PSYCHOANALYSIS, ISLAM, AND THE OTHER OF LIBERALISM[1]

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One of the difficulties in analysing what Islam has come to *mean* and to refer to since the 19th century is the absence of agreement on what Islam actually *is*. Does *Islam* name a religion, a geographical site, a communal identity; is it a concept, a technical term, a sign, or a taxonomy? The lack of clarity on whether it could be all these things at the same time is compounded by the fact that Islam has acquired referents and significations it did not formerly possess. European Orientalists and Muslim and Arab thinkers begin to use 'Islam' in numerous ways while seemingly convinced that it possesses an immediate intelligibility that requires no specification or definition. 'Islam', for these thinkers, is not only the *name* the Qur'an attributes to the *din* (often (mis)translated as religion, though there is some disagreement about this) that entails a faith [*iman*] in God disseminated by the Prophet Muhammad, but can also refer to the history of Muslim states and empires, the different bodies of philosophical, theological, jurisprudential, medical, literary, and scientific works, as well as to culinary, sexual, social, economic, religious, ritualistic, scholarly, agricultural, and urban practices engaged in by Muslims from the 7th to the 19th century and beyond, and much, much more. What kinds of modernist projects, intellectual endeavours and critiques, types of politics, forms of political life, spirituality, and economic and cultural practices do the new meanings and referents of Islam enable and what kinds do they disable?

Some of the new meanings and referents of Islam had a significant impact on political and social thought as well as on national and international politics in the 19th and 20th centuries and may have even more of an impact

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in the 21st. The implication of these meanings on politics and society results
from their transformation of Islam into a 'culture' and a 'civilization' or a
'cultural tradition' (Von Grunebaum 1955), a 'system' (Margoliouth 1896),
a '*manhaj*' [way of life, method] (Qutb 2005; Shakir 1992),[2] a 'programme'
(Asad 1947, pp. 5, 14, 152), an ethics, a code of public conduct, a gendered
sartorial code, banking principles, a type of governance. Moreover, 'Islam'
has also come to be deployed as a metonym: *fiqh* [problematically rendered
jurisprudence] and *kalam* [theology, again, problematically], traditionally
sciences established by Muslim thinkers, or *Shari'ah* ['sacred law', also
problematically], a term loaded with different connotations and trajectories,
often referring to a body of opinions and interpretations, come to be
conceived as constituent parts of 'Islam', for which it can metonym-
ically substitute.[3]

While the easiest transformation to identify is the one that makes Islam
over into a 'culture' and a 'civilization', given the centrality of this meaning
among Orientalist thinkers and their Muslim and Arab counterparts since
the 19th century, the production of Islam's many other new meanings and
referents may not be as clear. Yet a history of the multiplication of the
meanings of Islam is necessary for understanding what Islam has become in
today's world, both in those parts of the world where peoples, political and
social forces claim to uphold one kind of Islam or another and in those parts
of the world where peoples, political and social forces see 'Islam' as 'other',
whether or not they 'oppose' it. Indeed, the current ongoing war is itself not
only part of the productive process of endowing Islam with new meanings
and referents, but also of the related process of controlling the slippage
of the term towards specific and particular meanings and referents and
away from others. In this way 'Islam' is being opposed to certain antonyms
('the West', 'liberalism', 'individualism', 'democracy', or 'freedom') and
decidedly not to others ('oppression', 'dictatorship', or 'injustice').

Two central religious and intellectual strands emerged in the 19th century
among Arab, Muslim, and European Orientalist thinkers who argued for
the compatibility or incompatibility of 'Islam' with Western modernity
and progress. The word or, more precisely, name 'Islam' itself began to
conjure up immediate comprehension and significance in ways assumed
to have always been the case. This project of rethinking (about) 'Islam'
in new ways, while often passing itself off as a return to old or original
ways of thinking, was situated in the political context of the rise of

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2. Sayyid Qutb uses the term 'manhaj' throughout his writings, especially in *Al-Islam wa
Mushkilat al-Hadarah* [Islam and the Problems of Civilization] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq,
2005), as does Mahmud Muhammd Shakir in his *Risalah fi al-Tariq ila Thaqafatina*
[A Letter on the Path to Our Culture] (Cairo: Mu'assasat al-Risalah, 1992).

3. Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori have written perceptively about the
'systematization' of Islam and its 'objectification' and how the latter 'reconfigures the
symbolic production of Muslim politics'. For them, however, Islam denotes a 'religion'
and not multiple referents (Eickelman & Piscatori 1996, p. 38).

European imperial thought and territorial expansion and the corresponding decline of Ottoman political and imperial power. Yet the 'Islam' to which these European and non-European thinkers referred was a more expansive concept encompassing phenomena that had hitherto been seen as extraneous to it. Indeed, 'Islam' had never been the catch-all term the 19th century would make of it, but was, rather, something more specific, more particular.

