

Close Encounters: Islam,  
Modernity, and Violence



TEXTES DE RÉFÉRENCE

# Close Encounters: Islam, Modernity, and Violence\*

*Nilüfer Göle*\*\*



Académie  
de la Latinité

Rio de Janeiro, 2003

---

\* Published in *Understanding September 11*, Craig Calhoun, Paul Price et Ashley Timmer (eds.), New York, The New Press, 2002, p. 332-44.

\*\* I would like to thank Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Povinelli for inviting me to give a talk on September 11 in the workshop on “Violence and Redemption” at the University of Chicago, November 2001. A shorter version of this article was published in French in *Confluences Méditerranée*, 2001-2001. I owe special thanks to Levent Yılmaz, Soli Ozel, and Ludwig Amman for their valuable comments.

© Nilüfer Göle  
Brésil, 2003

***Académie de la latinité — Siège Amérique latine***  
***Secrétariat général***

Rua da Assembléia, 10, 42<sup>o</sup> andar, Centro, Rio de Janeiro

Tel.: 55.21.531-2310; Fax: 55.21.533-4782

Page WEB: [www.alati.org](http://www.alati.org)

E-mail: [alati@alati.org](mailto:alati@alati.org)

***Secrétariat exécutif à Paris***

25 rue Château Landon 75010 Paris. Tél./Fax: 33.1.40.35.08.20

E-mail: [nelson.vallejo-gomez@wanadoo.fr](mailto:nelson.vallejo-gomez@wanadoo.fr)

## 1. The Terrorist Moment

*I was driving down the hill on the campus of Bosphorus University with Uğur, a Ph.D. student of mine working on Islamic coffee houses in Istanbul. We are discussing the new forms of Islamic appearances in secular public spaces, when my cellular rang. It was my niece Zeynep, working in international banking (plugged in constantly to the Internet and to information networks), who informed me of the catastrophe. At that very moment only one of the twin towers of the World Trade Center along with the Pentagon was hit. I rushed home to watch the television and found myself witnessing the second attack. I was sitting stunned for hours in front of the screen, zapping between CNN, Turkish and French channels, and trying to find words that would give meaning to the images. The scope of destruction and the incessant repetition of images were creating a hypnotizing effect. Images were acquiring a sort of autonomy in the mind working their way through senses and emotions rather than being processed by words and rationality. It took me several days to shake off this state of apathy and contact my friends living in the states.*

To my surprise, they all gave very detailed, precise, and personalized accounts of the moment. As I am doing myself

right now. How they learned about the attack, where they were, and that exactly they were doing at that very moment, how they reacted emotionally and worried about their close ones, were meticulously described in their emails.

A colleague witnessed the catastrophe real close. He was changing planes in Washington when the plane hit the Pentagon, had to leave the airport, and took the first train allowed to leave town. "(...) I was worried about S. because he was in New York and I couldn't reach him by phone (...) Meanwhile, S. heard the first Trade Center blast when he was in the shower. Thinking it was a car wreck, he went to the window and looked out. I'm attaching the photo he took from our living room window, hoping your software can open photos."

Indeed photos, sent around the world digitally, were hinting at the visual experience of the moment, as a "snapshot." Maybe for the first time in history a terrorist event was being witnessed live, in real time, as an ocular experience and by so many people. September 11 was experienced personally, visually, simultaneously, and globally by those situated in different locations and publics. The terrorist moment took place in a global public space. The personal stories of those who were in the vicinity of the World Trade Center were particularly intense. But all from different parts of the world, in different cities, in Cairo, Montreal, New Delhi, Barcelona and from different publics, Muslim or Western, expressed a personal need to locate themselves and give a personal account of the circumstances under which they first heard about the terrorist attack and how they reacted to it.

The media, the newspaper, the Internet, most conversations, all moved and circulated information, stories, ideas, and pictures among different publics. Through repetitive images and the circulation of anecdotes, the moment was recorded and engraved in our collective memory. As in the case of an earthquake, the loss of a loved one, a fracture occurred; a fracture which took command of the memory. A sense of before and after developed as in the case of a tragic date. Narrating meant recapitulating retrospectively and over and over again the factual details from a personal angle; as if memorizing the moment could help to comprehend the tragic event.

