Georges Corm, Pour une lecture profane des conflits. Sur le «retour du religieux» dans les conflits contemporains du Moyen-Orient
(In favour of a secular reading of conflicts. ‘The return of the religious’ in contemporary Middle Eastern conflicts)

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In his book Pour une lecture profane des conflits Georges Corm, an economist, historian, geo-politician and former Lebanese Finance Minister, invites the reader to an in-depth discussion of the war logics that have torn the Middle East since the end of the Cold War. He condenses, as such, the content of previous works on the dynamics of contemporary conflicts in this region by questioning binary and simplistic explanations that make use of the debilitating thesis of the clash of civilisations and the pervasiveness of Islam, commonly associated with transnational Islamist terrorism, essential sources of conflicts. Against binary and caricatured approaches of the world, Corm advocates a multifactor analysis that takes into account economic, demographic, political, historical, geographic, geopolitical and cultural parameters. In this respect, he draws upon previous analysis and provides a key to understanding the mechanisms that, since 1990, have hampered opposition to unjust wars and objective thinking of reality and its complexities. For example, he examines the power of media and academic representations of an imagined ‘return to religion;’ the manipulation of memory and history; the exploitation of alleged political and religious values to create conflict; the perverse relationship between the geopolitical interests of states and their claim to defend religious ideals; and the selective application of international law to conflict situations. He therefore places an emphasis on the need for a profane, secular reading of conflicts, as opposed to ‘civilisational fanaticism.’

Through personal and rigorous reflection, Corm highlights the manipulation of history and memory and notes a change of era: the time when Communist subversion encouraged by Moscow was condemned in the West, and class struggle and anti-imperialism were celebrated in the East, has given way to religious, ethnic and tribal conflicts. This form of interpretation has acquired a new level of credence since American political scientist Samuel Huntington popularised the notion of a ‘clash of civilisations’ in the early 1990s, using differences in cultural, religious and moral values to explain international crises. According to Corm, Huntington revived the obsolescent dichotomy between the Aryan world, supposedly civilised and refined, and the Semitic world, considered anarchic and violent. For him, this invocation
of racist 'values' encouraged a resurgence of primary identities that successive waves of modernisation had pushed back. Corm suggests that the phenomena of globalisation, the homogenisation of lifestyles and consumption patterns, and the social upheavals caused by neoliberalism, have enabled the mobilisation of public opinions on an international scale, much helped by academic traditions and the cultural essentialism inherited from colonialism.

If, as the thesis tells us, both secular liberalism and socialist ideology have vanished, conflicts are being reduced to their anthropological and cultural dimension. Few journalists and academics are now concerned with maintaining a classical framework of political science, making use of the multiple secular factors of conflict as well as the ambition of political leaders, neo-imperial structures and the search for recognition that emanates from regional Powers.

As a general rule, the presentation of a conflict ignores the variety of factors that led to its outbreak. It merely distinguishes good and bad players and caricatures the issues at stake. The protagonists will thus be designated by their ethnic, religious and community affiliations, which assume homogeneity of opinion and behaviour within those groups. The inherent weaknesses of this type of analysis are observable in analyses of the last phase of the Cold War: for example parties to the conflict in Lebanon from 1975 to 1990 were classified as Christians and Muslims. Most caricatured presentations downplayed the fact that many Christians belonged to the anti-imperialist and anti-Israeli alliance supporting the right for Palestinians to conduct operations against Israel from Lebanon, while many Muslims were hostile to the Palestinians.

During the same period, further manipulation of religious identities occurred. The war in Afghanistan, which followed the Soviet invasion in December 1979, led to a mobilisation of Islam against atheist invaders, overshadowing the national dimension of resistance. Thousands of young Muslims of all nationalities, yet predominantly Arab, were trained and radicalised under American, Saudi and Pakistani patronage, creating a favourable environment for the development of international Islamism and jihad. Indeed, Corm identifies five events that helped demolish a secular vision of international relations: one, the success of Saudi Wahhabism and the creation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1924 which used its economic power to disseminate an uncompromising puritanical vision of Islam; two, Muslim secession from India in 1947, which gave birth to the religious state of Pakistan; three, the creation of Israel in which initial socialist Zionism was supplanted by religious Zionism; four, the creation, in 1969 under the impetus of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, with the goal of defeating both the Non-Aligned Movement and Arab nationalism; and five, the Iranian revolution of 1979 when, for the first time, the religious elite controlled civilian power. Georges Corm recalls that these religious states – Israel, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan – are allies of the United States and Europe for obvious geopolitical reasons, and that Iran’s Islamic revolution was first backed by Washington and Western Powers, which assumed Iran would become a faithful partner, and just as resolutely anti-Soviet as the others. This was a major geopolitical misunderstanding.