Another of the more interesting aspects of post-19th century uses of the term, 'Islam', is not just its accretion of referents, but also that the accreted meanings were deployed not only by different thinkers or different intellectual or political trends, but especially by each thinker and each trend. European Orientalists, Arab secularists (Muslim and Christian), pious (and later Islamist) thinkers, post-colonial states, defining themselves as 'Muslim' or 'Islamic' and their 'Western' and 'secular' opponents, all seem to use the term 'Islam' in a variety of ways to refer to a whole range of things. The productive multiplication of referents that Islam would begin to acquire would ultimately destabilize whatever meaning it had had before or even *after* this transformation, in that it is not always clear in modern writing about Islam which referent it has in a given text. Rather, it often seems that all of them are in play interchangeably *in the same text* as well as across texts, thus rendering 'Islam' a catachresis that always stands in for the *wrong* referent.

Psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic thinkers working more recently on the object called 'Islam' have been active participants in this process of multiplying significations, referents, and antonyms with little self-questioning or analysis of what they are doing. Historically, psychoanalysis did not take 'Islam' as an object of study or as a concern or problem. Except for Freud's passing comments in *Moses and Monotheism* about 'the founding of the Mohammedan religion' seeming to be 'an abbreviated repetition of the Jewish one, of which it emerged as an imitation' (Freud 1939, p. 91), little was written on the topic. Indeed, psychoanalytic studies on religion have been remarkable for the absence of any mention of Islam. This includes, for example, the early study by Erich Fromm (1950) on the topic, which makes no mention at all of Islam, while attending to Christianity, Judaism, 'Buddhism', and 'Hinduism'.

Arab psychoanalytic thinkers, including Moustapha Safouan, Fethi Benslama, Adnan Hoballah, and Georges Tarabishi, who are without exception male and located in France and whose studies focus on psychoanalysis and Islam (except for Tarabishi who is the only one writing in Arabic and who writes on Arab intellectuals and Arabic literature),[4] started to write on the linkage between the two in the context of the rise of

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4. Tarabishi, more recently, started to write on 'Islam', and occasionally punctuates his texts with psychoanalytic references, as he does in *Hartaqat 2: 'an al-'Ilmaniyyah ka-Ishkaliyyah Islamiyyah-Islamiyyah* (Tarabishi 2008).

Islamisms, which have acted as a trigger for their interventions.[5] In a longer study, I attempt to trace their perception of Islamisms as a 'return of the repressed', namely, Islam, when it should have disappeared a long time ago. This 'return' reopens the scene of the trauma of the persistence of Islam as 'religion' in the life of Arabs and Muslims, which causes our psychoanalysts embarrassment and 'shame' before their European counterparts and, more importantly, before their Europeanized selves. Indeed, much of their writing on this question uncovers a deep narcissistic injury that, as Arabs and Muslims, as Europeanized Arabs and Muslims who grew up in modernizing times that sought Europeanization as the telos of modernity to which all Arabs and Muslims were supposedly headed, they now inhabit times wherein the project of Europeanization had failed as a result of the 'return' of Islam in the form of Islamisms. Due to time limitations, I will focus my remarks on the work of Tunisian psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama in an attempt to examine the intellectual and psychic mechanisms at work in his thinking on this interesting but uninterrogated conjunction of a reified psychoanalysis and a reified Islam.

Benslama's (2002) *La psychanalyse à l'épreuve de l'Islam* is perhaps the most serious engagement with one possible relationship that a certain psychoanalysis could have with a certain 'Islam', namely one in which this psychoanalysis is put (or puts itself?) to the test of this 'Islam'. Benslama thinks he is, or wishes he were, writing a corollary to Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, along the lines of 'Muhammad and Monotheism'. This is in fact his second attempt to do so. His first book *La nuit brisée* [The Shattered Night], published in 1988, was less explicitly presented as such a project. *La psychanalyse à l'épreuve de l'Islam* is a more profound second attempt, a *repetition*, at an engagement with that very same project, and intensifies Benslama's dependence on *Moses and Monotheism* as the main psychoanalytic and Freudian scripture that guides him.

One of the more brilliant achievements of Benslama's book is his exploration of the role of Abraham and Ishmael as the father and grandfather of the Arabs and of the fact that the Qur'an, following the Torah, imposed the figure of non-Arab Ishmael (whose mother is the Egyptian Hagar and father the Hebrew Abraham) on Arab lineage which was never resisted by the post-Islamic Arabs, even though neither Abraham nor Ishmael had any presence in their cosmological lore prior to the

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5. Indeed, Benslama recognizes this clearly, by excepting himself as having shown interest in 'Islam' earlier than his colleagues. He states that his initial interest in 'Islam' had started due to an encounter with Pierre Fedida after which he published his first book dealing with psychoanalysis and Islam in 1988 'when Islam had not constituted yet a sharp problem in the international public sphere, nor a question for psychoanalytic research' (Benslama 2004a, p. 77). For Benslama's first book on the subject, see Benslama 1988. This is an interesting assertion since the more usual dating of the international interest in 'Islam' coincides with the Iranian Revolution of 1978/1979.