September 11 now became 9/11 a date, a history making moment, or rather a history-vanishing moment. Either way, we witnessed how the personal and the historical were intrinsically connected. History with a capital *H* was written with a collectivity of personal narrations from different locations. We had the impression of entering into History through a personal gateway. The terrorist instance turned into a calendar day, a historic moment. By the way, in Arabic, in Turkish, and in Persian the same word, “*tarih*,” stands both for a date and history.

September 11 took place in a concentrated yet relatively short temporality, peculiar to an act of terrorism. Yet within the moment of terror were condensed different temporalities, ages of history. Terrorism on September 11 and the U.S. counterattack on the Taliban opened up the Pandora’s box of a collective unconscious evoking the Crusades and drawing upon categories of distinction between the “civilized” and the “barbarians.” Layers of history and memory

were compressed and juxtaposed without chronological order in that moment: The hijackers viewed their action in reference to the history of Islam in the seventh century (especially the ten-year period between 622, the year of the Prophet's flight from Mecca, and 632, the year of his death) during which battles of the Prophet built the Islamic society against the infidels.<sup>1</sup> Whereas for the Western publics, the act evoked the shadows of very different historical moments, ranging from the Persian invasion of Athens, the Turks attacking Vienna, the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, to the recent bomb attack at the World Trade Center in 1993.

## **2. Visualizing Violence**

Different realities and distant temporalities are brought together by these collages that fix the history of September 11: history understood both as an image and the narrative attached to it.<sup>2</sup> On September 11 the instant as fracture and the image as violence imposed themselves on the mind. Since then we have been trying to find appropriate words, sort out a narrative that will accompany them.

Terror as usual was faceless, but also voiceless. Likewise New York; mutilated and muted. Silence accompanied the catastrophe. Absence of demands on the part of the perpetrators, absence of meaningful narratives on the part of the spectators. We were reduced to being passive spectators; it was like watching a silent movie on the apocalypse. Those who could see the World Trade Center, watched in silence behind their double windows; others watched in real time in

front of their television screens. Terrorism burst onto the stage of history, but the spectators were reduced to silence and to impotence, their capacity to act and to intervene were blocked, their subjective will to act was annihilated. The only heroic action was that of the firemen and police — who dramatically turned into involuntary martyrs.

During the attacks, the senses were heightened as in the case of a war, and through the media, the visual sense was traumatized. The attacks — blending terrorism, catastrophe, and war in one single stroke — spread through ocular violence.

Building a narrative, that is, attaching a meaning to September 11, should hence start from the temporality of the instant and the image, and not from the long-term causes nor from textual interpretations. In other words instead of enumerating economic, political causes or religious interpretations that have preceded the act, and advancing ethical arguments for the future, we first need to fix the image, give a pause, free it from the past and future time horizons, suspend it in the present, and expand it in search of new details and perspectives. We can visualize September 11 as a “snapshot” (note that the vocabulary meaning evokes violence: both a break and an explosion), as an *instantané* (in French) or as an *Augenblick* (in German) to link temporality and image, to capture both the suddenness of the moment and the intensity of the visual. The act of terror in this perspective appears as a *Momentbild*, as a momentary image that bears significance beyond that moment.<sup>3</sup> Once we frame the picture, then we can change the scales, shift from the micro to the macro,<sup>4</sup> move back and forth between

the particular instance of the event and the structural long-term process, and turn thereby the synchronic temporality of the picture into a moving picture, that is a movie (in my view on Islam and modernity) with historical agency and depth. Understanding September 11 requires building a narrative starting from the terrorist moment as an instance, an exemplary incident which, in one moment, makes appear different temporalities and a range of issues hitherto suppressed in one instant.

Furthermore, there were two instances, two “snapshots,” not one. It is only when the second tower was hit that in our minds the possibility of an accident ended, terrorism revealed itself, and bin Laden’s name and Islam were associated.

