

November 20, 2004

## Fundamentalism and its failures

NADER HASHEMI

The late Canadian scholar of comparative history and religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, was concerned throughout his life with the future development of Muslim societies. He concluded his *Islam in Modern History*, published nearly 50 years ago, by anticipating the destabilizing effects of Muslim politics on global affairs. He wrote: "The various intellectual and moral issues are today themselves internationalized. We would contend that a healthy, flourishing Islam is important not only for the Muslims but for all the world today." This observation, in light of Sept. 11, 2001, and the transformative events in global politics that have ensued, have a unique poignancy in the context of Islam-West relations.

The books under review are two recent editions to the growing "Islam industry" which has flourished, like mushrooms after a storm, since the fall of the twin towers in New York. Both authors enter the debate with impressive credentials. Gilles Kepel and Olivier Roy are leading French scholars on the relationship between religion and politics in the Arab-Islamic world. Their previous books, *Jihad: The Trial of Political Islam* (Kepel) and *The Failure of Political Islam* (Roy), have received critical acclaim from the media and their colleagues in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies. In their new volumes, they tackle the changing international order after 9/11, with a focus on the politics of Islam and the internal transformations and debates within Muslim communities both in the Middle East and Europe.

Kepel's *The War for Muslim Minds* is primarily concerned with the interaction and convergence of separate events that have led to a new rupture in Islam-West relations: the failure of the Israel-Palestine peace process, the rise of al-Qaeda and what he calls the "Neoconservative Revolution" in U.S. foreign policy. According to Kepel, "Though the ultimate goals of the jihadists and neoconservatives diverged, their proximate goals were remarkably aligned: ousting the region's regimes, whose authoritarianism and corruption they both abhorred."

In this observation, Kepel's "clash of extremisms" thesis comes off sounding like the Marxist author Tariq Ali, whose post-9/11 book, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*, drew on a similar theme. But this is where the similarities between the two men end.

Kepel is an establishment figure in France and a key adviser to successive French governments on relations with the Islamic world. His commentary on U.S. foreign policy is the standard view one would expect from the Quai d'Orsay after the serious strain in Franco-American relations over the invasion of Iraq. In his chapter on U.S.

neoconservatives, Kepel provides an objective and succinct summary on the intellectual origins of neoconservatism, its ideological links with the Cold War and the place of the Middle East in its geo-strategic conception of the world.

Kepel's most effective chapter is his analysis and discussion of al-Qaeda. In his free-flowing and accessible narrative, he draws on primary sources to develop a comprehensive picture of the origins, world view and motivations of this terror network. Short intellectual biographies of the key theoreticians of al-Qaeda are provided along with an explanation of their rationale on Sept. 11.

According to Kepel, "These acts of terror were read as expressions of frustration from a movement seemingly incapable of truly mobilizing the supporters required to overthrow governments." It is a spent force, he suggests, which at best has the ability to manipulate cynically the long-standing Muslim grievances with respect to the plight of the Palestinians, U.S. intervention in the Middle East and the corruption of Arab-Islamic ruling elites. While Kepel doesn't say so explicitly, it can be inferred from his criticism of U.S. policy in Iraq that Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz have done more for al-Qaeda's recruitment campaign than any speech delivered by Osama bin Laden or Ayman al-Zawahiri on Al Jazeera.

Olivier Roy's emphasis is slightly different. *Globalized Islam* explores the internal transformations occurring within Muslim societies as a result of the forces of globalization, Westernization and immigration. Written for a specialist audience, Roy's narrative can at times seem confusing and opaque, but the nuanced discussion within the text is worth the struggle.

Roy coins the term "deterritorialization" to argue that Islam is less and less identified with a specific territory or cultural heritage. In the modern world, it has to define itself in different geographical and political contexts, and it is primarily the forces of Westernization and globalization that are shaping what it means to be Muslim in the 21st century rather than a set of pristine and unchanging ideas from seventh-century Arabia.

The rise of Islamic fundamentalism, Roy contends, is a response to the transformation of traditional Muslim societies. Most mainstream Islamists do not want to turn the clock back and return to the pre-modern era, but are quite comfortable with the modern technology, higher education, urban lifestyles and comforts of capitalism. In a rapidly changing, increasingly pluralistic and globalized world, basic questions of "identity" have emerged. What does it mean to be a Muslim in today's fast-paced world? A return to religion, in particular an attachment to its outward symbols, is a common reaction among all faith traditions during times of crisis, social transformation and restructuring. In a very real sense, "born-again Christians" and "veiled-again Muslims" are responding to the same broad phenomenon.

Roy's most interesting discussion is on the question of Islam and secularization. He provocatively argues that the "in-depth secularization of Islam is being achieved by people who are denying the very concept of secularism. . . . The real secularists are the

Islamists and the neofundamentalists, because they want to bridge the gap between religion and a secularized society by exacerbating the religious dimension, overstretching it to the extent that it cannot become a *habitus* by being embedded in a real culture." It is the reaction against religious fundamentalism in the Muslim world that is slowly resulting in separation between the dirty world of politics and the sphere of religion.

In making the observation that "Islam is experiencing secularization, but in the name of fundamentalism," Roy points to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Twenty-five years after the Islamist seizure of power, disaffection with Ayatollah Khomeini's political project is at an all-time high. Roy points out that this is true not merely among young people and the growing middle class, but among significant sectors of the clerical community as well.

While acknowledging the specificity of the Iranian experience, he believes that this trend toward gradual secularization can be generalized beyond Iran's borders. In short, Roy contends that Islamic fundamentalists are modernizing agents who are pushing Muslim societies forward -- as a result of their own failed policies -- toward a position of de facto secularization.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith passed away approximately a year before Sept. 11, 2001. Had he lived, I'm sure he would have shared my enthusiasm for these recent additions to the growing literature on Islam. Both works are written with compassion, sympathy and critical acumen, and provide new insight into the changing world of Islam-West relations.

Nader Hashemi is a doctoral candidate in the department of political science at the University of Toronto.