



HAL
open science

The transformation of politicised religion: from zealots to leaders. Edited by Hartmut Elsenhans, Rachid Ouaisa, Sebastian Schwecke, and Mary-Ann Tétreault. Abingdon & New York, Ashgate/Routledge, 2016.

Thomas Pierret

► **To cite this version:**

Thomas Pierret. The transformation of politicised religion: from zealots to leaders. Edited by Hartmut Elsenhans, Rachid Ouaisa, Sebastian Schwecke, and Mary-Ann Tétreault. Abingdon & New York, Ashgate/Routledge, 2016.. Journal of North African Studies, 2018, pp.1-3. hal-01973719

HAL Id: hal-01973719

<https://hal.science/hal-01973719v1>

Submitted on 29 Jan 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The Transformation of Politicised Religion. From Zealots into Leaders, edited by Hartmund Elsenhans, Rachid Ouassa, Sebastian Schwecke and Mary Ann Tétreault, Farnham, Ashgate, 2016.

The comparative study of politicised religion across different religious traditions is almost as old as scholarly interest in the phenomenon itself. In 1987, Marty and Appleby launched the Fundamentalism Project, which gave rise to five edited volumes including studies on, among others, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist movements (**1991-1995**). Four years later, Kepel published a comparative study of Muslim, Christian and Jewish religious-political movements (**1991**). Yet, this approach subsequently fell out of fashion, in the field of research on Islamic movements at least, notably because scholars paid increasing attention to variations among such movements *within* the Islamic tradition in terms of context, ideology and practice.

The Transformation of Politicised Religion rehabilitates the cross-cultural study of what the editors call “New Cultural Identitarian Political Movements” (NCIPM), although from a different perspective than the one that inspired the Fundamentalism Project. The volume adopts a world-systems political economy approach first applied to NCIPM in 1994 by Hartmut Elsenhans, one of the volume’s editors. From a world-systems perspective, the economy and politics of any given country is determined by their position in the transnational division of labour. From the same viewpoint, therefore, it makes little sense to compare the conditions that gave rise to, for instance, Islamic movements in the Arab world, and North American Evangelicalism. *The Transformation of Politicised Religion* thus focuses on the post-colonial Global South (or “periphery”, in world-systems terms) and more specifically on India and Algeria, which are the subject of six out of eleven chapters, including two contributions from members of, respectively, the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Algerian Islamist Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix (MSP). The volume also includes case studies on Egypt, Turkey, and the Arab Gulf.

By virtue of his political economy approach, Elsenhans focuses on the socio-economic aims of NCIPM rather than on their cultural aspects. He interprets the rise of such movements as a predominantly middle-class, although socially diverse, challenge to the dominant strata that inherited power after decolonisation. Economically, the dominance of postcolonial political elites relied on the control of the resources of the modernising state, which allowed for the cooptation of lower social segments through rent allocation. Discursively, cross-class harmony was fostered through secular nationalism. Therefore, when in the 1970s it appeared that state elites had failed to deliver on their economic promises, some of the disadvantaged groups rejected both the dominant bourgeoisie’s control over the state, and the secular nationalist ideology that underpinned this hegemony.

Alternative, identity-based discourses such as Islamism and Hindu nationalism offered the advantage of not being mere expressions of a single class’ interests, but allowed for the incorporation of differing social interests, hence for cross-class alliance against the incumbent political elite. Elsenhans’ model resembles Kepel’s explanation for the success or failure of Islamist movements by the extent of their ability to unite the “pious bourgeoisie”, the “young urban poor”, and the “Islamist intelligentsia”. However, Elsenhans squarely places the focus on the middle-class, whereas Kepel’s emphasis on the revolutionary

dimension of Islamism translated into greater attention to Islamism's underprivileged proponents.

Elsenhans argues that the existence of a sizeable and relatively frustrated middle-class is a prerequisite for the rise of NCIPM as mainstream political contenders: if the middle-class is too weak, as is the case in Muslim Sub-Saharan Africa, politicised religion emerges as a fringe, radical phenomenon (e.g. Boko Haram); if economic growth matches the expectations of the middle-class, as is the case in East Asia, a possible increase in religiosity will not translate into the rise of politically organised religious forces.¹ From the predominantly middle-class character of NCIPM, the editors conclude that they should not be seen as radically at odds with bourgeois liberal values, but rather as cases of selective embrace of such values that will have an impact on the latter's definition at the global level. Where they take over, NCIPM will show politically conservative due to their bourgeois leaderships' drive to discipline labour.

The editors also provide analytical insight into the inclusion-moderation debate. They make an important distinction between *co-optation* of a movement by the incumbent regime, and *assertion* of a movement by its own efforts. Both situations tend to favour (yet do not guarantee) moderation: because of the NCIPM's relative weakness and short-term benefits, in case of co-optation, and because of a broadening of the NCIPM's social base, in case of assertion. However, the editors contend that co-optation provides for a less stable process of moderation, because it forces NCIPM to choose between the re-assertion of their oppositional credential, and a gradual fall into irrelevance. In both cases, anyway, a key determinant of the NCIPM's behavior is the impact of inclusion on the socio-economic interests of its composite support base.

As a concept, *The Transformation of Politicised Religion* is the kind of volume that one would like to see more often, that is, not a mere multi-faceted exploration of an issue, but a clearly formulated theoretical hypothesis to be tested through a set of case studies. The main weakness of the volume, though, is that it only achieves this goal to some extent. Whereas case studies on India and Algeria do apply Elsenhans' model, or at least, in the case of the chapter on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, concentrate on economic policies that reflect the movement's class interests, the contributions on the Arab Gulf and Turkey largely leave aside the political economy approach laid out in the introduction. This is unfortunate considering the potential consequences, for Elsenhans' model, of these countries' economic and political specificities, namely, the absence of colonial legacy in Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and an extreme, yet relatively sustainable, form of rentierism in Gulf monarchies. The organisation of the book also suffers from a large number of chapters on the Indian BJP (four in total) that partly overlap with each other and, for some of them, are a difficult read for whoever does not already have a solid grasp of late 20th century Indian politics.

References

1. Marty, Marin, and Scott Appleby, eds. 1991-1995, *The Fundamentalism Project* (book series), 5 vol. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

¹ As for Christian-majority societies, regardless of economic conditions, their religious traditions are ill-suited for the contentious politicisation of religion against elites associated with a Western-dominated world order.

2. Kepel, Gilles, 1991, *La revanche de Dieu : chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde*. Paris: Seuil.

Thomas Pierret
Aix Marseille Université, CNRS, IREMAM, Aix-en-Provence, France