*It is at that moment that I found myself saying that this could not be the work of Islamists. First, the scale of terrorism, with four hijacked planes attempting to hit four targets simultaneously, seemed to me almost too big, American size, to be imagined by Muslims. Secondly, long-time meticulous preparation in silence and technological expertise were not typical of Islamic activism. I had the conviction with many others that Muslims could not have cooperated and executed such a large-scale technical action to perfection. In the first hours, Agence France Press mentioned the name of a Japanese terrorist group; with the Kamikaze tradition, technical mastery, and the Hiroshima vengeance, a plausible rumor, it seemed to me. After all, in the case of the Oklahoma attack (1995) we were misled; the terrorists were not Islamists but white-supremacist American groups. Well, this was obviously wishful thinking on my part. There is no*

*neutral public, and I was thinking and speaking as a member of the most concerned public; Muslim, Middle-Eastern, and a sociologist on Islam. In my work, I have been trying to highlight modes of intersection between Islam and modernity, rather than adopting the perspective of a “clash” between the two. Islamic terrorism meant a triple defeat for me; religious, intellectual, and personal. However, my initial refusal to believe that Islamist actors were responsible for September 11 went beyond my wish to repress this embarrassing and painful reality. My arguments on the incapacity of Muslims to undertake such a large-scale high-tech attack expressed as well a hidden contempt (self-contempt?) for Muslims — a contempt that this very attack meant to reverse and invalidate, as I would realize later.*

### **3. A New Mapping of the Islamic Social Imaginary**

The terrorists were trained and acquired engineering and technical expertise in the United States and in Germany, effortlessly emulated the common lives of Western suburbia, performed in full recognition of the supremacy of the media, and were tuned in to the forces of (anti) globalization. The attack was an attack from within. The terrorists themselves were a product of the modern world, using modern arms, attacking modern targets. Islam was not turning against some kind of external, colonial, or occupant force of modernity. In an ironical sense, Islam was never so close to Modernity, both in metaphorical and in literal sense; so close as to collide and mutually annihilate, just like the dou-

ble crush/crash of the planes and the twin towers tragically symbolized.

The attacks of September 11 were condemned by many publics (including Muslim ones), but silently or even overtly endorsed by many others (and not only by Muslim ones). The reasons for this tacit consent were mainly enumerated in geopolitical or economical terms.<sup>5</sup> The division and yet the proximity between the rich and the poor; a world speaking the language of human rights, while many suffered under authoritarian regimes; those oriented toward success versus those without future; a world of citizenship versus a world of corruption; a world of libidinal consumption versus territories of famine — certainly there is a perturbing gap that fuels emotions of resentment, injustice, and revenge. But enumerating long-term structural causes is not sufficient to decode terrorism. It certainly helps us to understand the historical and political stage on which the terrorist act is played out, but at the same time such arguments exteriorize and objectify the reasons of terrorism and thereby omit its intrinsic motifs and trivialize the connections with Islam. Especially when such a historical-causal understanding of the phenomenon is coupled with the liberal inclination not to reduce Islam as a universal religion to a particular act of terrorism, the importance of the event itself fades away. The terrorist instance becomes secondary in view of the long-term past causes, on the one hand, and the ethical concerns for the future, on the other. Such self-critical Western analysis unintentionally ends up reducing terrorism to an epiphenomenon. Arguments such as “bin Laden is a product of American politics” attribute full agency to the Western

powers, whereas Muslims appear just as victims. Certainly, holding on to the view of a Western-centered and manipulated world, however unconsciously, has a soothing and reassuring function. Yet the attacks of September 11 attempted, even if only for a day, to reverse the roles, revealed the vulnerability of the Western powers, and turned Americans to victims. Although the war on the territory of Afghanistan aimed to restore the power relations and ended up creating new victims, the reasons for the tacit approval of the terrorists' act should be sought in the direction of this displacement of power relations between the West and Muslims. September 11 undoubtedly provoked shame among Muslims, but also a hidden feeling of pride and empowerment. However, this unacknowledged disposition does not mean the endorsement of Islamist radicalism, let alone bin Ladenist terrorism. But it contributes to the elaboration of a collective Islamic imaginary.