Qur'anic moment. (Here, Benslama seems to ignore the fact that in contrast to pagan Arab tribes, for Jewish Arab tribes, perhaps not considered Arabs by him, Ishmael and Abraham were indeed present.) Unlike Freud's Moses, who is exposed contra the Jewish scriptural and theological tradition as an Egyptian outsider to his chosen people, Benslama's Ishmael, who is not the main prophet of the Muhammadan call, is not revealed to be non-Arab, as this is not a hidden part of his lineage in the Qur'an and in Islamic theology. But rather what Benslama aims to do is to discuss his non-Arabness in relation to the question of identity and maternalism, the way Hagar is repressed in Islamic theology and Arab identity-formations in favour of Sarah, without much deviation from the Judaic story. To some extent, Benslama's discussion corresponds to Edward Said's important reading of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* as an anti-nationalist call that rejects essentialism and group homogeneity as necessary founding myths. Said concludes his discussion of Freud's *Moses*:

> In other words, identity cannot be thought or worked through itself alone; it cannot constitute or even imagine itself without that radical originary break or flaw which will not be repressed, because Moses was Egyptian, and therefore always outside the identity inside which so many have stood and suffered – and later, perhaps, even triumphed. (Said 2003, p. 54)

Benslama in contrast wants to read the repression of Hagar as informing 'Islam's' views of women and the figure of the mother more generally: 'Islam was born from the stranger at the origins of monotheism, and this stranger remained a stranger in Islam' (Benslama 2002, p. 171).

Benslama however does not limit himself to a discussion of paternity and maternity and the question of origins in the Qur'an and subsequent theological exegesis, but wants to bring his conclusions to bear on the contemporary situation. It is made obvious throughout the text that the entire archaeological project that Benslama is engaged in is precisely aimed at responding to the claims put forth by many contemporary Islamisms and their enemies concerning Islam and Islamic origins. It is in this context that Benslama's book shows less engagement with psychoanalytic readings and shifts to liberal critiques.

Definitionally, Benslama is aware that 'Islam' is multiple and that it is always already 'Islams'. Yet at key moments in his narrative these multiple 'Islams' slip into a singular one which is conflated with a singular 'Islamism' both as an utterable name and as one that should only be used under erasure ['*sous rature*']. My concern has to do with the ideological context of these slippages, as conscious and unconscious, to better understand the political philosophy and psychic processes that inform them. While he does not define Islam in his book, Benslama provides two meanings in a later article on the subject, namely that the word 'Islam' 'has been fixed by a theological connotation into "an abandonment to God"

["*un abandon à Dieu*"]' and that its etymology designates this act as 'having been saved after being abandoned' (Benslama 2004a, p. 79). The latter in fact may be one of the possible connotations of the word but not necessarily its immediate one, as the most common meaning of Islam in Arabic is 'deliverance [of one's self] to God', and not 'abandonment', or the more common Orientalist translation of 'submission to God' which Benslama problematically cites as the 'theological' meaning of the word in Islam, even while offering its other meaning(s) of 'being saved', but, curiously, not its meaning of 'deliverance' (Benslama 1988, p. 176). Benslama is certainly not alone in his problematic translations. The problem of translation and of language is essential for psychoanalytic thinkers more generally. Moustapha Safouan posits his major thesis about what he constantly refers to as Arab 'backwardness' as a problem of language and, like Benslama, but with less erudition, often seems to confound Arabic and Latin etymologies in ways that exoticize modern Arabic, as he does, for example, in his discussion of the difference between the Latin-based word sovereignty and its Arabic equivalent *Siyadah* (Safouan 2007, p. 65). But I digress.

It is clear that the two meanings of Islam that Benslama posits are not the only possible referents of the term as Benslama uses it in *La psychanalyse à l'épreuve de l'Islam*. While at the outset Benslama explains that the many 'Islams' he posited are diverse and various, that they are sometimes unconnected, even though they may all be hiding 'behind' the singular name 'Islam' (Benslama 2002, p. 23), he would soon abandon this multiplicity in the interest of a singular Islam whose signified and referents in his use will remain multiple but unspecified while presented consciously and ideologically as singular. It is rarely made clear, for example, when he uses the term Islam, whether he is referring to all Islamist movements and individuals or just some of them, or if 'Islam' refers to the history of Islamic theology from the 7th century to the present, or if it refers to the history or present of states that call themselves Islamist or even those that call themselves 'Muslim', or if it is referring to the Qur'an, the Hadith, the Sunnah, or all combined, and so on and so forth. While Benslama sees the attempt to homogenize Islams into Islam as not only an Islamist project but also as a European 'superficial' attempt to deal with the rise of many 'Islamist' movements in different geographical and social contexts, their reduction by a European political sociology to one Islam, Benslama declares, is nothing short of 'resistance to the intelligibility of Islam' on the part of Islamologists, a resistance that, he maintains, also applies to European psychoanalysts (Benslama 2002, p. 24). This astute understanding of the multiplicity of Islams as signifiers, whose signifieds, however, remain obscure in Benslama's own text, falls by the wayside through his constant invoking of 'Islam' in the singular as a subject with a self that expresses itself and whose meaning is readily intelligible. Benslama speaks of the 'actuality of Islam' (Benslama 2002, p. 26) that imposes itself

