

Book Reviews

Joselyne Cesari

Why The West Fears Islam: An Exploration of Muslims in Liberal Democracies.

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Joselyne Cesari, the Harvard-based scholar of contemporary Islamic societies and the director of the international research programme called “Islam in the West,” has recently bolstered her earlier works with the publication of a very rich collection of data of five years of fieldwork in five countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. Twelve focus groups, composed of five hundred (500) Muslims of different origins, ethnicities, gender, and level of education, were interviewed and/or listened to in discussions in five cities: Boston, London, Paris, Berlin, and Amsterdam. The questions raised among the focus groups vary from religion to politics, which makes the research truly interdisciplinary. The fieldwork first refers to some major surveys and polls conducted on Muslims, especially over the last decade—with an emphasis on rituals and religious issues like the veil, halal food, polygamy, minarets, and sharia (law)—as well as civil and political issues, like loyalty, citizenship, civic engagement and political participation. The volume is therefore a work that ranges from sociology-anthropology to political science and political theology.

The general question the book grapples with is “Why the West fears Islam?”, or more precisely, “How are the symbolic boundaries that place Islam “outside” created or reinforced?” (p. xvi). According to her fieldwork during the last decade (the 2000s), the answer Cesari reaches is outlined in what she refers to as three “symbolic boundaries” that “externalize” Islam in the West: 1) securitization, 2) secularism, and 3) Salafism (p. xvii). These factors are detailed in chapters 6, 7, and 8 respectively.

First, the securitization of Islam is a direct result of especially 9/11 terrorist events. It took an international aura with the War on Terror that the US administration launched. Cesari remarks that Muslims in the US are socio-economically much better-off compared to their European co-religionists. This distinction means that debating Islam in the religious society of the US is political, while it is basically a cultural debate in Europe.

Second, with reference to secularism, Cesari underlines its ideological and counter-religion aspect in European history (p. 144). The clashing “essentialized West” and “essentialized Islam” (p. xiv) reinforce each other; the first claims universalism, ignores the “other,” and “demonizes Islam” (pp. 81, 82), while the latter also adopts a rejectionist view of the West, a view the author refers to as Salafization (to be explained below as the third factor). Outside aspects of the intense conflict between some versions of European secularism and Islamic norms are freedoms of expression, body attire, and individualism. The common understanding of European secularism allows the cartoons caricatures of the Prophet of Islam, liberates the individual from any signs of regressive features that do not look liberating, like the wearing of the veil or burqa, and views that individualism does not restrain individual desires because of metaphysical or spiritual teachings. These three examples are viewed differently by Islam and Muslims: cartoons can be offensive, provocative, and disrespectful; the veil or burqa are spiritual expressions, and so is religious individualism that teaches certain manners of conduct and traces some broad boundaries to liberty (pp. 112-127).

Third, a global reach of Wahhabism and generous funding of Salafi movements and schools in the West and worldwide by Saudis have made it the standard image of Islam that the media depicts—while it hardly speaks of institutional and national religious bodies that have been founded in Europe by the state, like the French Council of the Muslim Faith or the German Islam Conference (pp. 107-111). The Salafi rejection of modernity, democracy, Islamic representative bodies set up by the state, prioritization of the community over the individual, and their strict adherence to Islamic law and women’s code of conduct make them stand on the opposite side of what the West stands for (pp. 129-137). These views fuel the West vs. Islam dichotomy and breed essentialisms. Against these broad exclusive views, through what she calls an “immersion approach” that reaches Muslims directly, and not through secular vs. Salafi perspectives and their media representatives, Cesari reaches interesting results that give a different image of how Muslims live their religiosity in the West. Below are some examples.

Despite the positive results of the fieldwork, Cesari still notes that even in cases of successful socio-economic and political integration, the above-mentioned three factors of externalization keep the boundaries between Islam and the West strong (p. xvii). She ends the book with a critique of the Western liberal-secular paradigm that she describes as a historical experience that Islam’s presence has unveiled and challenged. The author gives the French model of *laïcité* as an ideological and counter-religion narrative of secularism. She quotes the Catholic American Congressman Brian Higgins who says that his