Recasting Faith and Politics in the Twenty-First Century

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Since the end of the Cold War, religion has evolved as a major transformative force, influencing everything from state legitimacy to the mobilization of popular support for revolutions and terrorist activities. Rather than becoming marginal, religion has moved to the center of political discourse and concern. At once connected and separate, there is no clear boundary between religion and politics. What do we need to know about religion in the twenty-first century? How do we define the symbiotic relationship between religion and politics in an increasingly destabilized world?

Ian Buruma explores this connection in three concise and insightful chapters, one on the comparative study of church-state relations in Europe and the United States, one on the separation of religion and worldly authority in China and Japan, and one on the rise of radical Islam in Western Europe. He seeks to show how people in each of these parts of the world can combine religiosity in harmony with modern secularity. His main argument is that whereas the West has some troubles with the Enlightenment tradition of religious tolerance and the sharp division between religion and politics, the East Asians, especially the Chinese and Japanese, are capable of drawing on the transcendent idea of the Confucian state to co-opt organized religions and make them serve modernization. Though critical of the religious dimension of politics, Buruma believes in a strong modern state, seeing it as the only effective institution to enforce secularism in civic life (111).

This review begins with an overview of Buruma’s views on the complicated relations between religion and politics. I then discuss several thematic and methodological issues arising from Buruma’s analysis, such as his conceptualization and selection of subject matter, why he leaves out South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, and how his book permits the exploration of new themes that shed light on events like the Arab Spring.

Through a critical review of the American and European history, Buruma points out that the church-state relation in the West is a contested territory, characterized by a contradiction between the impulse to create a utopia that draws on religious themes and the commitment to safeguard human rights and other liberal values. Buruma’s example here is the United States immediately after September 11, when George W. Bush initially justified the War on Terror in both Christian providential and apocalyptic terms. The providential view of history derives from the notion of American exceptionalism, which portrays the United States as a unique nation built on democratic ideals and values and not on religious and ethnic identities, and an apocalyptic perspective, which characterizes the War on Terror as a global crusade against Islamic terrorists. The initial statements by Bush, plus state scrutiny and police power used against both American Muslims and terrorist suspects worldwide, exacerbated conflicts between the United States and Muslims globally.

Soon after 9/11, however, the Bush administration became less ideological and more
pragmatic and the notion of “crusade” against the terrorists was seen as counterproductive to the task of winning the hearts and minds of Muslims worldwide. Instead, the administration justified the war on the twofold grounds of the need to find weapons of mass destruction and to create a stable and democratic oasis in the Middle East. This shift towards political pragmatism is significant, as it reveals that the United States continues to adhere to the liberal ideal of toleration. When the United States first went to war, it drew on religious ideas to rally popular support. However, the relationship between faith and politics in the United States rarely pits religion against secularity, because American policymakers and the public relegate religion to private life and civic values to public life.

6 By comparison, the relation between religion and politics is far more contentious in Europe. While Europeans, like Americans, permit religious diversity, they insist on the public display of shared civic values. They allow immigrants and various faiths to flourish, but they insist that these same groups come to terms with liberal values, consequently assimilating or integrating into European democratic societies. Politicians in Europe seldom set out to impose their religious, moral, and ideological visions on society as the Bush administration originally did. Instead of separating faith from politics and banning religion from the public life, the Europeans prefer dividing the public sphere into separate units so that religious groups can coexist with the state and play a relatively active role in the secularized society (40). But in setting America against Europe in his analysis, Buruma not only denies the existence of civil religion (i.e., a shared set of beliefs, values and rituals) in the United States as a safeguard against religious fundamentalism and sectarianism, but also argues that the Europeans have a stronger state than do Americans to deal with different religions and to prevent them from interfering with public life. Secular states in Europe make religion a private matter, only related to the conscience of the individual, provided that private religious behavior does not jeopardize public life, civic values, and social order.

