

The International Spectator 4/2004

Book Reviews and Notes

What Future for Political Islam?

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Globalised Islam : the search for a new Ummah / Olivier Roy. - [English ed.] with revisions and updating. - London : C. Hurst & Co., 2004. - xi, 349 p. (The CERJ series in comparative politics and international studies). - ISBN 1-85065-593-6; 1-85065-598-7 (pbk)

In his recent book – an updated and enlarged version of the previous French edition, *L'Islam mondialisé* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2002) – the distinguished French scholar Olivier Roy tackles the ways in which the relationship of Muslims to Islam is reshaped by globalisation, Westernisation and the impact of living as a minority in the West.

The book is the sequel to Roy's previous ground-breaking work *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), the main argument of which was that the conceptual

framework of Islamist parties was unable to provide an effective blueprint for an Islamic state. As a consequence of this failure, Roy argued, Islamist movements were running out of steam as a revolutionary force and had reached a cross-road: either political normalisation within the framework of the modern nation-state as in fact has happened in Turkey and Jordan; or evolution towards a new form of fundamentalism that promotes a closed, scripturalist and conservative view of Islam, rejecting the nationalist and statist dimension in favour of a deterritorialised idea of the Ummah, the universal community of all muslims based on *sharia*.

Roy's new book takes the argument forward by focusing on this latter trend which Roy calls post-Islamism or globalised Islam. Thanks to emigration, one third of the world's Muslims now live as

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members of a minority, many of them in Western countries. This has produced, Roy argues, a 'deterritorialisation' of Islam: trying to create an Islamic state makes no sense for groups that are minorities and will remain so for decades to come.

Change is equally affecting Muslims in Muslim countries. Westernisation is an inevitable trend and even where there is a backlash against it, the usual aim is not to return to some golden pre-modern age, but to Islamise modernity.

Roy quite rightly opposes the idea that the problems of the contemporary Muslim world can be explained in terms of Islam. He is amused by the soaring sales of the Koran in the West after 9/11 because "the key question is not what the Koran really says, but what Muslims say the Koran says". "Not surprisingly, they [Muslims] disagree while all stressing that the Koran is clear-cut. The issue here is not Islam as a theological corpus, but the discourses and practice of Muslims."

A new form of religiosity is emerging which is much more the product of Western conceptions and culture than of Middle Eastern traditional society. Roy in fact highlights how 'born-again Muslims' or neo-fundamentalists resemble their Protestant counterparts in their focus on the individual and on self-realisation rather than on the community.

As Roy states, neo-fundamentalism is a "state of mind", an 'intellectual matrix' that can be manifested in various and different political attitudes. In Muslim countries, most of the new classes emerging from liberalisation would now support a soft-Islamisation or new forms

of individualistic religiosity and reject the social implication of an Islamic revolution, while sustaining privatisation and the free market. Islamist parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or the Refa Partisi in Turkey are therefore transformed into normal conservative parties, leaving behind them the utopia of the Islamic state and embracing the Western ideas of political reform and democracy.

International radical groups of the *al Qaida* type represent a different political trend, but are also the product of Westernisation. Most of the known *al Qaida* members are either Muslims living in the West or anyway cut off from their respective societies and families, for instance through the experience of *jihad* war in Afghanistan or Bosnia.

In Roy's view, the logic and the praxis of international *jihad* is closer to radical leftist and Third Worldist groups than to what can be found in Islamic tradition. *Al Qaida* cannot be explained with Middle Eastern conflicts, but has to be linked to the fact that the fault-line between Europe and the Third World goes through Muslim countries and Muslims are also the majority of people experiencing new form of social exclusion in the European *banlieu*. "Islam, after the disappearance of the extreme left", Roy remarks, "is one of the few discourses of political contestation available on the market." Yet, Roy remarks, *al Qaida* does not have a long-term strategy and does not pose a strategic threat to the West, but it is – like other radical groups before it – more of a security problem. In this perspective, the war against terror is inherently wrong: international

terrorism cannot be defeated through military campaigns, but only through intelligence or police operations.

Olivier Roy's book certainly offers a rare and valuable analysis of new trends in Islam through a rich and knowledgeable description of cultural and ideological developments. His book is thought provoking and also notable for de-constructing much of the current debate's dangerous simplifications such as the idea of a 'clash of civilisation'.

However, not everything can be explained by culture and ideology and some of Roy's hypotheses rely on circular reasoning and lack explanatory power.

For instance, Roy definitely has a point in underlining the modernity and the Western stamp of political Islam from its beginning and now in its various trends, yet his analysis of the recent transformation of mainstream Islamism would benefit from the inclusion of other elements such as the changing political environment in which Islamist movements or parties act, their social constituencies, the interests they represent or their organisational structure – basically all the normal questions political

scientists ask when studying a political organisation. The failure of mainstream Islamism cannot simply be explained by the utopian nature of its ideology – a frequent feature in politics – but by the fact that it is not socially revolutionary in the first place and thus easily cooptable by the ruling elites.

On another level, Roy's comparison of radical neo-fundamentalist organisations such as *al Qaida* with extremist anti-imperialist and Third Worldist groups is hazardous. Apart from the structural similarities that all clandestine or terrorist organisations might share, regardless of their political colour, there are basic differences: *al Qaida* does not question the power structure of international capitalism, rather it reinforces the idea of a 'clash of civilisations', founding its world view on a 'West vs. Islam' conception that not only mirrors and helps justify the ideology of the 'war against terror', but also tends to hide transversal social conflict and impedes solidarity between different peoples. More than the heir to the radical left, *al Qaida* is the product of the crisis of Third World political contestation and in a sense the negation of it.