

## Review - Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways

Written by Iqbal Akhtar

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IQBAL AKHTAR, JUL 31 2016

*Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways*

By Olivier Roy

Hurst, 2016 (paperback)

Olivier Roy's latest book to be translated into English is a continuation of his previous works on the globalization of Islam, albeit now in comparative perspective. I first read Roy's *Globalized Islam* while I was a cultural analyst in the U.S. Air Force and it profoundly changed my understanding of modern Islam, in part, inspiring me to study Islam at the doctoral level in Europe. The asset of the best of the French humanities and social science *écoles* is a background and emphasis in philosophy and the application of philosophical rigour to analysing the world. Philosophy allows Roy to really question, what is the core of a modern Muslim identity in the age of neo-colonial neoliberal globalization? It goes beyond the well-trod tropes in American popular discourses of 'radical Islam', the call for an Islamic Reformation, and the inherent incompatibility of Islam in a western democracy.

Much of the American foreign policy establishment, apart perhaps from the State Department and certainly in intelligence circles, still sees Islam as critiqued by Mahmood Mamdani—a 'good' Muslim versus a 'bad' Muslim. The good Muslim is our ally and does not threaten our ordering of the world, the bad Muslim is at best an obstacle, while at worst the existential enemy of the state. Much of the academic field of international relations fails to understand religion and take it seriously as an epistemological foundation for society. What is happening to globalized Islam is mirrored in post-modern Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. The book's comparative approach includes a dizzying number of factoids and historical references which drive home its main point—the deterritorialization and deculturation of religion as a consequence of globalization.

*Holy Ignorance* is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the connection between culture and religion that has been shaken as a result of the information and transportation revolutions. Roy pioneered the framework of *deterritorialization* as applied to the Muslim World. His neologisms of *deterritorialization* and *deculturation* that were once novel are now common knowledge—that Muslim migration to the global north has disconnected the generation brought up in the West from their parents' cultural background of Islam. Religion and culture are now understood to be antithetical to each other and so young Muslims are seeking an essentialized form of Islam that is disconnected from the grounding and values of a culture and its enchanted worldview. He also takes a jab at multiculturalism, which he sees as a flattening and equalization of cultures that are reduced to the lowest common denominator for appropriation.

The second part focuses on religion and the global economy. Neoliberal globalized capitalism has led to the commodification of religion, widely described as a marketplace in Anglophone academia. He corrects the widely held notion that religion is finding a resurgence in the world. Rather, religion as an alternative ethical and spiritual transcendental philosophy has ceased to be relevant as globalized capitalism has supplanted alternative authorities. This is most evident in the heart of Islam: Mecca. Mecca is the example *par excellence* of the Islamization of capitalist modernity, from the five-star Hilton towers with 'ka'ba-view' suites to halal Burger Kings. Globalized capitalism is a form of neo-colonialism that has thoroughly penetrated the world so what is in now in dispute is power

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and symbols of religious identity rather than fundamental cosmologies.

The deterritorialization and deculturation of global Islam also works hierarchically in the world of Islam. In my own work with the Khōjā, we see these concepts in action. The deculturation of the Ismaili Khōjā has continued under the aegis of the current Aga Khan IV. The incorporation of Tajiks, Syrians, Iranians, and Afghans among others into the core South Asian Khōjā and Mōmanā communities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has meant a loss of cultural, linguistic, and civilizational religious complexity for a common 'pan-Ismaili' identity. For the Ithnā 'Ashari Khōjā, the influence of the Iranian revolution has been to again Islamize western modernity because western scientific developments cannot match and outpaces the Iranian cultural response to it. So, among the Ithnā 'Ashari Khōjā Mother's Day, an American holiday that has been globalized, is religiously appropriated by celebrating it on the birthday of the Prophet's daughter Fatima on 20 Jumādā II of the Islamic calendar.

With all comparative work, some depth is lost with breadth but overall Roy's approach pushes us to think outside of a 'clash of civilizations' paradigm with scholarly rigour. It is possible that countries like Sweden, with its promotion of mother-tongue education of immigrant communities, can help to bridge the cultural divide and re-acculturate Islam. If we are to extrapolate Roy's vision, militant-extremism in the Muslim world will naturally wear itself out because the focus on religious norms contracts the range of human experiences and erases the cultural imagination of a society whereas fundamentalism will remain and grow throughout the world.

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### **About the author:**

Dr. Iqbal Akhtar is a dual-appointment in the Department of Politics & International Relations as well as Religious Studies at Florida International University. He completed his doctoral studies at the University of Edinburgh's New College School of Divinity on the history of The Khōjā of Tanzania, an Indic Muslim merchant caste in East Africa. Some of his publications can be found on Academia. Currently, his research is focused on reconstructing the 18th century religious cosmology of the Sindhi Khōjā. Through the ongoing interdisciplinary programme being pursued at FIU towards a Muslim Studies programme, Khōjā Studies is emerging as an important component for international interdisciplinary scholarly cooperation.