In the aftermath of September 11, the new mapping of an Islamic collective imaginary which was already taking place independently of national differences, religious-confessional divisions, or popular tradition, became more apparent. The Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981, Khomeini's *fatwa* against Salman Sushdie in 1989, the destruction of the Buddha statues in Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2001, the attacks on American on September 11, 2001 are among the "Sign Posts"<sup>6</sup> in the making of an Islamic collective imaginary which transcends the national frontiers and religious distinctions between Sunni and Shi'ite Islam. It extends the territory of Islam, conquering (as in the case of "futuhāt") not

new territories, but the social imaginaries both in Muslim-majority Muslim-minority situations. Each offensive constitutes a political (or rather a “meta-political”<sup>7</sup>) icon and has a religious reverberation. Application of *shari’a* (Islamic revolution) call for *jihad* (September 11), but also blasphemy (*The Satanic Verses*), idolatry (the Buddha statues), and usury (Western banking) reactivate and penetrate, by adherence as well as by resistance into Muslim consciousness. The religious lexicon is used and misused to give meaning to these practices as well as to resurrect a collective Islamic repertoire. Religious idiom and the antagonism with the icons of Western culture provide a sense of collective empowerment and the elaboration of Muslim self-definitions. In a modern world speaking the language of emancipation, tolerance, liberalism, blasphemy, idolatry, and *jihad* appear as a religious reminders of limits, prohibitions, and duties for Muslims.

These micro-acts, seemingly isolated in time and space, express both an antagonistic engagement with the West and the reinforcement of an Islamic community, *umma*, guided by moral values of Islam. The centrality of moral values shapes the relations between religion and politics as well as individual and society in Islam. “The virtuous Muslim is Thus seen not as an autonomous individual who assents to a set of universalizable maxims but as an individual inhabiting the modal space shared by all who are together bound to God (the *umma*).”<sup>8</sup> Complex notions of both *jihad* (religious war)<sup>9</sup> and *shari’a* (religious norms and laws derived from Qur’an and the Sunnah — words and deeds of the Prophet), as manifestations of religious obedience to God, illustrates

the close linkages between the interiorization of religious morality and the community (*umma*) as a religious-political space. Neither *jihad* nor *shari'a* are confined exclusively to the realm of *ulema*, politics and the state. *Shari'a* is the foundation of an Islamic way of life. It governs every aspect of life from matters pertaining to ritual purity to questions related to interest-free banking and jurisprudence. Islamic religion is more about how one lives than what one believes. And the veiling of women as the most powerful meta-political icon contributes to the daily performance of Islamic morality, to the disciplining of self, body, and space in counterdistinction with the Western conceptions of the emancipatory self. The different manifestations of the veiling issue in different contexts, ranging from state enforcement (as in Iran), community pressure (as in the Egyptian case) to individual choice (as in Turkey), illustrate well the difficulty of differentiation between individual, community, and state enforcement in regard to religious issues.

The call for *jihad* entails both the meaning of making an effort on the path of God, ranging from a warrior military sense to a more moral version, encompassing individual interiorized effort, and community improvement. Martyrdom is associated with the warrior interpretation of *jihad* and the devotion to community's defense. However the suicide-attacks on September 11 inject a novel notion of martyrdom into the Muslim imaginary: There is no defense of any communal purpose, but a status to be achieved by the individual warrior and performed as a pure act of worship to please God, irrespective of God's specific command. Consequently martyrdom ends up blending into a new kind of

nihilism.<sup>10</sup> Martyrs themselves are uprooted as well; they are recruited from different regions and countries, illustrating both the global and de-territorialized feature of the Islamist action.<sup>11</sup>

#### **4. Twins and Mimetism**

The targets on September 11 were the Pentagon in Washington and the World Trade Center in New York. Both targets represent the international, outward-looking face of America, both military and economic. But in the last decades, financial capitalism rather than military domination stood for the expansionist power of the United States. No wonder that it is collapse of the twin towers, the temple for financial capitalism, which came to be the pictogram of September 11. It was not just the human lives lost or bodies that disappeared which shocked the public, but the images of the planes crushing one after another into the towers, the fire, silhouettes of human bodies jumping out of the buildings, and the collapse of the towers that caused a deep trauma for our visual and ethical memory.

