

FEATURED BOOK REVIEWS

Post-Islamism: The Failure of Islamic Activism?

REVIEW BY ERMIN SINANOVIC

Department of Political Science, Maxwell School, Syracuse University

Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah. By Olivier Roy. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 349 pp., \$29.50 (ISBN: 0-231-13498-3).

Globalized Islam is a sequel to Olivier Roy's *The Failure of Political Islam* (Roy 1995), which developed the thesis that Islamists around the world have failed to translate their ideology into a concrete and viable blueprint for society. The corollary of that thesis is the assertion that Muslim discourse has entered a new phase of post-Islamism. *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* explores a variety of resulting issues, including post-Islamist and post-jihadist developments (Feldman 2003), the future of political Islam (Baker 2003; Fuller 2003), Islam in a globalizing world (Ahmed 2003), and Muslims in the West (Ramadan 2003). It also looks at the renewed Muslim transnationalism (Mandaville 2001), which is best expressed in the concept of the "Ummah": the global Muslim community of believers.

Methodologically, Roy opposes the culturalist approach to Islam—exemplified by Bernard Lewis (2003), Samuel Huntington (1997), and Daniel Pipes (2003). This approach states that Islam is the issue, and that, to understand Muslims' behavior, one needs to study Muslim history and theology and then extrapolate from that foundation to current Muslim practices. Although the culturalist approach raises a great many questions, the opposite approach—denying any role to culture whatsoever—is equally wrong. And this is exactly what Roy does. For him, "the real explanation is at the political level, not that of cultural factors" (p. 15). But, can politics be divorced from culture, especially for a religious community that often claims that religion is its *sine qua non*? Roy's logic of explanation is strictly structural materialist. He uses globalization and Westernization as independent variables, and he tries to trace how they influence, shape, and alter Muslims' behavior. He pays particular attention to "deterritorialized" Muslims—that is, those Muslims who live as a minority in non-Muslim societies or those who, although living in Muslim countries, feel uprooted as believers amid the sea of Westernization and secularization (pp. 17–26). Roy relies on "personal experience and even intuition" (p. 8) as methodological tools. Based on this approach, he is able to concoct the claim that "we should take Islamization as a contemporary phenomenon that expresses the globalization and Westernization of the Muslim world" (p. 15). In this narrative, the Muslims seem to be passive observers who just follow the spirit of the times. This assumption explains why Roy interprets almost everything that Muslims do as proof of the Westernization of Islam. He gathers his evidence mostly from different Muslim web sites and from the books written by Muslim activists, analyzing the statements and legal pronouncements contained therein. He also relies on books, many of them in French. In fact, *Globalized Islam* could serve as a good introduction for French-language work on Islamism. Although Roy acknowledges that it is difficult to gauge the influence of these books, pamphlets, and web sites, his analysis often assumes that they are authoritative representatives of political Islam.

Assertions about the failure of political Islam and the identification of post-Islamism are the intellectual products of what can be called the French school of political Islam. In addition to Roy, its major proponent is Gilles Kepel (2003). Yet, as Henri Lauzière (2005) forcefully argues, post-Islamism does not stand up to empirical scrutiny. It is focused primarily on political variables, whereas the Islamist agendas include much more than politics. Roy claims that the reorientation of Islamist movements and of individual Muslims toward religiosity and away from politics is a sign of the failure of political Islam. He also believes that the Islamists' abandonment of transnational solidarity and their new centeredness on national politics is yet another indication of failure. However, this shift could be interpreted as tactical and not strategic in nature. Very few Islamic movements have abandoned their goal of establishing an Islamic state with a full-fledged application of Islamic law. However, because of both internal and external factors (that is, the authoritarian states at home and the support for these regimes from abroad), they are now realizing that the task is more difficult than previously thought, necessitating a new approach. The countries that are ruled or have been ruled by the Islamists—Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan—have one thing in common. The groups that came to power in these countries did so through revolutionary means. In the rare instances in which Islamist groups won elections, they were prevented from assuming office (for example, the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria) or removed by the military (for example, Refah in Turkey).

