

## BOOK REVIEWS

OLIVIER ROY, *Secularism Confronts Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). Pp. 144. \$25.50 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

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In this recent book, the French scholar of contemporary Islam Olivier Roy takes up one of the most debated questions within Europe today: how should European states (France in particular) respond to the forms of politics and religion practiced by the growing number of Muslim immigrants within their borders? Although there are many books that take up this topic, Roy frames the issue in a particularly useful manner, one that merits attention. Instead of asking what is intrinsic to Islam that presents a problem in relation to norms of European social and political life, or European values, as many have tended to pose the question, Roy focuses his inquiry on the principles and practices of French secular governance as they bear on the regulation of religious expression in general and on Islam in particular. This approach has two benefits: first, it leads Roy to examine how the problem of religion is constructed differently in relation to different forms of secularism—from state-centered *laïcité* to secularization as social transformation. As he convincingly argues, it is important to grasp such distinctions if we are to understand some of the distinct ways religion becomes politicized within secular-liberal states. Second, Roy explores how emerging forms of religiosity tied to economic globalization present a unique challenge for French-style *laïcité* while furthering processes of secularization through their emphasis on individual choice and on drawing a sharp boundary between religion and politics.

It is unfortunate that the analysis presented in *Secularism Confronts Islam* falls far short of its promise. One part of the problem has to do with Roy's uncritical adoption of the ideological standpoint of the French state. The possibility that the marginalization experienced by Muslim immigrants in France might be due in some part to institutionalized discrimination, to forms of racial or religious exclusion rooted in French society, is never even posed as a question. Criticisms of the French state are limited to its strategic policies, misjudgments in the state's attempt to manage its Muslim populations. By focusing the analysis entirely around the question of how European states should regulate their Muslim minorities, Roy excludes from his analytic purview any inquiry into how French secular liberalism might generate its own forms of violence and exclusion in ways that prevent Muslim immigrants from participating fully in society. In accord with this standpoint, all responsibility for the weakness and marginality of Muslims within French civic and political life must be seen to lie with Muslims themselves. Note that this is not an observation about a personal bias in Roy's approach but a critique of the analytical framework he adopts, one grounded in the ideological imperatives of the secular-liberal state.

We see the force this framework exerts on the analysis in the way Roy naturalizes the nation as the true site of identity and belonging while criticizing those forms of religion and sociability that do not map onto the space of the nation as distortions engendered by

globalizing forces. This is evident, for example, in Roy's treatment of the categories "religion" and "culture." He writes: "On the one hand, there is culture—that is, in the anthropological sense—the entirety of the ways of thinking and acting characteristic of a society. Religion exists only through a culture, which may be perceived as ethnic. In this case, religion has to do with ethnicity, customs, traditions" (p. 9). Here and throughout the book, religion is dematerialized and dehistoricized, assigned the status of a set of abstract principles or rules without historical agency or efficacy. It is only via the medium of culture—a key category of modern nationalism—that religion, according to Roy, achieves concrete historical form. In this normative argument, religion should seamlessly coincide with, and contribute to, national culture. It is not surprising that Roy's prescriptions for how the French state should address its Muslim minorities all focus on the task of territorializing Islamic religious practices within the fabric of the French nation.

Moreover, it is precisely when religion becomes detached from its cultural moorings that, according to Roy, it becomes what he labels "fundamentalism" or "neofundamentalism": "Making an apologia for the loss of cultural identity as a preliminary condition for the attainment of a pure faith, Christian (essentially Protestant) and Islamic (in the form of Salafism) *neofundamentalism* affects populations that feel they have been uprooted or have lost their cultural identity or both, and it supplies them with compensation for that loss" (pp. 74–75). The claim that contemporary Islamic movements should be seen as providing psychological compensation for those suffering the alienating effects of rapid modernization—that is, culture loss—is an old one. However, Roy's argument entails more than this. Fundamentalism in this account results from the attempt by Muslims (and Christians) who have "experienced a loss of cultural identity" to construct a "pure religion." The idea that Islamic fundamentalism might be considered a religious form purified of culture is intriguing but ultimately untenable. Don't so-called fundamentalists eat certain foods, organize their family life in certain ways, and practice certain methods for getting their children to sleep? Of course to answer such questions, we would need to know what people actually do, a kind of account entirely lacking in Roy's book. Indeed, the description of fundamentalism Roy provides remains highly abstract such that it is extremely difficult to imagine anyone who might qualify. For example, Roy notes that one defining characteristic of modern fundamentalism lies in a tendency to sanctify everyday life by "placing everything under the sign of religion" (p. 79). How do Muslims who undertake this effort actually live? The only sense we are given for how this attitude may shape one's life is provided in a footnote to Tariq Ramadan in which Ramadan states that even mundane acts can be considered holy when done with a remembrance of God. Although it would be interesting to explore the ethical and theological implications of this comment, we might also note that Tariq Ramadan, by most accounts, leads a daily life very similar to that of other European public intellectuals (albeit with greater travel restrictions). So in what sense does his life exemplify the sort of fundamentalist tendency Roy identifies? In short, by leaving out of his account any description of how people live, where they work, how they educate their children, and so on, Roy leaves us with little more than a straw figure.