The airplane and the skyscraper, respectively the arms and the target of the terrorists, were the two major technological symbols of the industrial era and therefore a little bit outdated in the digital/communication era. Both represented and facilitated human mobility, the sense of exploration, and the possibility for urban concentration. In today's information age, neither the planes nor the skyscrapers were subject to major innovations; we have reached the limits of speed and height: Or rather they have become so common,

so familiar that they could no longer be seen—until September 11, the day when both the airplanes and the skyscrapers turned into unfriendly, hostile sites for all.

The twin towers, when they were dedicated in 1973, were presented (and heavily criticized) as the hallmark of modern architecture, as the first buildings of the twenty-first century. The matrix of steel and glass invoked the modern aesthetic of transparency and solidity. They expressed the engineers' genius and their arrogance for overcoming natural limits. For the architect of the twin towers, Minoru Yamasaki, there was almost no limit of height: "It does not matter how high you go... what really matters in Manhattan is the scale near the ground."<sup>12</sup> As the tallest buildings, the twins imposed themselves as an (phallic) architectural icon in the New York skyline.

The twin towers no longer tell the world: "Divided we stand." Eric Darton, writing their biography in 1999, proposed to, almost prophetically, unbuild the towers from the landscape, that is, to make New York's Trade Center symbolically disappear from our perspective in order to get to know its history of construction, story by story. Indeed, what do the twin towers really stand for? What did the terrorists actually make disappear as an icon?

*That night, after the collapse of the twin towers, I did not want go to sleep. Not fear of insomnia, but fear of the next day. The next day was not promising to be a better day. I was anxious of awaking in a world which did not bear any promise for the future. The terrorists have attacked that linkage between a new and a better day; have attacked the faith in*

*work and progress, and foremost they have shattered the innocent pleasures of the routine of daily work.*

One Knows that the twin towers were office buildings, yet their architectural design made it nearly impossible to imagine that they were full of people, observed Eric Darton. The design of the World Trade Center did not give any indication of the purpose of the buildings. To the human eye, “trade towers disappeared as sites of human habitation.”<sup>13</sup> In a similar but tragic way, the terrorist attack on the September 11 made the bodies disappear both materially and visually. The buildings were crumpling under our gaze, but the death of so many thousands was not visible to the eye, remaining just an abstract figure. The media self-censorship caused either by respect for human dignity or for the invincibility of the “sole remaining” superpower was responsible for not showing human agony. We still had to realize that bodies had simply vanished and incinerated under steel, glass, and fire and that families of victims yearned for their loved-ones’ bodies for mourning. The disappearance of the bodies was counter-balanced by the daily publication of victims’ biographical profiles in the newspaper.<sup>14</sup>

Darton, writing before September 11, points out that there is a kindred spirit linking the apparently polar realms of skyscraper builder and the skyscraper terrorist: “To attempt creation or destruction on such an immense scale requires both bombers and master builders to view living processes in general, and social life in particular, with a high degree of abstraction. Both must undertake a radical distancing of themselves from the flesh and blood experience of mundane existence ‘on the ground.’” Darton quotes

Gaston Bachelard who, in the *Poetics of Space*, speaks of distancing oneself from the flesh and blood experience of ground life to manufacture a daydream, a reverie, separated from the restless world. The daydream world offers up the impression of domination at little cost.<sup>15</sup> September 11 entails a radical distancing from flesh and blood existence of ground life (by the very arms and targets, namely plane and high-rise buildings, it raises itself well above the ground-level). It manufactures a science-fictional dimension separated from the real world both for the suicide-attackers themselves and for the victims, as well as the victimized eyewitnesses. It shares a mimetic desire of domination with the skyscraper builder.

The profile of some of the victims and the terrorists have similarities: same thirty-something generation, high-tech education (the life stories of the victims suggest that those at the World Trade Center were on average less specialized in high-tech and financial skills than one thinks). Yet the centrality of work in the lives of the victims and the absence of a work-oriented life for these Muslim terrorists separated their experiences. The terrorist accomplishment (meaning also work) is mimetic in reverse; it invalidated the work of others, a work day was made to be worthless. September 11 attacked the innocent belief in and the optimism for the future anchored in the daily routine of work as an organizing category of our modern personality and lives.

