modernity* (2019) constitutes a welcome academic input in the current debates on emerging Islamic thought in Europe. **Hashas** is a Moroccan political theorist, whose academic research areas revolve around Arabic-Islamic, Moroccan and European Muslim political, theological and religious thought.

The book is structured in two parts. The first section consists in a textual analysis of four European Muslim thinkers and their perspectives on the „idea of European Islam“. The second part builds on a comparative work conducted by **Hashas** between European Islam thinkers and various scholars in Islamic thought, ranging from the early Islam rationalist thinkers to more recent Islamic reformist and critical thinkers.

The first chapter focuses on the thinking of German-Syrian political scientist **Bassam Tibi** and his project of „Euro-Islam“. Familiar with medieval Islamic

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thinkers (**Al-Farabi**, **Ibn Rushd** and **Ibn Sina**) and influenced by German rationalist philosophers (**Adorno** and **Horkheimer**), **Tibi** comes up with the notion of „Euro-Islam”, a particular secular and liberal depoliticized approach in the study of Islam as a religion to explain Islam’s apparent difficulties with modernity. Influenced by **Geertz’s** cultural anthropology, the author broadens his understanding of Islam as a „cultural system” adapting to new settings and other circumstances throughout history (p. 52). For the him „cultural modernity” needs to be added to overcome Islam’s challenges with the issue of modernity and to facilitate the development of „Euro-Islam” within a Western context (p. 59).

The second chapter analyses **Tariq Ramadan’s** approach to European Islam. **Ramadan** is a Swiss-Egyptian scholar whose „reformist” perspective calls for a study and interpretation of Islamic sources embedded in a Western Muslim context. Influenced by his grandfather **Hassan al-Banna’s** thinking, his „traditionalist reformist” philosophy rests on three key concepts:

1. „Shari’a” as the way: he deconstructs the hegemonic perspective of „shari’a” seen as a corpus of individual and collective rights and duties for Muslims only determined and interpreted by scholars of law and jurisprudence. He enlarges the meaning of this notion (the „way leading to the source” in Arabic) not only to the expression of Islamic principles, but also to a broader framework of individual and collective faithfulness in specific settings such as Europe for instance (p. 84).
2. Europe as the „space of testimony”: he revisits the „traditional Islam” concept of „shahada” (the basic profession of faith in Islam) and turn it into the notion of „dar al-shahada” (space of testimony), Europe becoming not only a space for Muslim faith, but also for European Muslim citizens’ social and political involvement in European societies (p. 85).
3. Ethics in the continuum, for pluralism, beyond legalism: For **Ramadan**, „shar’ia” and „shahada” are vital components of Western Muslims’ ethics, expressing the universality of Islam. Therefore, he strives for an ethics reconciling Islamic sources, human societies and human knowledge. Furthermore, this „ethical” framework for European Muslims should be adaptable, knowledgeable regarding the environment and science and eventually be context-specific.

The third chapter focuses on French-Moroccan theologian and imam **Tareq Obrou**, a scholar that **Hashas** regards as a „liberal reformist“. His philosophy revolves around two key concepts:

1. „Geotheology for an Islam of context“: **Obrou** is aware that Europe (France in his life context) has become a secularised context, that provides Muslims a normative system allowing them to live their Muslim faith and French citizenship. Consequently his „geotheology“ (secular theology) advocates the construction of a contemporary, enlightened and contextualised Islam.
2. „Shari’a of the minority“: **Obrou** grounds his work as a specific response to the ongoing challenges caused by globalisation. Indeed, he realises that this trend triggers a general feeling of minority or undermining that may increasingly affect groups, communities and societies. Consequently, he calls for a „shari’a of the minority“, thus revisiting this „traditional Islam“ notion in the European context with Muslim-minority societies (p. 112).

Chapter 4 introduces **Abdenour Bidar**, a French philosopher and essayist, specialised in religious issues and mainly focusing on current developments in Islam and contemporary changes in spiritual life. **Hashas** identifies three turning points in the development of **Bidar’s** philosophical and theological contribution to European Islam.

