

## ISLAM INSTRUMENTALIZED

### *Religion and Politics in Historical Perspective*

Does Islam bear some responsibility for a lack of development in the countries in which it dominates?

In this book, economist Jean-Philippe Platteau challenges several specific claims seeking to connect Islam with a lack of development. Through a nuanced analysis, he disputes the widespread view that the doctrine of Islam is fundamentally reactionary, defending tradition against modernity and individual freedom, and the related view that Islam is an obstacle to modern development because of a fusion between the spiritual and political domains. At the same time, his analysis identifies how Islam's decentralized organization, in the context of autocratic regimes, may cause political instability and postpone reforms. Ultimately, he emphasizes how secular authoritarian leaders in Muslim countries have tended to instrumentalize religion at the cost of widespread corruption and regressive measures, creating an unfortunate association between secularism and self-serving cynicism.

Jean-Philippe Platteau is Emeritus Professor of Economics at the University of Namur, in Belgium. He has devoted his research career to studying the role of institutions in economic development and the processes of institutional change. He is the author of several books, including (with R. Peccoud) *Culture, Institutions, and Development: New Insights into an Old Debate* (2011), *Institutions, Social Norms, and Economic Development* (2000), and (with J. M. Baland) *Halt-ing Degradation of Natural Resources: Is There a Role for Rural Communities?* (1996).

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# Islam Instrumentalized

*Religion and Politics in Historical Perspective*

**JEAN-PHILIPPE PLATTEAU**

University of Namur, Belgium



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*To Nicole Moguilevsky, for her patience and intellectual curiosity*

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## Preface

This book has a long history. It started about twelve years ago when I was teaching a course on the Institutional Foundations of the Market for students of the economics master's degree at the University of Namur. One of my lectures was devoted to a discussion of the role of religion in development, and the starting point was, of course, the work of Max Weber on Protestantism. I then discovered the book *What Went Wrong* (2002) by Bernard Lewis, which provided me with a direct application of Weber's analysis: Unlike Protestantism whose doctrine is conducive to growth, Islam is antagonistic to modernity because it is intrinsically unable to separate religion from politics. Here was therefore a neat thesis, enunciated by an historian, which might not fail to appeal to economists who are used to thinking in terms of elegant models articulated around a well-delineated argument. However, as I expounded Lewis's thesis to my students, I felt increasing unease with its underlying argument. I then began to reflect on the reasons behind my doubts by taking account of major works addressing the relationship between state and religion in the history of Islam, both historical studies and studies dealing with contemporaneous regimes.

As my lecture on religion and development evolved, I wrote two journal articles where I formulated my thinking (Platteau, 2008, 2011). This gave me a first opportunity to receive detailed written reactions to my critique of Lewis's Huntingtonian thesis. At about the same time, I also had several opportunities to present my ideas in Belgium and in Arab countries in front of audiences that included Arab intellectuals and scholars. It was during a conference held in Cairo in 2008 that I made the decision to embark on a book venture following the explicit advice of James Robinson, who attended the event. This decision was reinforced by the strong encouragement I received from Arab intellectuals who found my central argument convincing: Bad politics and the instrumentalization of Islam by cynical

autocrats are responsible for the problems confronted by their countries, rather than Islam per se.

I then looked at my 2008 journal article, dividing arguments amounting to three to four pages each into several future chapters. All of my subsequent work consisted of the elaboration of these chapters and the addition of new ones that appeared essential to completing the argument.

The question remains as to why another book on Islam is needed considering the flurry of such books during the last decades. Of course, the subject is immensely topical given the threatening rise of Islamist movements and their insertion in the heart of advanced European countries. But is an abundance of books really helping improve our understanding of the predicament of Muslim countries? And in which sense can I argue that the present book makes an original contribution that justifies all the efforts put into it?

A combination of five characteristics makes this book unique among the numerous scholarly studies available. Although the book shares certain elements with a number of other studies, no single book uses a similar perspective based on all five traits. Let me now identify each of the five key characteristics.

First, my book looks at Islam from a particular angle: the relationship between religion and politics. This approach logically follows from the puzzle that motivated my query: Is there indeed a fusion between these two domains in the case of Islam? And, more generally, is there a specific sort of relationship between Islam and politics that creates an obstacle to development and modernity? One of the great merits of Lewis's aforementioned book is precisely that it highlights the critical importance of politics. On this score, I entirely agree with him. Indeed, my investigations drove me to the conclusion that it is misleading to consider the role of Islam while ignoring the way it is positioned vis-à-vis political rulers, autocrats in particular. However, I simultaneously raise serious doubts about views that attribute the problems of Muslim countries to a clash of civilizations. There is actually scant empirical ground for arguing that Islam and politics are or have always been merged.