In this contemporary myth of the Tower of Babel, the hubris of the builders who defied space competed with the hubris of those who despised the vanity of the human condition and waived the threat of a sacred punishment. Industrial

arrogance inspired by construction, science, and work, and terrorist arrogance sanctioned by destruction, religion, and death clashed.

On September 11, two towers were attacked by the two planes. Twin attacks against the twin towers.

## **5. Fearing Sameness and Quest for Purity**

The phobia for twins in traditional societies is common knowledge. Twins are feared and considered a punishment; physical resemblance is judged enigmatic because the disappearance of differences creates a problem of classification. The impurity of the sameness is feared to be contagious. And like all impurities, it attracts violence.<sup>16</sup> The relation between sexuality and violence is part of the common heritage of different religions. The twins, just like women and menstruation, are considered to be impure.<sup>17</sup>

The fear of impurity is revealed in the notes by the mastermind of the attacks, Mohammed Atta, that were left behind in the car that he used. A handwritten document in Arabic depicts in detail the religious prescription and the practical precautions to follow for achieving the unity of body and spirit and for succeeding at his last mission. The text specifies that the plan should be examined; that the suitcase, the clothes, the knife, the tickets, the passport should be checked; that the clothes should be tightened as the righteous predecessors have done in preparation for a battle: that a ritual washing should take place; that excess hair should be shaved from the body, and perfume applied to it in order to purify the body and the spirit.<sup>18</sup> The testimony of Moham-

med Atta expresses overtly the fanatical fear of impurity from contamination by women and sexuality: “The one who will wash my body should wear gloves so that my genital parts should not be touched.” It adds: “I don’t want pregnant women or a person who is not clean to come and say goodbye to me because I don’t approve of it. (...) I don’t want any women to go to my funeral or later to my grave.”

The phobia for women and twins mirrors the reaction engendered by proximity with that which is impure and with sameness. Sameness creates a problem for the contemporary Muslim world (read Muslim men). Modern society is a society of uniformization and homogenization of experience; it is worked out by the principle of equality. Equality has an unintentional consequence of creating (twin-like) “sameness.” The aspiration for an egalitarian and democratic life has as its consequence the disappearance of hierarchies and frontiers between men and women, the old and the young, and between the cultural and the natural. The religious certainty anchored in the territory of nature (geographical, biological, and corporal) is shattered by industrial, medical, and genetic inventions. Women are at the center of these transformations; both in relation to cultural values and to bodily experiences. As women reconstruct their identity in regard to cultural criticism and gender consciousness, the differences between the cultural and the natural, the private and the public, the feminine and the masculine are blurred. The interchangeability of roles, clothes, and spaces between sexes become ordinary practices. The values of the modern world cherish borrowings, and the multiplicity of identities. Modernity has an inescapable, in-

evitable dimension; it spreads out globally, it becomes a model of reference by seduction, contamination, multiplication, and cloning. The twin posture of the towers, according to some critics, exemplified a coercive, antidemocratic, and pernicious form of late capitalist extreme repetition, “the threat of insane multiplication.”<sup>19</sup> There exists one “World Trade Center” building in every big city of the world. And the Muslim world is far from making an exception. In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia exists a replica of the twin towers.

The closeness between the Muslim world and modernity, like the intimacy between men and women, is a nodal point around which tensions are built. It is not the “choc” of difference and distance, but on the contrary, the closeness and intimacy which are at the origin of these tensions. Islam, especially that of the Middle East by its closeness to and ties with Europe—by means of geography, monotheism, voluntary modernization, colonization, and immigration—reveals most dramatically the problem of “small difference” and fear of sameness. Islamism is a collective and conflictual expression of this involuntary yet intimate encounter with modernity.

Contemporary Islamism is based on a double movement and tension: antagonistic posture with modernity and de-traditionalization of religion. Radical Islamism does not subscribe to the traditional interpretations of religion; Islamist discourse is simplistic, anachronistic, cut off from its referential context of the Qur’an. Islamism operates as a sort of ideological amalgam between different schools of Islam, national cultures, and popular customs. The authority of the religious hierarchy (*ulema*) for interpreting religious

texts and jurisprudence is disregarded and faces erosion because of the democratization-cum-vulgarization of religious idiom. Laypersons who speak the language of Islam without institutional authority of religious schools and knowledge find legitimacy in their activism. Activism and terrorism provide, or rather impose, a new source of legitimacy for Islamic idiom. Who will decide what is licit and illicit in Islam? Who has the authority over the interpretation of religious texts? Who can give a *fatwa* and declare a *jihad*? These questions all become very problematic as Islam is de-traditionalized in the hands of Islamism in particular, and in the face of the modern secular world in general.