on him, of 'the tradition of Islam' (ibid., p. 27) within which people grow up, and how he had 'noted simply that, in the majority of cases [he consulted], Islam was always the effect and the cause of subjective and trans-individual structures' (ibid.).

In these telling slippages (and there are many more), what is most interesting is the commonality of the perception of the singularity of Islam and its effect on Muslims that Benslama shares with many of the Islamist thinkers themselves. Indeed, and in line with how many Islamists and Muslims reacted to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, Benslama identifies their reaction as occurring within the singular world of Islam. He states that the 'shock in the case of Islam came from whence we did not expect, from literary fiction that put on stage the truth of origins as a trick' (Benslama 2002, p. 43). In doing so, Benslama is following in a liberal secular tradition, which often seems to recognize the same Islam of some Islamists as the one 'Islam', even though he is well aware (and curiously adds a footnote to the Arabic edition of his book clarifying) that what is at stake [*enjeu*] in contemporary debates is the 'meaning of Islam', and what is unfolding is indeed 'a war of the name', or a nominalist war.[6] In his book, however, and despite his noted vigilance, Benslama opts not only to analyse the terms of this war but, and therein lies the contradiction, also to join in as a party to the war. In this light, the battle over the Islamist notion of Islam (which Benslama and many secularists often oppose as the one Islam), as many Islamists correctly claim, is between those who want to uphold 'Islam' and those who do not. In fact, he ambivalently posits this singular 'Islam', whose meaning he often shares with the Islamists and the Orientalists, as the other (or is it the Other?) of liberalism (Benslama 2002, p. 45).[7] He does not do so explicitly, but his invocation of 'freedom', 'tolerance', and 'individualism' as the values or key ingredients that are absent from the one Islam, and as the ingredients that would be included in the Islam he wishes for, structures his polemic against the Islamists. Moreover, his insistence that Islam be transformed from a *din* into the Christian and liberal notion 'religion' ['*La religion musulmane*'] (ibid., p. 24) and his attack on the Islamists who, unlike him and liberal common sense, regard 'Islam not only as a religion' (ibid., p. 25) commit him to a liberal epistemology whose aim is the assimilation of the world in its own image.

But there is an important ambivalence in Benslama's project. While this Islam seems according to him to be opposed to individual freedoms like those of writers of the calibre of Rushdie, he also criticizes European Islamologists for not recognizing that another Islam (whose referents again

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6. Fathi Bin Salamah, *Al-Islam wa al-Tahlil al-Nafsi* (2008, p. 36 n.).

7. See *La psychanalyse à l'épreuve de l'Islam* (2002, p. 45) for Benslama's liberal defence of personal freedom and the individual.

remain multiple – the Qur'an, Islamic theology, Islamic 'culture', etc.) does uphold individualism. Benslama insists that:

> Islam rather deploys one of the extremely powerful dimensions of individuality, a dimension of great conceptual abundance. This dimension could not have developed without being compatible with the reality of the culture. This is indeed a culture of individuality, but one that is essentially governed by an identification with God. (Benslama 2002, p. 302)

Indeed, Benslama is very critical of Western psychoanalytical pronouncements on Islam and Muslim cultures as obliterating of the individual, and which see Western achievement that gave birth to the individual as the ultimate achievement of civilization *tout court*. He declares that these approaches that want to insist that the alleged absence of individualism in Islam prevents Muslims from being accessible to psychoanalysis are 'ignorant': 'I will not cite anyone's name so as not to privilege those who are in the order of ignorance and carelessness' (ibid.).