7 This comparative analysis of the relation between religion and politics in Europe and the United States is provocative yet problematic. In postwar sociological scholarship, one finds an extensive discussion of American civil religion, as in the works of Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton, Daniel Bell, and Robert Bellah. The structural-functionalism school influenced by Emile Durkheim stresses that however secular it is, modern society cannot function without shared values, and therefore, it requires a dominant moral consensus in order to survive.[1] Following this line of reasoning, Daniel Bell called for the need to re-sacralize society and culture. During the Cold War (1945-91), shared values related to both American civil religion and the idea of America as a providential and exceptional nation justified American global hegemony.

8 But since the end of the Cold War, the world is heading towards a less centralized form of governance. As the United States is now facing serious setbacks in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, many emerging powers such as China, Russia and Brazil have formed regional alliances to create a multipolar and anti-hegemonic order. Fareed Zakaria refers to this development as the beginning of “the post-American world,” in which the United States retreats and the rest of the world advances in economic power and political influence.[2] Against this dramatic shift of global balance of power in the early twenty-first century, the United States appears to be lacking in internationally shared values and norms in an increasingly unstable world.

9 Closely related to the above issue is that America has been in the midst of a profound demographic change. The United States continues to be an immigrant nation attracting people from different continents, ethnicities, and religions and cultural heritages. Once the immigrants conform to the shared public values and swear allegiance to the Union to become citizens, they affirm the civil religion as the common bonding force. Americans generally confine religion to private life and civic values to public life, and consequently, there is a relatively harmonious relationship between faith and politics.

10 In contrast, for many countries in Western Europe, however secular they are, religion is less important than public order. These nations are always skeptical about any public display of religious beliefs and practices. Not being immigrant nations, France and Germany, the core members of the European Union, find it hard to absorb large numbers of Muslim immigrants from North Africa and Turkey. Only with difficulty can these European governments make the Muslim newcomers accept essential notions of public behavior in line with secular modernity. Whatever their private religious faith, the Muslim immigrants need to comply with the laws and morals of secular society as seen in the intense debate over the French ban on wearing full-face veils in public places. The boundary between public and private in the United States is not as sharply defined as that in Europe, and this permits more space for integrating many cultures and nationalities into the American mainstream.

11 By shifting the attention to East Asia, Buruma highlights the unique pattern of an accommodating relationship between state and religion in China and Japan. Historically, under Confucianism, the Emperor embodied the Mandate of Heaven,
represented the sacred on earth, and monopolized people’s access to the transcendent. Unlike the West, where the power of the Catholic Church embodied in the Pope and the unity of Christendom created ongoing conflicts between the religious and political establishment, the Confucian world had a strong secular outlook and no religion could challenge political authority. By embodying the Heavenly Mandate, the Confucian state integrated the political, moral, and religious domains into the existing familial-social structure and cosmological universe. Seeing politics and religion as two sides of the same coin, Confucian thinkers did not advocate the autonomy of temporal and spiritual spheres or the contemporary Western idea of church-state separation. Therefore, the established Taoist, Buddhist and Shinto institutions never claimed to speak for the sacred and existed independent of the imperial power. This ideological foundation enabled the ruling authorities to co-opt the religious institutions and put them in the service of the state. In a similar fashion, the modern Chinese and Japanese elites have drawn on the Western concepts of nationalism, scientific progress, and secularism to achieve national survival and provide good governance. They believe in a strong state built by a powerful and efficient government, one with a vision and plan for the transformation of their countries into modernized nations.

Buruma captures this important characteristic of the East Asian world: China and Japan have never been troubled by the problem of exclusivism deeply rooted in the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and their leaders have no difficulty imposing their vision of modernity over the organized religions. Whoever holds the Heavenly Mandate can draw on the strong tradition of a centralized state to co-opt religion and at the same time to curtail its potential power of subversion. Therefore, the established Taoist, Buddhist and Shinto institutions never claimed to speak for the sacred and existed independent of the imperial power. This ideological foundation enabled the ruling authorities to co-opt the religious institutions and put them in the state-building process. Even though religion still permeates every level of their societies, the authorities prove capable of integrating religious leaders and practitioners into the totalizing secular order.[3]

12 Seen from this perspective, a complete separation of religion and politics is inconceivable in East Asia because any organized religion has to gain recognition from the government by adapting its teachings to the state’s modernizing agendas.[4] These modernizing agendas are largely shaped by the Confucian tradition of governance and the appropriation of modern Western values. The Chinese and Japanese elites have drawn on the Western concepts of nationalism, scientific progress, and secularism to achieve national survival and provide good governance. They believe in a strong state built by a powerful and efficient government, one with a vision and plan for the transformation of their countries into modernized nations.