The marriage between the Taliban movement and bin Laden seems a mis-fit when one considers the distance of the first and the familiarity of the second in regard to the modern world. But the quest for Islamic purity implies separations both from women and modernity. The question of women is pivotal for the antagonistic engagement of Islamists with modernity. The Taliban movement is the most fanatic expression of the phobia of women, and the most radical attempt of seclusion of women in their bodies, in the interior space of the home. One cannot forbid modernity without forbidding women. "The Forbidden Modern"<sup>20</sup> implies this intrinsic relation between modernity and women. In the backstage of September 11, the seclusion of women is carried out, while the engineer-hijackers occupied the front stage.

Islamic veiling is a reminder of difference; a curtain, a boundary-maintenance between men and women, between interior and public exterior spaces, Islam and modernity.

But at the same time, Islamic women make their way into spaces of modernity, acquire public visibility and socialize with men. They become active members of a political movement, participate in public life, have access to higher education, pursue professional careers. This paradox constitutes the central knot in view of the orientation of Islamism in general and of women in particular. Islamist engineers and veiled women reveal the tensions between rationality and faith, veiling and public visibility.<sup>21</sup> The recognition of this tension opens up a realm of self-reflexivity and creative conflictuality. The denial leads to ideological dogmatism and destructive antagonism.

The central question addressed to Islamists in particular to the Muslim world in general is to know the ways in which they can come to terms with their own experience of modernity. Because modernity is more and more an intrinsic value and lived practice. September 11 was meant to express a radical antimodernity, but by the same token its actors have confessed to their being close to modernity. The “neo-martyrs,”<sup>22</sup> the de-traditionalized actors of the Muslim world, in destroying the most troublesome symbols of modernity, the twin towers, have destroyed their own twins. They have mutilated themselves, as they have mutilated their women. They have pushed Muslims to mourn their own modernity.

In other terms, Islamism expresses the ambivalence between being both “Muslim and Modern,” or rather expresses a double negation, being “neither Muslim nor Modern,” and thereby intensifies the unresolved tension between Islam and modernity. September 11 put a cathartic

and tragic end to this tension. The fear of the sameness of modernity led them to search for purity through a destructive performance and to exorcize the modern in themselves.

## **6. Appearance Through Disappearance: Islam Erupting in Public**

On September 11, the vulnerability of the United States was revealed. Thus the Americans tragically joined the rest of the world.<sup>23</sup> The city of New York was just like any city in the world, chaotic, crowded, and in ruins: “Lower Manhattan was like a city after an earthquake (...) Wall Street executives were wandering like the homeless. Streets like Kinshasa. Rubble like Beirut or the West Bank.”<sup>24</sup> The pre-modern Taliban movement enters the stage of modern history with bin Laden-engineered terrorism. The United States and Afghanistan, one highly controlled and protected and the other totally abandoned to terrorism, meet one another in the same cycle and the coeval time of a globalized world. Globalization was furthermore accelerated as the most distanced in time, place, and civilization were brought together, and not always without anxiety nor confrontation. In particular the juxtaposition of images from New York and Kabul, and furthermore those of George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden, created a kind of surreal yet an embarrassing collage.<sup>25</sup>

September 11 had an unintended consequence, namely the appearance of Islam on the global stage. Since then, Islam is more than ever present in the transnational public sphere. “Islam” is teleported to the center of the collective

imaginary. Islam, until then identified as a political issue and confined to the Middle East and to Europe, made its entry into the American consciousness. The mosque gained public recognition with the visit of President Bush. Hitherto unknown Qatar Television channel Al Jazeera acquired global visibility.