1. „Self-Islam“ and responsible spirituality: His first book *Self-Islam, history of a personal Islam* (2006) retraces the cultural, psychological and spiritual liberation from a man straddling between various cultures. He is very critical of literalist/conservative Islam. Indeed, he advocates a „Self Islam“, embedded in individuals and their personal experiences rather than in „traditional Islam“ (p. 133).
2. Islamic „existentialism“: for **Hashas**, **Bidar’s** „existentialist“ Qu’ran’s reading highlights Muslims as individuals who have chosen the relationship they want to have with their Islamic culture and a loyalty to Islam as a creed. Indeed, individuals are placed at „the central stage of the world“ and regarded as „heirs of God“ (p. 141).
3. „Overcoming religion“: in 2012 **Bidar** published a book in French entitled *Comment sortir de la religion?* (*How to Get out of Religion?*): For **Hashas**,

this piece of work represents „the highest stage” in the development of **Bidar’s** theological philosophy in thinking articulations between Islam and modernity (p. 146). For the French thinker, religions, with their „transcendental” and „spiritual” aspects, have confined individuals in „finitude”. Therefore, he advocates individuals to re-appropriate themselves „the eternal infinite power” they have been „granted ontologically” by God and deploy their „creative power” to reach true happiness and become „heirs to God” (p. 148).

In the fifth chapter, **Hashas** focuses on the evolution of ethics in Islamic thought. He first notes that medieval Islamic thought („kalam”), mainly inspired by Greek thought, was featured by philosophical creativity, where the ethical debate focused on articulations between human reason and divine revelation. However, since the 12th century, Islamic thought has been marked by what **Hashas** calls „scriptural ethics”, which stresses all the literal and integral commentaries of the Qu’ranic text on the basis of the Qu’ran itself, without any historical or textual criticism. In the 19th Century, the first reformist thinkers called for a new Islamic theology articulated to modernity. However, until now, they have not been able to advocate for an abandonment of religious laws in order to adapt to modern requirements such as freedom and equality (p. 158). As a result, to approach the idea of European Islam in a perspective going beyond „scriptural ethics”, **Hashas** rests on British philosopher **George Hourani**. For him, if Islamic thought needs to get revived, it should rest on the intellectual legacy of early Islamic rationalist scholars, who untied the „ontological-epistemological bond” by stating that ontologically Qu’ran referred to notions of values and reason, whereas on an epistemological level, all knowledge – in its abstract and general forms – is still considered divine (p.160).

In the book’s last chapters (6 to 8), **Hashas** proceeds to an assessment of European Islam, by resting on two conceptual frameworks, one „Islamic” and the other one „Western”. In addition, this general assessment also leans on **Hashas’** triadic framework of analysis „world-society-individual” to grasp the globality and novelty of European Islam.

In chapters 6 and 7, Hashas assesses European Islam theologically and politically leaning on two conceptual frameworks. First, he rests on Abderrahmane’s „Islamic modernity” approach, developed by modern reformist

Moroccan philosopher Taha Abderrahmane, whose intellectual project consists in founding a philosophy that takes its Islamic roots in the Qu'ran and the Sunna. In his book *The Spirit of Modernity* (2006), he proposes a modern reading of the Qu'ran (p. 178). First, he is very critical towards Western modernity and highlights its main shortcomings: its materialism, based the materialistic realisation of individuals in spatial and temporal circumstances, as well as its disconnection with the divine, the intemporal dimension. The „Islamic modernity” that Abderrahmane calls for should capture „the spirit of modernity”, by using its own religious tradition (the link to the divine), what the author refers to as „continuous innovation”. Furthermore, it should also rest on renewed „strategies of modernist readings”:

1. The „revised humanizing” strategy, which consists in recognising that individuals are honoured to inhabit the world and have the „highest rank” after God. They have access to the Qu'ran through the method of interpretation.
2. The „revised rationalizing” strategy, which intends to expand reason and not disconnect with the divine. For **Abderrahmane**, employing modern methodologies of understanding texts and scientific phenomena should „expand reasoning horizons”.
3. The „revised historicising strategy”, which rejects the immutability of the Qu'ran by relativising its verses to their socio-historical contexts (p. 181).

Eventually, he intends to re-ground Islamic thought on an ethics of Qu'ran, connecting on the ontological fact (lost from early Islamic times) of „original unity” between religion and politics (p. 182).

Leaning on the Moroccan thinker's conception „humanisation-rationalisation-historicisation” and his triadic framework of analysis of religion's globality „world, society, individual”, **Hashas** evaluates the European Muslim thinkers' work in that respect.

1. „World Axis”: **Hashas'** argument is that European Islam promotes the 'worldly inheritance' of individuals as a will of God and thus restores the ontological link between the physical and metaphysical worlds. When evaluating **Tibi's** „Euro-Islam” in a „world axis” perspective, **Hashas** shows that grasping the Qu'ran is reduced to the private sphere. On the

contrary, **Ramadan** and **Obrou** regard the Qu'ran as grounded in the physical world. For **Ramadan**, the Qu'ran (*the First Book of revelation*) is placed on an equal footing as the Universe (*the Second Book of revelation*). For **Obrou**, there are *three Books: Revelation, Creation* and (the inner self of) *Man*. In the case of **Bidar**, he advocates a relativisation of the theological foundations and Islamic values. In relation to the divine tutelage, **Bidar** regards the Qu'ran as a book of reflection and meditation whose objective is to know individuals better (p. 183).