Subsequently, the analytical focus changed. The anti-imperialist and pro-Palestinian policy of Tehran was denounced as Shiite, anti-Western and subversive, as opposed to moderate Sunnism. Generating a rivalry between Sunnis and Shia, and between Arabs and Persians incidentally – a trap which Saddam Hussein rushed into
by attacking Iran in 1980 – became a major concern for the United States, more so after the failure of their invasion of Iraq in 2003, which ultimately led to increased Iranian influence. A whole political and media literature today invokes the danger represented by an expanding Shiite crescent consisting of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, attempting to destabilise Sunni Islam and willing to destroy Israel through state terrorism. Literature fails to note that the partial conversion of Iran to Shiite Islam dates only to the sixteenth century and that it was encouraged by the Safavid dynasty to oppose Ottoman expansionism. It also ignores that Iran has always been a major regional power and that its regime pursues the same policy of grandeur as the Shah did, but under new trappings and with stronger nuclear ambitions. Despite such secular historical data, everything in the Middle East is still analysed in terms of 'Sunnis' and 'Shia.'

With the Arab uprisings of 2011, the game of simplification has continued. In Bahrain, demonstrators were described as 'Shia' manipulated by Iran against 'Sunni' rulers. This simplification overlooks the fact that many Shiite citizens supported the ruler, while many Sunnis sympathised with the cause of opponents. In Yemen, the Houthi rebellion and its supporters have also been seen as Shiites under exclusive influence of Iran. In Lebanon, in spite of the objections that it generated within the Shiite community, and, conversely, the popularity that it gained among Muslims and Christians of many denominations, including Sunnis, Hezbollah remains considered a mere instrument in the hands of Iranian ambitions. There is no mention of the fact that this party was formed under Israeli occupation, between 1978 and 2000; an occupation that would have persisted without its resistance. Moreover, the fact that Hamas in Gaza is a pure Sunni phenomenon, derived from the Muslim Brotherhood, hardly disturbs the analysts who support moderate Sunnism. In other words, nuance is absent and situations of oppression or socio-economic marginality are largely ignored. The hegemonic ambitions of conflicting parties do not exist: there are only benevolent and evil powers. Communities with diverse opinions and behaviours are characterised by means of hollow anthropological and cultural generalities, stereotyped essentialism, even though they have lived for centuries in a strong socio-economic and cultural interpenetration.

New concepts have replaced traditional discourses: in the West, 'Judeo-Christian' values have succeeded the secular invocation of 'Greco-Roman' roots. Similarly, the promotion of 'Muslim' values, characteristics and customs have taken over anti-imperialist claims of secular Arab nationalism, which had long dominated regional politics. Now, the individualistic and democratic values that the West claims to represent are seen as opposed to the allegedly holistic, patriarchal and tribal values of the East: for example European sociologists found that Buddhist societies would never accede to industrial capitalism, based on the values of Protestantism. Thus, the Palestinian question is no longer perceived as a national war of liberation, which could be resolved through the creation of a single country where all would live on equal footing. It is considered a Muslim refusal of Jewish presence in Palestine and therefore, for many good minds, a sign of obstinate anti-Semitism. Whether in Tibet, Xinjiang, the Philippines, the Caucasus, Burma, Mali, former Yugoslavia or Ireland, can all these conflicts be seen as a confrontation of religious values? Or are they, on the contrary, secular, that is to say anchored in a social reality?

The exploitation of identities in the game of large and small powers is as old as the world. It had been thought that modern politics and principles would permanently
install secularism in international life and in the relations among states, but it has not. Indeed, certain states have gone so far as to become the spokespersons of transnational religions, especially regarding the three great monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). Corm shows, in this regard, how the hegemonic ambitions of states are wrongly analysed using the prism of religious wars; how a number of states play the religious card to legitimise their ambitions of power, influence and expansion; and how some use religion to justify the non-observation of human rights as defined by the UN. As for the sanctions applied to violators of international law, they also vary in a significant way: severe punishments imposed by the international community in some cases (Iraq, Iran, and Libya) and total absence of reprimand in others (Israel and the United States).

To conclude, Corm calls the West to a more subtle and non-sectarian analysis of the Arab and Muslim world and asks the Arab and Muslim world to work for more freedom of conscience and interpretation of sacred texts as a precondition of secularism. The manipulation of religion for political purposes has crushed entire populations: before the Arab revolution, authoritarian rulers used the fear of radical Islam to ensure the support of Western countries, while displaying a facade of religiosity meant to appease their domestic public opinions. The manipulation of several uprisings by radical Islamist insurgents shows the danger of such collusion between political power and religion. Bringing an end to such exploitation and to simplistic views that hide the secular nature of conflict is, for G. Corm, a critical necessity.