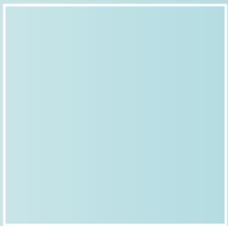




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POLICY

BRIEF



Middle
East
Directions

The limitations and dangers of Western government funding and promotion of Islam in the context of the new ‘war of ideas’

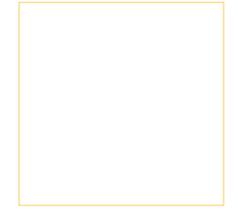
Olivier Roy

A widely shared view in Europe is that fighting radicalization and terrorism supposes the promotion of a “good moderate Islam”. This view is based more on unchecked prerequisites (the more religious you are, the more prone to radicalization) and wishful thinking (reform the theology and you will get “moderate” believers). Nevertheless there is something that can be done and be efficient in the long term: developing spaces where Muslims and specifically imams can develop a theological reflection in a European intellectual framework.

A wrong answer to real problems

There are two issues: jihadism (including terrorism) and Salafism (a fundamentalist reading of the Koran and the hadith). Salafism is essentially perceived as the matrix of jihadism, which is wrong.

1) Terrorists and jihadists are more often disenfranchised youth in quest of a cause who cast their revolt into the Islamic narrative of Al Qaeda and Daesh (hence the astonishing and growing number of converts, not to speak of petty delinquents, both of them having no previous theological training in Islam). They are believers once they join the fight; religion is relevant in the framing of their revolt, but the revolt is not a consequence of years of religious training.



2) Most salafis, by contrast, don't push for jihad, but preach a sort of social and cultural "secession": good Muslims should abstain to mingle with either non-Muslims or "bad" Muslims. This attitude creates a lot of societal problems in European societies (gender segregation, rejection of common social rules, ghettoisation of destitute neighbourhoods etc.), and fuels hostility from the rest of the population. They claim also to represent the only "true" Islam and struggle to strip of religious legitimacy any other moderate religious voices. We may add that they also reject multi-culturalism because they consider that religion has nothing to do with culture: they reject the very concept of a "muslim culture".

Confusing both jihadism and salafism would 1) miss the real roots of radicalization, 2) miss the causes of the success of Salafism.

But in both cases, there is a common issue: the lack of Islamic religious alternative in our societies. The "other" Muslim believers have little visibility and few credible representatives (imams, theologians, religious intellectuals). Jihad and Salafism offer a (different) answer to a quest of spirituality, not to speak to a quest of the "absolute" (culminating in the suicide bombing).

A purely secular approach (teaching values, tolerance, "laïcité", or chasing Islamic signs from the public sphere) will not answer this religious demand.

The issue here is not to "empty" the religious field, but on the contrary to "saturate" and diversify it, by trying to offer different forms of religious practices.

This is often framed by European institutions as "promoting moderate Islam", but this not the right approach. The issue is how to root a Muslim religious practice in a European context.

The limitations of institutional action to promote "moderate Islam"

1) The notion of "moderate religion" makes little sense: Martin Luther and Jean Calvin were not moderate theologians. Each revealed monotheistic religion contends that God's law is above man's law (a claim made by Pope Francis as well).

The issue is not theology per se but how a set of beliefs is put into practice by the believers, -what I call "religiosity",

that is the way a believer experiences and acts his or her own religion. The problem is that in a secular Europe we tend to consider that a moderate believer is somebody who believes moderately, an assertion that true believers cannot accept, whatever their religion and whatever their own way to comply with man's law. Religion is religion: looking for "soft" religion is a non-starter.

2) A secular state cannot interfere with theology. It may and should regulate the behaviour of all citizens in the public sphere, and prevent abuses even in the private sphere. It may thus regulate religious practices, but not ask for a theological change. A European citizen has the right to stick to conservative values, to be "pro-life", to oppose same-sex marriage and not to be Charlie. This is the basic definition of freedom of religion (and opinion).

