# *Book Reviews*

## Secularism Confronts Islam

*Olivier Roy, trans. George Holoch*
*New York and Chichester, UK: Columbia University Press, 2007, 128 pages.*

This work by a leading French Islamicist is both an analysis of Islam, secularism, and society in Europe, as well as a prescription for its leaders on how to "correct" their wrongheaded policies with regard to their Muslim minorities based on this analysis. This might seem unduly arrogant on Olivier Roy's part, but his past landmark books do seem to commend the perspicacity of his views on the subject, and most of all, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Harvard University Press: 1994) and *Globalized Islam: The Search for the New Umma* (Hurst: 2004).

On one level, Roy is focused on France: how one might begin to mitigate the polarization of the French elites in the wake of forbidding the veil in public places and the violence of the 2005 riots in the poorest – mostly Muslim – suburbs of Paris. Indeed, the first chapter is devoted to the historical roots of France's virulent version of state-enforced secularism (*laïcité*). But on another level, this is a work rich in theoretical analysis, widening its insights to Britain and the United States and their "common law" version of *laïcité*, as well as providing a new theory to the sociology of religion.

The intensity of the French debate raises important questions. "The campaign of Islamophobia we are witnessing today is involved in the reshaping of the French political and intellectual landscape" (p. 2). How so? The Christian Right and the Extreme Right's suspicion of Islam is now shared by a sizable portion of the Left, which has reacted with fear to the French Muslim community's new and outspoken rhetoric. School girls want to wear the veil out of pride. And this new Islamic discourse has been promoted both by the "bearded Salafist preacher" and the suave intellectual embodied by Tariq Ramadan.

Roy argues that in the face of French hardcore secularism, born of the historical struggle against the Catholic Church, we are now witnessing the

emergence of a religiosity that is common to many other parts of the world. This is the "fundamentalism" he described in *Globalized Islam* that is perhaps best understood when observing the phenomenal growth of Protestant Pentecostalism across the globe. What these movements have in common is a communitarian ethos on religious grounds, an exclusivism sharply dividing believer from unbeliever, and a commitment to surrender all aspects of life to God's dictates.

It is doubly "globalized" in that it is not only found everywhere but it is also postcultural, that is, a creed and cult divorced from the trappings of its original culture. Both individualistic and communitarian (one chooses to join a community as an individual), it is a form of religiosity eminently well-adapted to globalization, and therefore not amenable to the kinds of state controls the French Jacobin state would like to impose upon it. Economic liberalism, expanding civil society, the growing influence of supranational bodies, and massive population flows – all of these factors both weaken the traditional modern state and favor the rise and spread of this religious revival, whether Orthodox Judaism, Islam, Protestant and Catholic charismatics, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the like.

In truth, the French assimilationist model of state erasure of all intermediary bodies (*laïcité*) or the multiculturalist model of the United Kingdom, much of Europe, and North America are both in crisis today. The French model attempts to dictate what the citizen's values will be (hence no religious identity markings in the public square), whereas the multiculturalists allow citizens to relate to the state through their primary membership in a cultural and/or religious community. Second- or third-generation French Muslims protest that they are second-class citizens and, moreover, that they are not allowed to be publicly identified as Muslims. Yet while a minority among these same populations in the United Kingdom or the Netherlands become increasingly radical (an extreme case being the assassination of filmmaker Theo Van Gogh in 2004 by a Dutch-born Muslim of Moroccan origin), Muslims in general are experiencing a strong political backlash.

Leaving aside his analysis of France's recent suburban violence (it has nothing to do with Islam and everything to do with economic and political marginalization), another key insight in this book drawn from the sociology of religion is that there is no necessary causal connection between theology and social behaviors. Thus for western governments to try and manipulate Muslim sentiment by promoting liberal interpretations ("Islam needs a reformation!") is both useless and self-defeating. It will only reinforce the majority position that continues to head in a more conservative direction. But just

as the Catholic Church in France was forced into submission politically through the 1905 law (the clergy was still monarchist at heart) and gradually made its peace with the secular state (Vatican II is a fruit of that), so will the most conservative Muslim communities in the West. Ramadan's promotion of a "western Islam" and the ruling Turkish Islamist Refah Party's support for the secular Turkish state are eloquent proof thereof. Political practice precedes a reworking of theology, not the other way around.

The Turkish case study reveals another of Roy's central points: *laïcité* as a state-sponsored program must be distinguished from secularization, the gradual process by which the religious fervor of the masses tends to cool over time. The first, at least in its authoritarian version, is failing and must be rethought; the second will continue to spawn many forms of revivalist fundamentalism – the attempt to re-create a space in which the individual can live out his/her faith in every area of life. But in so doing, religious communities all over the world, including the Muslim *ummah*, have "bowed to new configurations, from territorial detachment to individualization, not so much of theological reform as because [they have] learned to live as a minority" (p. 102).

The few typographical errors ("communitarization" on pp. 28 and 30 morphs into the more felicitous term "communitarianization" from p. 32 on) take nothing away from the great importance of Roy's analysis in this compact book. Like other religions coping with the deterritorialization of traditional religious space, Islam is being reconfigured to fit its new globalized context. Theology has begun and will continue to take stock of this fact.

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