By failing to put into question the secular-liberal framework he adopts, Roy's analysis remains tethered to the biases and sensibilities of bourgeois culture, including its moral preference for a highly intellectualized notion of religion. This standpoint finds expression in his treatment of the forms of Islamic knowledge and practice prevalent among the popular classes of the banlieu: "the second generation of French Muslims is not buying an intellectual and complex Islam for many reasons (the most important being that they want to experience immediately a total Islam that has the answers to everything)" (p. 99). Because he views Islam as a scholarly tradition, Roy sees all contemporary popular Islamic forms as debasements, an Islam of "tinkerers" (p. 82), as he dismissively describes them. It is not surprising that when Roy comes around to providing a concrete description of the "culture" that fundamentalists

supposedly reject in favor of their “pure religion,” it turns out to be European bourgeois culture: “fine arts, novels, music” (p. 74). In short, although this book starts as an analysis of French public discourse on Islam, in the end it reads more as a symptom of that discourse.

USSAMA MAKDISI, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008). Pp. 262. \$35.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

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What makes *Artillery of Heaven* so compelling a read is that it has all the drama and immediacy of a film thriller while never sacrificing the nuances of context or the complexities of historical analysis. Ussama Makdisi manages to take five years in the life of Asʿad Shidyāq—a Maronite who converted to an evangelical Christianity in 1825, only to find himself detained and tortured by the Maronite Church—and renders a vibrant account of 19th-century American “missionary warfare” in the Middle East as it played out in the life of a soul-searching young man. Yet, the import of *Artillery of Heaven* is far greater than this would suggest, for it is through a detailed analysis of the ways in which Asʿad’s life was subsequently written *about*—by missionaries, Maronites, and Arab moderns—that Makdisi succeeds in recasting the missionary encounter as inherently plural and fraught rather than a singular, unidirectional imposition of modern values.

In insisting upon this plural vision, Makdisi is responding to a long-standing tendency, among Western historians of mission and Arab historians of the *nahḍa*, to adopt a parochial view of the 19th-century missionary encounter in the Middle East. Whether this parochial view was a function of language limitations and the seductiveness of missionary biography, as with the mission historians, or of a nationalistic impulse to deemphasize sectarian identities, as with the *nahḍa* historians, Makdisi aspires instead to a “transnational” approach. This is an approach concerned as much with Boston and Istanbul as with Mount Lebanon and one that accordingly takes advantage of the great variety of sources available on Asʿad’s life, whether missionary journals, the Maronite Patriarch’s admonitions, or the young man’s own reflections on his predicament.

The result is a resolutely ambitious and largely successful effort to understand Asʿad’s story as a place where, in Makdisi’s words, two “antithetical readings of the world” converged (p. 5). *Artillery of Heaven* dwells at length in its opening chapters upon how 19th-century American missionary attitudes were informed by encounters in earlier centuries with American native peoples—missionaries dispatched to the Middle East understood themselves as benevolent agents of the Lord whose success evangelizing abroad might redeem earlier failures in evangelizing at home. Set alongside this analysis of the missionary worldview is an analysis of contemporaneous Maronite visions of social order, which cast the missionary enterprise as blasphemous and heretical and thereby sought to preserve the hierarchical relationships of power that characterized the 19th-century Levant.

According to *Artillery of Heaven*, from the crucible of missionary–Maronite conflict—which resulted in Asʿad’s death in 1830 at the age of thirty-two—emerged “unanticipated consequences.” Foremost among these was “a liberal attempt to reconcile cultures” (p. 14), embodied by the key *nahḍa* figure Butrus al-Bustani. Al-Bustani is perhaps best known for his literary efforts, having assembled pioneering modern Arabic dictionaries and encyclopedias. The book draws attention, instead, to al-Bustani’s account of Asʿad’s life, which he published