2. „Society Axis”: in this perspective, European Islam historicises the Qu'ran and gives the individuals the responsibility to interpret it according to human societies' needs. Apart **Tibi**, the three other scholars historicise the *Prophet Muhammad's era* and regard it as „exemplary”. Regarding socio-political issues, apart **Tibi's** secularist outlook, **Hashas** stresses that the three other scholars view them as being led by individuals at the societal level in specific spatial and temporal contexts (p. 185).
3. „Individual Axis”: for **Hashas**, European Islam has stressed the place of individuals' agency and reason when handling faith at the personal level. **Tibi** is a strong proponent of individual human rights in the development of his vision of „Euro-Islam”, but keeps faith in the private sphere. **Ramadan** connects the divine, ethics and reason. The Qu'ran being *the First Book of Revelation*, the Universe being *the Second Book*. For **Obrou**, the same observation applies, as the *Three Books (Creation, Revelation* and (the inner self of) *Man*) highlight the issue of ethics and spirituality in Islam. **Bidar** also connects ethics and spirituality through connecting five matrixes (God, Creation, Prophethood, Qu'ran and the Umma), the matrix of God, being the dominant one. In his perspective, ontologically, human reason is equipped with divine attributes, individuals being the „heirs of God” (p. 191). Eventually, concluding chapter seven, **Hashas** notes that European Islam, using **Abderrahmane's** „Islamic modernity's” framework, may reinforce its epistemological foundations.

The book concludes with the eighth and final chapter. Here, **Hashas** adopts a „Western” conceptual framework to assess whether European Islam can be rooted in Western societies' political culture. He draws on **John Rawls'** political philosophy of „overlapping consensus” to see if European Islam can take root as „a reasonable „comprehensive doctrine” in Western societies' ethos of liberalism

and pluralism. In **Rawls'** perspective, the consensus is attained, when the critical adjustment of the „comprehensive doctrines” manages to steady around a public conception the support of each of the „reasonable” worldviews represented in society. It is not a matter of compromise, of concessions, but of a „reasonable agreement” (p. 227).

Hashas justifies his choice of **Rawls'** „overlapping consensus” as a framework to grasp European Islam as „a reasonable comprehensive doctrine” on three grounds: *The first reason* is that **Rawls'** work in contemporary political philosophy is acknowledged amidst the „classics in the field” (p. 228). *The second ground* is a „historical necessity”. In current relationships between Europe and Islam post-1945, **Rawls'** concepts such as „reasonable pluralism” and „rational faith” to maintain „social justice” and „stability” (p. 229). *The third and last reason* is that, according to **Hashas**, few of Muslim reformist and critical thinkers have thoroughly engaged with **Rawls'** „overlapping consensus” to grasp European Islam as „reasonable comprehensive doctrine” (p. 230).

Ultimately, after having assessed **Tibi**, **Ramadan**, **Obrou** and **Bidar's** conception of European Islam into the light of **Rawls'** framework, **Hashas** concludes that „European Islam” taken as a „reasonable comprehensive doctrine” may match the idea of **Rawls'** „political liberalism” (p. 270). Eventually he positively concludes that the experience of a European Islam influenced by individual and pluralist dynamics is a trend indicator that needs to be closely followed as a potential model for the Arab-Islamic world and Muslim majority countries in contemporary globalised world.

Hashas' book offers an interesting and detailed analytical perspective on the construction and the evolution of a European Islamic thought. Moreover, criticism of such a fine-grained analysis is not evident. However, there are only two secondary points I want to raise. The first is that even though **Hashas** justifies his selection of the scholars he studied with solid arguments in his book's introduction, one can slightly regret that he chiefly focused on male thinkers, with an Arab immigrant background and mainly stemming from a francophone intellectual tradition (**Ramadan**, **Obrou**, **Bidar**, **Tibi** being the only exception as a German-Syrian thinker). Other European Muslim thinkers who could have also been studied are British Muslim convert **Abdal Hakim Murad**, Austrian-Palestinian **Mouhanad Khorchide** or thinkers from Bosnia, such as **Enes Karic** *inter alia*. My second point is that although **Hashas** provides rich intellectual and theoretical insights on a wide range of various (European) Muslim reformist and critical thinkers, he does not highlight enough the role of various other „ordinary

European Muslims” (men and women) who, as individuals and professionals, are also social, cultural and political actors of the construction of various expressions of European Islam. Nevertheless, this monograph constitutes a significant contribution in the emerging debates on articulations between religion, politics and ethics in a European Muslim context.