Benslama's ambivalence here is not necessarily and only a conscious ambivalence but more likely the effect of an ideological commitment, one that imagines different audiences differently. The reference to multiple Islams might be said to be the ideological position (the position of political correctness?) and/or an expression of a wish, while the reference to one singular Islam in the many slips could betray what Benslama actually *fears* to be the case. This could indicate his own unconscious resistance to the claim (his own claim) that there are many Islams, or his conscious recognition that his claim is a mere wish and not an acknowledgement of observable reality, and that what he does notice or 'realize', as he tells us, is that there actually exists only one Islam and therefore that this Islam must be opposed (hated?) for not pluralizing itself as it must and should. In this regard, he announces at the outset of the book that the origins of his own interest in writing on Islam as an intellectual task – which emerged in the early 1980s (elsewhere he would tell us that his interest started in the mid-1980s) (Benslama 2004a, p. 77) 'in a critical historical situation marked by a fanatical surge' – were to engage decidedly in the kind of thinking that explores 'the gap between a terminable Islam and an interminable one' (Benslama 2002, p. 20). While Benslama cautions us (and perhaps himself) to use a new vocabulary and to adjust to a new epistemology wherein we (he) must 'hear Islams when we say Islam', it would seem that he often remains deaf to his own cautionary warning (ibid., p. 76). Perhaps, then, the singularity of actual Islam is itself the scene of the trauma that one cannot but revisit and whose claims, one, or Benslama, is compelled to repeat at the very same moment and in the very same text where he insists that he and we must resist.

Indeed, *La psychanalyse à l'épreuve de l'Islam* repeats many of the scenes (and discussions) in the biography of the Prophet Muhammad that Benslama conjured up in *La nuit brisée*. It remains unclear if this act of

repetition is merely a self-repetition that revisits his first (inaugural?) text (child?) on 'Islam' or a revisiting of the Prophetic scenes themselves as the site of trauma that compels repetition. *La psychanalyse à l'épreuve de l'Islam* surely is a repetition with a twist. It is a more comprehensive, more elaborated second attempt at producing a psychoanalytic reading of 'Islam'. As Benslama's youngest child on Islam (and, as we know, books which carry the names of their authors are always reproductively connected to them, just as children carry the name of the father), *La psychanalyse à l'épreuve de l'Islam* seems more privileged and more celebrated by critics, just like the younger male child in the Torah is always more privileged – Abel, Isaac, Jacob, and others. It is unclear if an unconscious wish on the part of Benslama is at work here, one of preferring, once again as God and Abraham did, Isaac to Ishmael.

Before I indulge in further speculations, let me cite Benslama's own statement of his task in his important book:

> to translate the Islamic origin into the language of Freudian deconstruction … Translation is not application or annexation, but through a signifying displacement, conveys the very texture of a tradition in its language and its images, in order to give access to what is unknowingly thought, inside it [*à son insu*]. (2002, p. 319)

I am unpersuaded by this assertion, mostly because often translation of 'Islamic' texts into European languages seems to mean retrieval of dictionary meanings of words and their etymology without much attention to the intellectual context and historicity of the uses and significations of words and how they change over time – the 'links' that Muhammad Arkun has juxtaposed as 'language–history–thought' (Arkun 1998, p. 16) – something all contemporary interpretative exercises of the texts of the past must attend to in order to avoid projecting contemporary meanings and values onto them. It is clear that Benslama is concerned that translation can be a form of annexation. But he wants to insist that translation in this case opens up an access to the unconscious of the tradition ['*à son insu*']. While this may be so, it does not do away with his initial concern. I would call translation in this case not 'annexation' but assimilation, in that, whether Benslama's 'Freudian deconstruction' uncovers an Islam that is individualist or anti-individualist, it could only uncover it in relation to a modern liberal European value that he posits as universal, namely 'individualism'. This assimilationist move is presented as useful for psychoanalysis and as useful psychoanalytically to the extent to which it allows 'the intelligibility of the logic of repression, which subtends the foundation of a symbolic organization' (Benslama 2002). There is some tension in this assimilationist project, however. On occasion, like the Orientalists, Benslama insists on *not* translating the Arabic word for God, 'Allah', into its French equivalent ['*Dieu*'] when translating an Islamist text from Arabic, but seems invested in exoticizing it as the specific and proper name of the Muslim God, when

in fact it is the name that Arab Christians had used for their God before Muhammad and still use it after him (ibid., p. 59). Ultimately, however, Benslama wants to present Islam as assimilable to the liberal notion of the individual even if it is so with a difference. It is possible here that Benslama is engaged in deploying this Islamic individualism as a way of passing Islam off as European, and that this passing off is indeed a form of resistance on his part to Orientalist liberal accounts of Islam as lacking in individualism, while simultaneously condemnatory of Islamist resistance to passing off, which he brands as pathological or as suffering from some form of 'group delirium' [*délire collectif*] (ibid., p. 49). In another related but earlier context, he makes a policy recommendation for Arab pedagogy through cautioning that unless the Arabs 'introduce Kant's critique of pure reason into their educational curricula, they would be committing a horrendous error' (Benslama & Quybasi 2008, p. 15).

