

Olivier Roy

Is Europe Christian?

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One of England's most popular novels of the eighteenth century is Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones*. In it, a certain Mr Thwackum pronounces:

... nor is religion manifold, because there are various sects and heresies in the world. When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England. (Fielding 1749, Book III, ch. 3)

When reading this book, I soon got the impression that by Christian, Olivier Roy means Roman Catholicism, and by Catholicism, he means pre-Vatican II Catholicism. Furthermore, by Europe he means Western Europe, and by Western Europe, he means France and, perhaps, Italy (which does, after all, contain the Vatican).

Of course, I exaggerate – a bit. There are a few references to Poland – Pope John Paul II was, after all, a Pole. There is also a single, throw-away remark about Russian Orthodoxy but no mention of Greek or any other Orthodox religion, let alone of any of the Uniate Churches. This does not mean that the book is not worth reading: it is. But the title would certainly be misleading for the readers of RASCEE who take it for granted that both Central and Eastern Europe are part of Europe and that both Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy are Christian religions.

There are occasions when Professor Roy would appear to offer some sort of justification for his somewhat restrictive position. "If I seem to grant the Catholic Church a virtual monopoly on Christian expression," he writes, "it is because the major Protestant churches in Europe have been self-secularized" (86). Moreover, it would seem, these churches have diluted themselves still further by attempting to integrate the ordination of gay ministers or religious services for gay marriages into their theology. Oh dear. What would the Christ who founded Christianity have made of that, one might ask?

Roy maps for us how the heart of both Protestant and Catholic Christianity moved away from Europe, leaving us with the question: Does Christianity remain at the heart of Europe? From the time of the Reformation, Roy argues, it no longer made sense to speak of Christian Europe; it became more appropriate to speak either of Protestant Europe or of Catholic Europe. One might wonder whether, from the imposition of the "Iron Curtain", it likewise follows that speaking of Europe no longer makes sense, as it became more appropriate to speak of Western and Eastern Europe – even after the end of the Cold War?

Yet as late as 1957, Roy notes, it was not considered necessary by the indubitably Christian engineers of the European Economic Community to mention that Europe was Christian; half a century later, however, Benedict XVI and several others were urging that the preamble for a Constitution of Europe should mention Europe's „Christian roots“. Why, Roy asks, could these roots no longer be assumed? There are two reasons, he tells us. First, secularization has given way to both a religious and a secular dechristianization of Europe; second, there has been the ever-increasing arrival of Islam both through immigration and through the

proposed expansion of the continent's borders with Turkey's application for membership of the European Union. (Neither the Byzantine Empire nor Bulgaria deserve a mention.) Most particularly, the (Catholic) Church is now finding itself having to fight new forms of paganism which have been eroding Christian values, with sexual (im)morality, abortion and same-sex marriage being the major focus of concern.

Roy distinguishes between two types of secularization: (1) the increasing autonomy of the political sphere and (2) the decline in religious observance and its disappearance as the focus of social and cultural life. Roy characterises the latter process as „dechristianization in Europe“ (28), and this, he argues, has been doomed to a ratchet effect: „dechristianization never takes a step backward“ (35).

Among the many examples of modern Europe's dilemmas that Roy discusses is France's resolution of the apparent contradiction of forbidding the Muslim veil whilst permitting the Catholic nun's veil. The sleight of hand here is to claim that, whereas the former is a manifestation of a „foreign religion“, the nun's veil is to be defined as a part of (French/European) culture – so it, unlike the Muslim veil, does not threaten laïcité. Other examples (such as the minarets in Switzerland, the Italian dispute over the crucifix in schools and various decisions by the European Court of Human Rights) all, in different ways, secularise religion by reducing it to culture. “The truth [having become norms rather than values] is now handed down by the courts instead of the Church” (152). “If Europe is to become Christian again, it is in need of prophets, not legislators” (150).

Some of Roy's claims may raise the odd eyebrow. To take what may be a minor example, “mainly secular” England is mentioned as having “hastened” to repeal the law of blasphemy when, in 1989, the Iranian Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa ordering Muslims to kill Salman Rushdie following the riots, book burnings and death threats evoked by the publication of *The Satanic Verses* the previous year (136). In fact, it was not until 2008 that the common law offences of blasphemy and blasphemous libel were abolished in England and Wales. Even by the standards of the British government, a two-decade-long process hardly merits an impression of haste.

Is Europe Christian? undoubtedly presents us with some challenging generalisations; it also contains a wealth of interesting details. I was particularly struck by the information that, evidently, the Council of Trent required hotels in Protestant countries to provide twin beds, and „matrimonial“ (double) beds in Catholic countries (12). The translation by Cynthia Schoch offers us a pleasant read, without the awkwardness of phrase that can all too often spoil the enjoyment of reading books originally published in another language.

Having read the book, however, I am left with a strong desire to invite Professor Roy to drink a cup of coffee – or, perhaps, a cup of tea – with Mr Thwackum.

REFERENCE

Fielding, Henry. 1749. *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*. Dublin: John Smith.