

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Marzouki, Nadia. *Islam: An American Religion.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, pp. 288, \$35 (9780231176804).

Discussing far right representations of Islam and Muslims in America—and France to a lesser degree—Marzouki presents a thought-provoking dissection of the growing nativist impulses in the West and the timid liberal response to them. This public discourse includes vital issues, including national identity, the place of minorities in state and society, and what it means to be American or French (or European). Marzouki's discourse analysis makes good use of existing knowledge on public perceptions of Muslim institutions and practices in the West. The book also offers an optimistic view of minority integration in a period of contentious politics.

The book's central hypothesis is that the public controversies over Islam are not simply the latest manifestations of "the contradictions between open secularism and persistent racism" rather, what is at stake in the rising anti-Islam projects is the "definition of the very meaning of the political community." This exposes "fundamental misunderstanding about the social contract and democracy," which are founding ideas of the American system of government (7).

To support this hypothesis, Marzouki analyzes the drive of actors, including the Tea Party, fundamentalist evangelicals, extremist Zionists, and other illiberal groups—all lumped under the rubric of populism—to oppose mosques and Islamic law and to normalize attacks on Islam and Muslims. Alas, Islamophobia is forcing a conversation on the very meaning of citizenship and liberal democracy. While recognizing that other minority groups had also been at the center of contestation among white Protestants and recalling the interpretive value of the conflict-ridden Americanization process, Marzouki highlights hope and peril in contemporary American politics, policy and law on Islam and Muslims.

The hope lies in the fact that despite the effectiveness of the Tea Party and others in using Islamophobia for political gain, most Americans are *not* seduced by this extremism. Thus the net result of this abnormally high public visibility of Muslims, as the author predicts, will be the normalization of Islam and Muslims in society. This is seen in the push back by liberals in politics and the media against Islamophobia and in

federal court cases outlawing anti-Sharia statutes (by state legislatures) and acts of discrimination against Islamic religious practices. Here, Marzouki points to a key difference between the U.S. and France—and much of Europe—in that the courts in the Eastern side of the Atlantic offer legitimation to administrative, legal and political constrictions targeting Muslims and other minorities.

Yet Marzouki is alarmed by the fact that the rhetoric of the far right is so overwhelming and appears so much in the media that even so-called liberal outlets, like CNN, often report on it uncritically—as if the rhetoric doesn't register as shocking or as challenging core liberal rationalization, except in a few occasions when the rhetoric can be so easily challenged. And so “[t]o be liberal no longer means simply to believe in principles of justice and fairness but to exhibit certain acceptable behaviors, feel emotions that are expected of you, and repeat certain stock phrases.” (203)

The peril lies in the documented cases demonstrating the growth of an anti-intellectual, illiberal form of populism that questions the role of the government in protecting Muslims and other “free riders who prefer to receive assistance by stealing the labor of deserving Americans” (156). These Americans are allegedly ‘victimized’ by the liberalist state apparatus and judges who don't subscribe to the original meaning of the Constitution.

Marzouki's discussion underscores the shift in American public discourse that occurred with the 2008 electoral campaign and paradoxically resulted in the election of Barack Hussein Obama. She cites credible polls showing that 11% of Americans continue to believe Obama is Muslim. She observes that the post September 11 conversation on Muslims featured the growing binaries of *good v. bad* Muslims and *peaceful v. intolerant* Islam. After the election, the far right pushed the Republican Party to accept the view that Islam as a *category* is a threat that must be defined and dealt with, not as a religion capable of multiple interpretations but as an intolerant, anti-Christian political ideology bent on world domination.

The disintegration of al-Qaeda, the killing of Osama Bin Laden and the defeat of ISIS has not dissuaded opponents to the Islamic jihad that has infiltrated the U.S. government and seeks to Islamize America. This is because exaggerating the Islamic threat was still paying a mobilizational dividend. To illustrate this political motive, Marzouki devotes an entire chapter to the Tea Party's embrace of extremist Islamophobes. But the author sees the Tea Party more in line with libertarian ideology, which is not necessarily anti-Muslim.

Marzouki's work offers more. Unlike other liberal analysts who dismiss populist politics as dogmatic underserving of much attention, the

author places the far right in the context of a political process that is *rewarding* extremism. She singles out governmental outlets such as the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom that seem to function with an overriding preoccupation of “Christians persecuted by Muslims,” offering a geostrategic policy that “updated [the] version of Christians under siege from godless Communists” (183). Confirming such analysis is the January 22, 2018 speech by the self-described Christian Vice President Mike Pence to the Israeli Knesset. He rationalized cutting U.S. contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency that aids Palestinian refugees by proposing that the funds will be directed to help persecuted Christians—never mind that the Christians of the Holy Land were the first to denounce the move. (See full text of speech at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/full-text-u-s-vice-president-mike-pence-s-speech-at-the-knesset-1.5751264>)

But the book suffers a key shortcoming that must be noted. The author makes the case for inclusion based on an imperfect human encounter in which group intolerance can have the opposite outcomes at the levels of society and state. Yet, the very objects of these dynamics, Muslims, seem to have no input into the discourse on citizenship in a liberal democracy except to reject those who seek to exclude them. This, however, is still a thought-provoking contribution to scholarship on Islam and religion in Western democracies and the very meaning of citizenship and liberalism in 21st Century America.

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