Herein lies the importance of the discourse of scientism and rationalism with which Benslama identifies modernity, the West, and psychoanalysis to which he opposes Islamism (in the singular, despite his own assertions that it is a plural phenomenon (Benslama 2002, pp. 24–5)) and the one Islam. He consecrates a series of binaries to make this opposition clear:

> This line does not only pass between those who are tolerant and those who are fanatical, between rationalists and believers, between the logic of science and the logic of faith, but also between the position that thinks it can find the truth of origin in the texts of tradition – and this position thinks that this could be done through rational procedures armed with the good speech of the historical method – and the position that considers these same texts as a fiction or as a legend. (Benslama 2002, p. 36)

In this regard, it is most perplexing that Benslama discusses some Islamists' attempt to make the Qur'anic text correspond to scientific knowledge as a sort of neurosis or more precisely as 'interpretative delirium' [*délire interprétative*], and not part of their rationalization of religion (ibid., p. 70). He adds that 'examining these [Islamist] documents leaves one with the impression of an immense interpretative delirium, ushered in from a destruction anxiety and constituting an attempt to repair from the outside that which has collapsed on the inside' (ibid.). This is ironic, given Benslama's commitment to rationalism and the fact that he chose the non-ironically named 'Association of Arab Rationalists', of which he is a member, to publish the Arabic translation of his book. Benslama's use of these taxonomies of rationalism and irrationalism, science and faith, knowledge or ignorance, is in fact shared by many among Islamist thinkers. If the Islamist thinker Sayyid Qutb referred to his contemporary Muslims and non-Muslims as still living in an age of ignorance (echoing the Qur'an's description of the pre-Islamic period), Benslama, aside from using post-Enlightenment descriptions of 'darkness' and 'obscurantism' to characterize

Islamists, insists that Muslim men of religion live 'in great ignorance' (Benslama & Quybasi 2008, p. 18).

The opposition of science to religion and the correlate characterization of psychoanalysis as a 'science' that is opposed by Islam as 'religion' is shared among many of Benslama's psychoanalytic colleagues, including Tarabishi, Safouan and, more recently, Adnan Hoballah. Here, the reification of psychoanalysis as science and the elision of the important debates within psychoanalysis about its own scientificity, let alone Freud's own overdetermined relationship to science, are never acknowledged or referenced by any of them. Perhaps, Benslama's resistance to, or anxiety about, the possibility of many *psychoanalyses* rather than one true psychoanalysis parallels his anxiety about the one Islam and the many. Still, these thinkers differ among themselves about the nature of the relationship between 'Islam' and science. This opposition is not new but harks back to Orientalist Ernest Renan's infamous debate with Jamal al-Din al-Afghani in the 19th century about this very question, wherein Islam and the Arabs were castigated as 'hostile to science' – a debate with which none of these thinkers seems familiar (Massad 2008, pp. 11–16).

Benslama has a major concern with the liberal notion of tolerance, which he finds lacking in the one Islam propagated by the Islamists (all of them?), but which he seems to think is in abundance in European rationalism and secularism (all of it?). Here Benslama's commitment to liberalism is also a commitment to the Freudian equation of individualism with phylogenetic and ontogenetic maturity to which Freud opposes group solidarity and organicism as primitive and regressive, *and* a commitment to Freud's consideration of tolerance as marking the highest maturity achieved by liberal political orders, which are essentially synonyms for high civilization. Freud's accounts of these questions, as Wendy Brown (2006) has shown, can be read in two different directions, as both how men overcome primitive asociality towards forms of social life free from strife in a social contractarian manner (*Civilization and Its Discontents* and *Totem and Taboo*), and as the overcoming of primitive solidarity and organicism to achieve civilized individuality (*Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*). In contrast, liberal notions insist that civilized individualist liberal tolerance, as Brown put it: 'is only available to liberal subjects and liberal orders and constitute the supremacy of both over dangerous alternatives. They also establish organicist orders as a natural limit of liberal tolerance, as intolerable in consequence of their own intolerance' (Brown 2006, p. 303). Thus, while Benslama chastises the one Islam and Islamists (always seen as deploying one singular meaning and interpretation of the one Islam) for lacking any rationalism or tolerance, and that he wants to deny them any tolerance as a consequence of their own alleged intolerance, he wants to extend tolerance to the individualist Islam he rescues from (all) the Islamists and from the Orientalists as one that can feature this

important civilized value. In this sense, his liberal values differ little from the general understanding that liberalism has of societies who insist on different forms of sociality and which it considers other. As Brown maintains: 'Organicist orders are not only radically other to liberalism but betoken the "enemy within" civilization and the enemy to civilization. Most dangerous of all would be transnational formations imagined as organicist from a liberal perspective, which link the two – Judaism in the nineteenth century, communism in the twentieth, and today, of course, Islam' (Brown 2006, p. 310). Here the historic links between liberal anti-Semitism and Orientalism and liberal anti-communism are shown to inhabit the very same politics of identity and othering.