By comparison, Buruma regards the rise of radical Islam in Western Europe, especially Wahhabism, as subversive to the modern world. Wahhabism is “a new identity promising purity, moral superiority, and power” for dislocated and marginalized people (89) and its rapid growth results from clashes between religious peoples, not simply between Muslims and secularists. Many warriors were drawn into this extremism as much by their political rage against the West as by their theological and spiritual concerns. Therefore, the challenge posed by the radical Islam in Europe is more social and political than cultural and religious (114). This troublesome development calls for the need to accommodate those radical Islamic groups that subscribe to Wahhabism and that are determined to assert their beliefs and norms against the secular ideals of democratic society in Western Europe. Only by doing so can the civil society and the radical Muslims in Europe find a mutual public space for dialogues and understanding.

13 By referring to Wahhabism as key in his argument, Buruma conveys to us that East Asia poses no problem to the West because its transcendent polity under the Heavenly Mandate adapts easily to Western modernization at the behest of the state, but the Muslim enclaves in Western Europe seek to hold on to their distinct religious identities against secular modern states. Such a conceptualization can be misleading. Even though Buruma is right about the challenge posed by Muslim extremists in Western Europe as more political than cultural (114), this only represents a tip of the iceberg in the rise of global Islam. In fact, Wahhabism originates from Saudi Arabia as a reform movement and has only become connected with the growth of Islamic terrorism in recent decades. This school of thought remains marginal to global Islam and does not represent the whole picture of radical Islam in the West. The radical Muslims in Western Europe are not political terrorists so much as religious fundamentalists. Their extremist views of the West are less shaped by Wahhabism than by their own migration experience from Turkey and North Africa, their frustrations with a lack of economic opportunity, their disillusion accompanying the failure of social and cultural integration, and the marginalization of ethnic minorities in the relatively homogeneous European societies. Thus, the real problem lies within Europe, where the political and social mainstays fail to distinguish Islamic extremists (bent on seeking power in the name of Allah) from Muslim activists inspired by their faith to pursue justice and change, and from Muslim youngsters living a double life with little understanding of how to be cosmopolitan Muslims in a transnational world.[5] All of the above constitute a serious moral and social crisis in Western Europe today.

14 Buruma’s findings and analysis are quite insightful at several levels. First, he highlights the diverse linkages between religion (sacred scriptures, transcendental worldviews, religious institutions and symbols) and secular politics. Scholars have long questioned the causal relationship between modernization and secularization.
Religions permeate modern societies and shape collective identities of peoples and all forms of political action around the world. Perhaps only Britain, France, the Netherlands and the Nordic countries fit better than Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal into the classic sociological model of secular modernity as indicated by popular indifference to religious doctrines and practices and by low levels of religious participation.[6] In these countries, Lutheranism and Calvinism have given rise to a deeply internalized and private sense of religiosity while upholding the state power publicly. For example, many of the Lutheran-influenced Scandinavian mystery writers convey a somber and noir idea of individual conscience. But elsewhere in the world, there is a strong reluctance to separate religion and politics, private and public spheres. Today, most Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Hispanics, and Africans have embraced different faiths and values, and have successfully displayed a high level of religiosity in harmony with modern secularity.

Second, Buruma challenges us to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the world, as against a simplistic division of the globe into mutually hostile civilizations and religions. While different historical experiences generate different reflections on the juxtapositions of religion and politics in East and West, Buruma urges us to be critical of the religious dimension of politics in any temporal and specific settings. Buruma asserts that a strong modern state is the only effective institution to enforce secular and civic values. As the rise of global Islam tests the limits of the Enlightenment ideal of religious tolerance, the East Asians rely on the transcendent idea of the state to put any kind of religion in service of modernization and to create developmental states.