The Islamists' inability to come to power in most Muslim countries is more an indictment of the authoritarian and despotic nature of those polities than a sign of the Islamists' failure. No revisionist political party or program stands much chance in an environment in which regime perpetuation by any means is the only game in town. To talk about the increased emphasis on personal piety and spiritual purification as markers of the Islamists' failure is to forget what many Islamic movements were all about in the first place. The quintessential Islamic movement, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, reflecting the beliefs of its founder, Hasan al-Banna (who was assassinated in 1949), has from its very inception put a premium on personal religiosity, spiritual activities, and moral education (*tarbiyah*). Thus, the increased emphasis on these issues in the "post-Islamist" phase of the movement could also be understood as a return to its roots. Finally, it should be recalled that the present Prime Minister of Iraq, Ibrahim Jaafari, is an Islamist, and that Hamid Karzai's Afghanistan is also based on Islamic law. With the recent shift in Bush Administration policy under Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice toward encouraging democracy in the Muslim world, we could see many more Islamists elected to power. This possibility is especially strong given that Islamist parties are often the only organized social and political alternative to the current secular and authoritarian regimes. Therefore, given the Islamists' limited opportunity to exercise political power thus far, and the ongoing possibility that they will come to power in countries around the Muslim world, it is definitely premature to write the obituary of political Islam and declare this the beginning of a post-Islamist period.

Roy is on much firmer ground when he talks about the effects of globalization on Muslims and the Westernization of both Muslim individuals and societies. In fact, had he couched his thesis in terms of globalization and Westernization and their impact on Muslims, without relating those forces to post-Islamism, he would have had a much stronger argument. As it is, he is trying to demonstrate the failure of political Islam, and the subsequent rise of post-Islamism, in exactly those societies in which the Islamist program by default does not have any chance to succeed: Western countries in which Muslims are but a tiny minority. Post-Islamism aside, Roy provides a compelling analysis of the emergence of transnational Muslim identities. He shows how acculturation (divorcing Islam from any given culture) leads to identity reconstruction and to the creation of a new culture that is based on Islamic, and not ethnic, values. The experience of living as a minority has led

Western Muslims to reinterpret old norms or to create new ones. Issues such as *halal* (Islamically permissible) food and *hijab* (covering for Muslim women) are common themes among contemporary Muslims.

Roy also discusses the breakdown of traditional religious authorities, and how—as a result and in conjunction with forces of globalization—religion becomes a commodity in the market of ideas. Within the Islamic discourse among deterritorialized Muslims, the religious market brings many different and contradictory ideas into conflict, but it also allows for creative synthesis. The outcome is that believers—who are simply consumers—can freely choose among the available ideas. Another result of the interaction between globalization and deterritorialized Muslims is their individualization. According to Roy, religious discourse and preaching targets individuals and not groups, which leads to an individualized concept of religiosity. The emphasis is, then, not on religion, but on religiosity. Roy also introduces the concept of neofundamentalism: “a trend, a state of mind, a dogmatic relation to the fundamentals of religion” (p. 234). He includes in this trend many Salafi groups but also the Tablighi Jama’at and the Wahhabis. Given that many of these groups predate globalization and post-Islamism, it is not entirely clear what is new about them, even though Roy tries hard to justify his typology. These chapters, however, give an excellent overview of various Muslim scholars, preachers, and activists. Finally, the book addresses the problem of terrorism. For Roy, terrorism is a security issue and should be understood in the context of globalization and Westernization. However, he fails to mention the role of the repressive, secular, and authoritarian regimes in Muslim countries in forging contemporary Muslim radical militancy. He also neglects the impact of Western hegemony and how it plays into the rhetoric, ideology, and actions of militants.

In short, *Globalized Islam* has serious theoretical and methodological flaws. Yet, it also provides a wealth of information about Muslims in Western countries, and it gives a useful overview of the opinions of various Muslim individuals, scholars, and activists. Unfortunately, this abundance of information and Roy’s writing style make the book repetitive and unreadable at times. Roy would have had a greater impact had he shortened and combined some chapters. For instance, Chapters 3 and 5 (on Muslims and Islam in the West, respectively) could have been shortened and combined. So could the first two chapters (the introduction and the chapter on post-Islamism), which come to almost 100 pages, in which Roy seems to drum up the same points time and again. On the other hand, the chapters on the “deterritorialized” Muslims and on the impact of globalization and Westernization on contemporary Muslims could be used in specialized courses on contemporary Islamism, although probably at the graduate level. Indeed, Roy’s analytical concepts (for example, post-Islamism, neofundamentalism, deterritorialization) will spur intellectual debates for years to come. This latter contribution, in spite of the book’s limitations and shortcomings, should ensure *Globalized Islam*’s value to the field of international studies.

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