I should note here, though, that Judaism, having entered after World War II the liberal Western dyad identified as 'Judeo-Christian' civilization, now mostly escapes such descriptions, save for those Judaisms that resist their inclusion in this liberal order. Indeed, Benslama himself was implicitly so impressed with the Jewish achievement of Western liberalism (i.e. Jews having reached Western liberal individual maturity), which he wants Muslims to emulate, that he exaggerates the scientific achievement of Jews by endowing Christian thinkers with Jewish identities. In his rush to demonstrate his defence of the Europeanized and therefore liberal, mature, and Enlightened 'Jews' against a fantasized primitive obscurantist Arab anti-Jewishness that could explain what he considers to be an 'Arab' or 'Muslim' rejection of psychoanalysis as the 'Jewish science' – a European notion which in fact has little resonance among Arab or Muslim thinkers – Benslama responds thus:

> I feel some shame when I find myself having to draw attention to the fact that he who thinks like this must also deny the theory of gravity or the theory of relativity, which were both the result of the work of Jewish scientists, Newton and Einstein. (Benslama & Quybasi 2008, p. 14)

It seems Benslama is not only unfamiliar with the fact that Newton was Christian, but also with the latter's major exegetical contributions to Christian theology. His exaggeration of Jewish achievements and Arab failures recalls his preference for Isaac over Ishmael noted earlier.

In reading Benslama, one gets the general sense that psychoanalytic studies of Islamists (seen in their entirety as upholding the one illiberal Islam) replicate ego psychology's methods of looking for the neurotic mechanisms in the childhood of a person that prevents him and her from accepting authority and joining the call of normativity. Islamist and Muslim resistance to Western secular and liberal (read Christian) normativity is seen as psychic resistance to maturity and to adult authority, and a rebellion against normativity. Like American imperialism, a liberal civilizational psychoanalysis, of the sort Benslama promotes, seeks to bring these recalcitrant and sick elements back into society and nurse them back

to good health. It is unclear if Benslama's political and physical location in France, like the rest of his cohort, might account for this type of liberalism (although it does certainly explain his sense of 'shame'), but it could at least contextualize the kind of critiques with which he wants to engage and in which he wants to insert his own.

Two trends are juxtaposed in Benslama's text, a condemnation of a static Islamic theology, which he declares 'fossilized by centuries of immobility' (Benslama 2002, p. 43), and a break with Islamic origins that modernity – through colonialism – has ushered in the Muslim world, which brought about the one Islam in reaction to it. Based on his research, Benslama diagnoses the situation today as follows: 'What has happened in Islam in the last twenty odd years emerges from this conjuncture; it proceeds from a break which cuts its history and opens inside it another possibility of history' (ibid., p. 317). His findings while researching 'the transformation of the figure of the father and of the paternal function' in a Tunis suburb in the mid-1980s were sufficient for him to recognize that there was a 'deeper' and 'more longstanding' dis-ease ['*malaise*'] afflicting 'Islamic civilization', and not merely one suburb (Benslama 2004a, p. 76). It is unclear if this is on account of Benslama's or his Tunisian subjects' symbolic conflation of the father and the paternal function with Islam as one and the same! This would be significant because Benslama spends some time in his book correctly pointing out that, unlike in Christianity, God in 'Islam' has no paternal role at all to play and indeed such a role is explicitly repudiated in the Qur'an. Benslama blames Arab and Muslim intellectuals and the political elite for the dis-ease from which Islam seems to suffer: 'an elite that did not know how to translate the modern to the public, nor utilize the interpretative and political possibilities to moderate the public's excesses' (Benslama 2002, pp. 317–18). His conclusion that in the Arab world 'modernity was not therefore but a simulacrum of the modern' (ibid., p. 318) betrays a belief that 'modernity' in the West is a fact, rather than an interpretation.

Even though Benslama insists that 'Islamism [again seen as a phenomenon with one singular meaning and referent] does not sum up Islam [but which Islam?]' (ibid., p. 319), he maintains that analyzing these destructive effects on the break [*césure*] should not serve an essentialist process which would in turn ignore the contemporary historical and material forces that have led Islam to 'be out of joint' (ibid.). The work of culture, he continues, has difficulty thinking through this 'deracination' of Muslims from their own history in their encounter with the simulacrum of modernity. It is 'this transgression, about which nothing is said, that has determined here the task of the psychoanalyst' (ibid.). Yet, at the end of the book and after he presents the reasons for why Islamism should be read under erasure, we are reminded that 'one cannot exonerate Islam of this ideology' of Islamism (ibid., p. 318)! This tension between the one Islam and the many informs Benslama's discussion throughout.