Conceptually, Buruma identifies with the values of Enlightenment, especially its emphasis on reason, science, progress, and human capacity to seek happiness in this world rather than in the afterlife. With the rise of human reason and individual piety, there has emerged a private religious sphere beyond the control of the state and the church. This privatized religious sphere has not only changed traditional forms of religious observance and ministry, but also enabled religious practices to be compatible with modern secularity. But as Bernhard Giesen argues, "All politics relies on a hidden transcendental reference."[7] Secular politics has taken on many religious features and has proclaimed to be the crucial element in defining the purpose and meaning of human life. The symbiosis between religion and politics draws attention to the misuse of religious ideas, symbols and rituals in all temporal and spatial settings. What Emilio Gentile calls “the sacralisation of politics” can be found in any society where politics, after having gained its autonomy from traditional religious constraints, acquires its own religious character and becomes a new object of worship with elaborate systems of beliefs and ideologies, symbols and rituals.[8]

However, one should be aware of two methodological flaws in Buruma’s analysis. The first problem concerns his conceptualization of the subject matter. The West, East Asia, and the Muslim world can hardly be treated as a static and homogeneous entity. Internal diversities in these places are as significant as cross-cultural differences. Even though the Saudis have actively promoted the Wahhabi brand of Sunni Islam as the only correct path to salvation as opposed to Khomeini’s brand of Shia Islam, Wahhabism, especially its belief in Jihad as the proper instrument to disseminate Islam, remains marginal to global Islam. Wahhabi extremism may lead to terrorism, but Islam as a world religion is not directly connected with terrorism. With the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the recent death of Osama bin Laden, the Wahhabi teachings have lost the appeal to Muslims worldwide.

In addition, over 60% of Muslims worldwide live in non-Arab Asia such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia and China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and they do not subscribe to the Wahhabi teachings. The majority of these Chinese, Indian, and Persian Muslims are religiously moderate and seek to integrate their Islamic faith and values with modernized lifestyles. Furthermore, the transnational dimension of Islamic extremism deserves much attention. While much emphasis has been placed on Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah, other radical groups with broad-based ideological and political agendas (e.g., Muslim Brotherhood) and low-profiled networks (e.g., various Sufi brotherhoods) are equally influential. Politically, these transnational groups have adopted a more secular outlook and have built their local constituencies by challenging authoritarian regimes, opposing national governments’ suppression of local Muslims, commenting on controversial issues like the Palestinian Question and criticizing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These organizations have appropriated the ideology of “justice and development” to mobilize support from Muslims and non-Muslims around the world. Through the internet and cable television networks, they have created an electronic democratic space for addressing Muslim discontent and for pursuing justice in the name of Islam. These different patterns of Muslim activism should be viewed as both a reaction to neoliberal globalization and an ongoing effort to modernize their countries in the name of Allah. Today, the diverse landscapes of radical Islam involve not only Muslim immigrants in Western Europe but also complicated networks of religious groups and movements from the Middle East to Asia. This transnational dimension challenges secular governments worldwide to pay attention to the legitimate grievances of local Muslims and to implement effective policies of engaging the Muslim actors in specific settings.
The same criticism can be applied to Buruma’s characterization of East Asia. In modern China and Japan, the development of religion-state relationship is contingent upon many variables.[9] The Chinese and Japanese intellectuals and rulers are fascinated by the Enlightenment values, and their perspectives on religion have been shaped by their encounters with modern Western culture. As latecomers to modernization, they are faced with tremendous internal and external pressures for change. For better or for worse, both China and Japan have to put religion in the service of the state because of the needs for rapid economic growth and strong government control. One should not take for granted that these Asian developmental states have resolved the tensions and conflicts of modernization.