Second, the book adopts a comparative perspective in the sense that it makes repeated references to other religions. Since Lewis draws a contrast between Islam and Christianity, it was just natural to check whether and in which sense religion and politics are, in fact, separated in Christianity. In addition, given the importance of radical puritanical movements in Islam today and their considerable impact on international politics through the actions of al-Qaeda and ISIS, it is almost unavoidable to wonder whether

these movements are a specific feature of Islam. My foray into the worlds not only of Christianity (Chapter 2) but also of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism (Chapter 8) results in a negative answer to that question.

Third, the book delves deeply into the history of Islam (and that of Christianity). Because Lewis identifies the problem of Islam as linked to an intrinsic feature that can be traced to its very foundation, this inquiry must also go all the way back to that remote period. What I propose is therefore an ambitious perspective that covers the whole history of Islam. The contemporaneous relationship between Islam and politics in a large number of Muslim countries (from the postindependence period to the present) receives a lot of attention, particularly in Chapters 6 and 9. Yet this analysis appears at the end of an historical investigation intended to place events in a long-term perspective.

Fourth, the book is grounded in a theoretical framework drawn from economics, which has helped me structure the central argument running through the book. That is why its setup and essential intuitions and results are explicitly discussed (in Chapter 4) in a language accessible to all social scientists. This framework clearly belongs to the field of political economics in the sense that it models the behavior of the state (an autocratic power). Since my interest lies in the relationship between state and religion, the behavior of the religious clerics is also featured.

Fifth, the approach of the book is decidedly multidisciplinary. Although inspired by an economics framework, it draws upon a considerable number of works written not only by economists but also by historians, political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists. The real challenge that I confronted was precisely how to make diverse but relevant studies intelligible within a coherent framework that could be easily grasped by a wide audience of scholars and intellectuals.

By now, it should be clear that the book is the outcome of a social science research endeavor aimed at drawing a “big picture” of the interaction between religion and politics in the specific case of Islam. It took me a lot of time to write, not only because of the abundant material to cover but also because I wanted to have a clear theoretical structure to support the entire argument and to link complex facts together. I believe that my book is very useful in understanding present-day events because it places them in a long-term and comparative perspective. The advantage of such a perspective is that it compels us to take enough distance from the immediate shocks that atrocities committed by fanatics necessarily cause (I am writing this preface just a few days after the killings committed at the national airport and a metro station in Brussels on March 23, 2016) to enable

comprehension of their full meaning and of the context in which they take place.

It is my great pleasure to acknowledge the intellectual support of many people from my own profession and from other disciplines. First and foremost, I wish to express my strong gratitude to four persons who played an important role at critical junctures in the elaboration of this book. By chronological order and, as it happens, reverse alphabetic order, these persons are Karim Zouaoui, James Robinson, Timur Kuran, and Emmanuelle Auriol.

Karim Zouaoui, a biophysicist from the Free University of Brussels, has engaged repeatedly with me, from the very beginning of my enterprise, in deep discussions about the problems of Islam. These discussions were a big stimulus to the thoughts germinating in my mind even before I decided to write on the subject. James Robinson, now at the University of Chicago, motivated me to upgrade my articles into a full-fledged book, as I mentioned earlier. Timur Kuran, now at Duke University, knew quite well the work I did on issues of institutions and development before I became interested in the study of Islam. I am quite thankful to him for having continuously prompted me to work in this new field in which he is an internationally reputed expert. In addition, his advice, remarks, and suggestions as my book took shape were always of very high value to me. I am also immensely indebted to him for having read and edited line by line the final version of the manuscript. In this way, I was able to benefit greatly from his long experience and professional skills in writing books. I took the time he spent to help me improve the book as a measure of his interest in the topic, and so I felt strongly encouraged to deliver a well-polished book. Lastly, Emmanuelle Auriol, from the Toulouse School of Economics, came late but at a decisive stage of the book's finalization. I was then trying to work out a coherent and pertinent theoretical framework to buttress its central argument. My sustained and repeated discussions with her, as well as our joint work on a coauthored paper (in press), proved essential to a central question of the book, namely the differences between centralized and decentralized religions.

Next, I have benefited from many thoughtful comments and suggestions made in a long series of seminars, workshops, conferences, and roundtables organised for the specific purpose of discussing this book's manuscript. The roundtables took place at the Toulouse School of Economics (2015) and the University of Torino (2016); the other events spanned a ten-year period (2006–16) and were held at Namur (twice), Barcelona, Cairo, Kuwait City, Beyruth, Brussels, Stanford, Firenze, Oxford, Torino, Moscow, and Saint Petersburg. Among the people to whom I want to express special thanks are

*Preface*

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