But there is a resolution to this tension. Understanding that the only way out of the one Islam is the way into liberal secularism, Benslama has more recently co-founded 'The Association of the Manifesto of Freedoms' and is signatory to (author of?) its founding declaration. It is noteworthy that the vocabulary that informs the declaration is borrowed wholesale from American cold-war anti-communism. The declaration affirms that its members who are 'holders of the values of secularism and of sharing a common world . . . [are] linked by our own individual histories, and in different ways, to Islam . . .', which the declaration defines 'as a place where many of the dangers of a globalized world crystallize: identitarian fascism and a totalitarian hold, civil and colonial wars, despotisms and dictatorships, inequality and injustice, self-hatred and hatred of the other, amidst political, religious, and economic extremes' (Benslama 2004b, pp. 91–2). Islamists (all of them?) are said to constitute 'forces of destruction' that must be opposed through democracy and the institution of the political, which cannot be imposed militarily but must 'target the internal structures of Islam [but, again, which Islam?] and modify its relations to its geopolitical borders' (ibid., p. 92). While a singular Islam (which seems to be the only state in which Islam can exist at present, according to Benslama's reading) is being singled out in the declaration for this transformation, the signatories insist that they will fight and resist what they call 'totalitarian Islamism' (ibid., p. 93).

Ironically, not all Islamists oppose psychoanalysis, and some of them are in fact open to it. Unlike Benslama's full-scale rejection of Islam as Islamism (both seen as singular as signifiers and signified), Ahmad al-Sayyid 'Ali Ramadan, an Egyptian professor of psychology teaching in Saudi Arabia, is not only tolerant of Freudian psychoanalysis but offers an Islamist assessment of the positive and negative aspects of it from an 'Islamic' perspective. After reviewing and commenting on the oeuvre of Freud and the psychoanalytic method as well as the history of Western critiques of psychoanalysis and the history of its practice in Egypt, Ramadan concludes with a list of the positive contributions of psychoanalysis, including Freud's concept of the 'unconscious', the method of 'free association', 'releasing the patient's anxieties', 'giving confidence [to the patient]', 'bringing unconscious struggles to the surface of consciousness', 'reducing the resistance' of the patient, the discovery of the 'Oedipus complex', and more (Ramadan 2000, pp. 227–8). Ramadan takes psychoanalysis so seriously that he compares it to the Qur'anic notions of the psyche and shows where they converge and diverge. (ibid., pp. 269–327). My point here is not only to cite the openness of Ramadan to Freudian psychoanalysis, but also to show that Benslama seems not only intolerant of the 'intolerance' of Islamism(s), but also of its *tolerance*.

Benslama, then, like some of the Islamists he decries, but certainly not like others who do not exist in his epistemological framework, wants to fix the many Islams he identifies into one form. For him the only tolerable

Islam is a liberal form of Islam that upholds all the liberal values of European maturity and is intolerant of the Islam of the Islamists whose values are said to oppose liberal values even *when they do not*. He also wants to fix the meaning of Islamism as one that upholds the illiberal Islam, which he cannot tolerate. In Benslama's hands, psychoanalysis becomes the handmaiden of European liberalism that shows no ambivalence about its self or its projected other. On the contrary, the certainty with which 'Islam' is *christened* the other of liberalism and the West aligns it with the figure of the primitive and the pre-oedipal child in the cosmology of Freudian psychoanalysis. Benslama is not alone in effecting this transformation but is rather part of a large group of European and Arab thinkers who are insistent on these representations. While he had brilliantly analysed the figure of Abraham and Ishmael in the Qur'an and the Islamic theological tradition, it is when he wants to deal with contemporary Islamists that his psychoanalytic insights are transformed into invocations of liberalism. It is this liberal identity and the mechanisms through which it produces its others that are taken as uninterrogable referents in his work and in the work of his cohort. This serious limitation of Benslama's oeuvre more generally, however, can be productively read in a psychoanalytic way. Indeed, this might be a great task for psychoanalysis at present, namely to study the processes through which the liberal self is constituted by Europeans and intellectual migrants from the non-European post-colonies. A more curious psychoanalysis, perhaps, would do well to undertake a study of the group psychology of liberal and secular thinkers more generally on the question of 'Islam' to uncover the unconscious processes and mechanisms at play in the formation of their liberal ego, which in turn privileges this liberal reading of something they insist on othering as 'Islam'.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the terms and methods used by psychoanalytic authors to explain and understand something they other as 'Islam'. The paper engages critically and psycho-analytically with these authors' attempts to read 'Islam' psychoanalytically, and finds that more often than not they subject it to liberal principles that are not defined in psychoanalytic terms. Focusing on the work of Tunisian author Fethi Benslama, the paper analyses and deconstructs certain key semantic and conceptual confusions of 'Islam' and 'Islamism' that are manifest in the general psychoanalytic literature on 'Islam'.

Key words: Benslama, Islam, Islamism, liberalism, other, psychoanalysis