*I heard myself egoistically saying that I was going to lose the only relatively neutral public, namely the American public, for the reception of my work on Islam. Islam making its entry in the American public consciousness will most probably mean extension and multiplication of stereotype images and prejudiced arguments—leading to yet another missed opportunity for a dialogical relation between Islam and the West.*

Islam, until now absent from globalization, becomes its active agent. Ironically, the interest in knowing and taming Islam increases the exchanges among different national publics and accelerates the creation of a transnational public sphere. Either interconnectivity between different national publics are intensified or news one are launched. The French newspaper *Le Monde* published for the first time articles in English from the *New York Times*; the Turkish daily *Radikal* systematically published in translation selected articles of opinion-leaders and intellectuals from all over the world. Some of the experts or spokespersons of Islam circulate constantly among different national publics and television programs. Western languages are now familiar with the Islamic idiom (*jihad*, *fatwa* are used in daily language); the books on Islam enter into the mainstream market. Islam has

become an active agent in the circulation of ideas, commodities, and people. Debating Islam enforces the expansion of the global frontiers of the public, media and market.

On the one hand, the martyrdom which aimed at purity ends up, albeit unintentionally, mixing and breeding Islam into the modern consciousness. On the other hand, the presence of Islam on the front stage of history defies and deconstructs the monocivilizational definitions of modernity.

Indeed, Islam and Modernity have never come so close.

## Notes

1. Hassan Mneimneh and Kanan Makiya, "Manual for a 'Raid,'" *New York Review of Books*, January 17, 2002.
2. Reinhart Koselleck, *Le futur passé: contribution à la sémantique futur des temps historiques*, translated from German by Jochen Hoock and Marie-Claire Hoock, Paris, EHESS Press, 1990.
3. David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer, and Benjamin*, Cambridge, UK, Polity, 1985, p. 6.
4. Jacques Revel, "Micro-analyse et construction du social," in *Jeux d'échelles: la micro-analyse à l'expérience*, Revel, ed., Paris, Gallimard-Seuil, 1996.
5. Such a perspective on anger and injustice is not exclusively developed by social scientists, but also by literary figures. See for example the article written by the novelist Orhan Pamuk, "The Anger of the Damned," *New York Review of Books*, November 15, 2001.
6. *Sign Posts* is the title of a book written by an Egyptian radical Islamist, Sayyid Qotb, which became the most popular blueprint for radicalization of political Islam and was widely read among the Islamist youth of all Muslim countries during the 1970s.
7. Michel Wieviorka, "Reflexions sur le 11 Septembre et ses suites," in *Confluences Méditerranée*, n. 40, 2001-2002, p. 27-40.

8. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, Baltimore and London, John Hopkins University Press, 1993, p. 219.
9. For a detailed analysis of Jihad, both as an outcome of history and doctrine, cf. Alfred Morabia, *Le Jihad dans l'Islam medieval*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1993.
10. H. Mnemneh, and K. Makiya, *op. cit.*
11. Michel Wieviorka, *op. cit.*
12. Eric Darton, *Divided We Stand: a Biography of New York's World Trade Center*, New York, Basic Books, 1999, p. 219.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
14. Under the rubric "Portraits of Grief" in *The York Times*.
15. Darton, *op. cit.*, p. 119.
16. René Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, Paris, Bernard Grasset, 1972, p. 59-88.
17. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an Analyses of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.
18. H. Mnemneh, and K. Makiya, *op. cit.*; and *Le Monde*, October 2, 2001.
19. Darton, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
20. The title of my book, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996.
21. Nilüfer Göle, "Ingénieurs islamistes et étudiantes voilées en Turquie," *Intellectuels et militants de l'Islam contemporain*, Gilles Kepel and Yann Richard, eds. Paris, Seuil, 1990.
22. A term used by Farhad Khosrokhavar, "Les nouveaux martyrs d'Allah," *Le Monde*, October 2, 2001.
23. Dick Howard, "Quand l'Amérique rejoint tragiquement le monde," in *Esprit*, Paris, October 2001.
24. Richard Powers, "The Smile," *New York Times*, September 23, 2001.
25. Reminding us of the photography work of Guy Peellaert. See Guy Peellaert and Nik Cohn, *20th Century Dreams*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.