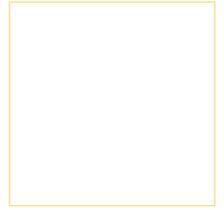
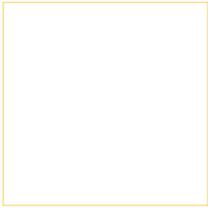
3) Tensions between dominant values and specific religious practices should be dealt with as a conflict of rights, not as an ideological or cultural fight against "obscurantism". Among recent conflicts of rights, we can mention "child's rights" (circumcision) and "animal's rights" (ritual slaughtering). It is up to the courts, and in last instance, the EC of HRs to deal with such conflicts of rights. Incidentally any endeavour to "curb" Islamic religious practices has an impact on religion in general (banning the veil entails the banning of the *yarmulke*, forbidding *halal* entails forbidding *kasher*, restricting religion to the private would precisely contribute to the de-christianization of Europe).

4) Informal campaigns to promote a "good moderate Islam", by giving the floor to Muslim liberal intellectuals who often are not believers themselves, miss their targets. They bypass believers and theologians, who should be the first actors in dealing with radicalisation.

Nevertheless there is a need and a possibility for a proactive policy

Any policy towards Islam should be based on two principles: 1) let religion to the religious, 2) regulate the religious market by encouraging those who accept an "embedded" Islam in Europe.

The interlocutors should be religious actors. If we want a "European" Islam, it is counter-productive to treat Islam as a "culture", foreign by definition. Moreover "true" believers want religion, not a cultural ersatz. The key issue is hence about the Imams and theologians.



The need to have a better religious apparatus for European Muslims is obvious.

1) First of all too many imams are foreign educated, don't master the basic European codes and cultures, are unable to foster integration, and sometimes just reject it. Secondly, they propagate too often a very conservative version of Islam, not to speak of Salafism. Thirdly they are less and less in touch with the growing middle classes of Muslim origin, whose rise is overlooked by political actors and by the media. These new middle classes are the actors of the change, because they have specific religious needs (to be believers, citizens and economic actors in the same time). The problem is that educated young Muslims don't want to become imam: no prestige, not well paid, dependent from local Islamic associations in the hands of notables. There is a crisis of vocation among educated second and third generation of Muslims which explains why imams are still "imported" from the south (the same phenomena exists in the catholic Church, except that the African priests appointed in Europe have a good previous training in church seminaries).

2) The training of Imams should not be delegated to foreign states (official agreements with Turkey and Morocco, informal agreements with Egypt, grants from Saudi Arabia). Firstly foreign countries, even when they are our allies, consider Muslims in Europe as their diaspora that should not assimilate, and not as full European citizens; secondly the Islam they promote is usually very conservative and not open to theological debate. Free debate is not on the agenda of the foreign sponsors. It should be on our agenda. Once again the idea is not to impose a "moderate" Islam, but to establish an arena of free debates on religion. Freedom of debate is the pre-requisite for any theological reformation from inside

3) Imams should be trained in a European religious context. The issue as we said is not theology (inter-faith dialogue does not really help here), but religiosity: how to be a believer in a European secular context. Informal interaction is more important than huge conferences. The idea is to shape a common approach to faith in a secular context, not a common theology of course.

Training places should not be insulated, but on the contrary in close proximity with other religions.

The problem of course is that the states cannot organize such interaction. But they could encourage it in the

framework of the existing legislations. Given the diversity of such legislation, the answer could only be at a European level and in a very flexible way:

- Making use of existing academic theological faculties to open Islamic theological faculties in a religious academic context. This supposes a strong cooperation of the Christian Churches (not always very open to the idea).
- Supporting the only existing autonomous Islamic European faculty of theology: the Sarajevo faculty of Islamic theology, established by the Austro-hungarian empire. It has a remarkable academic staff, but is surrounded by religious establishments lavishly funded by foreign states. It has credibility, whether academic, religious or even political (the single presence of the vast graveyard resulting from the war would deter any western jihadi to play the "holier than thou" story).
- The idea would be to connect different institutions (not excluding foreign ones) that could provide a formation that would be "homologated" at a European level.

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Middle East Directions

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