In particular, the experience of contemporary China is illustrative. The rapidity with which the Chinese authoritarian state has achieved economic development makes for tensions and conflicts in every case. An unprecedented level of social and economic inequality remains intact and the great cultural divide between the metropolitan cities (Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou) and the extensive rural hinterlands is unbridgeable. Such internal differences constitute a major obstacle towards the country’s development. But China seems to lack strong shared values or a civil religion to hold the diverse populations together. The only option is to draw on its legalistic tradition of a strong authoritarian state to co-opt its religious communities. Otherwise, it will fail to hold the country together and prevent it from falling apart. The state’s ability to put religious institutions and religious followers in service of the country goes hand in hand with the need to maintain control and stability. The close alliance between religion and politics in China is very much a patron-client relationship. This discussion affirms the complexities of religion and politics in modern East Asia, whereas with selective facts, Buruma appears to affirm simplicity.

Meanwhile, if Buruma referred to other multi-religious and multi-ethnic states such as India, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, he could easily substantiate his arguments about religion-state accommodation. The most obvious example is India where its democracy has worked well to contain the destabilizing force of religious extremism and sectarian rivalries. As India is home to a Hindu majority and the world’s third largest Muslim population, as well as to millions of Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, Parsees and Jains, some sectarian politicians have manipulated religious and communal differences and have caused violence to erupt on several occasions. But Indians from all walks of life have condemned such violence, and this provides the best democratic guarantee against the exploitation of sectarianism.[10] Compared with China and Japan, India’s path to development is democratic rather than authoritarian, and its secular constitutional democracy has succeeded in mediating all the religious, communal and ethnic grievances from within.

Singapore is another shining example of how a strong city-state has enforced secularism in everyday life. Being at the crossroads of many civilizations in Southeast Asia and being surrounded by powerful Muslim states such as Malaysia and Indonesia, Singapore has to deal with the varying and often conflicting demands of its diverse populations and avoid provoking its Muslim neighbors. Since independence in 1963, the powerful Singaporean state has imposed a secular national identity on its citizens and has resolved religious tensions and ethnic conflicts through mediation. Even though Christianity has contributed to state-building and has established a powerful institutional presence through modern education, medicine and charity, the Singaporean leaders always avoid showing favor to the local Christians in order to appease the Muslims from within and without.

The recent democratic transformation of Malaysia and Indonesia is also illustrative. Their predominantly Muslim populations are not antagonistic towards modern liberal and democratic values. They are rather eager to promote religious, ethnic and cultural pluralism from within and to create a new form of Islamic democracy, ostensibly designed to fight for equality, justice and development in the name of Allah. Evidently, the diverse religious and ethnic populations in these countries have fully integrated the procedural and rule-bound institutional practices of democracy into their polities.

In short, the strength of Taming the Gods lies in its clear and sophisticated theoretical framework. Buruma should be praised for explaining the rise of radical Islam in Western Europe and the strategies employed by different European states to accommodate their Muslim citizens and residents. But he has yet to problematize the vastly different and ever-changing patterns of state-religion relationship in various parts of the globe. For example, he oversimplifies the West and fails to point out that the long history of immigration and the well-established notion of civil religion in the United States have permitted more diversity in private and in public than Europe. The Europeans are still burdened by their imperialist past and become less sanguine than the Americans about the presence of large numbers of Muslim immigrants in their relatively homogeneous societies. Troubled by this “Third World in the First World” syndrome, the Europeans resist the alien character of an Islam which confutes religion and politics, and which in some cases allows the Sharia Law to govern the private and public domains. Anders Behring Breivik’s violence in Norway is an extreme example of the anti-Muslim and anti-multicultural sentiment rising in
Buruma’s discussion of the official co-optation of religion in East Asia is timely and insightful, but then his arguments about the accommodating relationship between religion and politics would be more convincing if he mentioned India and Southeast Asia. In spite of the Confucian tradition of governance, the authoritarian Chinese state has yet to overcome the tensions, conflicts and inequalities brought about by the rapid pace of industrialization and modernization. The same set of internal problems has contributed to the jasmine revolutions sweeping through North Africa and the Middle East. If Buruma had been correct about the global political threat of radical Islam, these spontaneous popular uprisings against the authoritarian dictatorships in the Arab world would not have happened. In this perspective, the complexities of state-religion encounters should be contextualized in proper temporal and spatial settings.

Notes


