

Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways

March 31, 2011



Religion was supposed to fade away in a secularising, globalising modernity, and in the post-9/11 period, proponents of secularism are often angry and bewildered at the persistence of religion. For both militant Richard Dawkins-style atheists and the more cautious supporters of a strictly secular public sphere, responsibility for the failure to secularise is placed at the door of a sinister resurgent religious militancy and a failure of liberal nerve to resist this resurgence. Secularity itself is, it would seem, never the problem.

But as Olivier Roy argues in *Holy Ignorance*, religious fundamentalism and secularising modernity are much more closely linked than is often appreciated. In fact, it is not just that "secularization has not eradicated religion", he argues, but that secularisation has worked as "we are witnessing ... the militant reformulation of religion in a secularized space that has given religion its autonomy".

Roy's methodology relies on an investigation of the complex and changing relationship between culture and religion to produce a panoramic but subtle overview of the place of religion in a globalised world. His argument is that, whereas in the past there was a close, even symbiotic, connection between religion and culture, in modernity they become decoupled. This is not an inevitable and uniform process, and Roy draws on a vast number of examples and case studies that show how religion and culture interrelate. He is particularly interested in practices of conversion because as religions bring in new adherents they are forced to confront alien cultures.

The contrast between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism is particularly instructive for Roy. Catholicism has historically made concerted attempts to respond to new cultures, as in the development of syncretic practices through South American and African missionary work. This has not been a uniform process but the general tendency has been in the direction of "inculturation", creating a very close connection between, for example, Brazilian culture and Catholicism. In contrast, Protestantism has tended to emphasise a universalist kind of missionary activity, creating a much more uniform practice.

In recent decades, it is the latter strategy that has become much more potent. For all South American, Spanish and Italian Catholicism's symbiotic relationship with local culture, it is losing ground whereas Pentecostalism and other Protestant variants are booming in hitherto Catholic

strongholds. But it is a strength of Roy's book that he pays due heed to counter-examples. So there are also cases of Protestantism being historically closely connected to local cultures and losing ground in recent decades like their Catholic counterparts, as with Danish Lutheranism.

Holy Ignorance does not rely on an essentialist view of particular religions, but on a wider argument about the place of religion in a secularising modernity. Secularisation denies and undermines religion's symbiotic connection to culture and in the process religions become "formatted" or standardised, so that they come to resemble each other. So, for example, the roles of Jewish rabbis, Catholic priests and Muslim imams become similar.

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As religion breaks free from its local manifestations, it becomes more easily transplanted to other locations. Fundamentalist forms of religion do this most successfully. Unanchored in the constraints of tradition and local culture, fundamentalism recognises no limitation and hence comes to view everything outside itself as pagan and impure. This is the "holy ignorance" that Roy identifies and warns us of.

Holy Ignorance's modest length suggests that there is some over-simplification and Roy's thesis awaits and requires serious empirical examination. But, if nothing else, this extraordinary book's disturbing message - that secularism may be religious fundamentalism's best friend - is worth taking very seriously.

Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways

By Olivier Roy, translated by Ros Schwartz Hurst, 288pp, £20.00 ISBN 9781850659921. Published 1 October 2010

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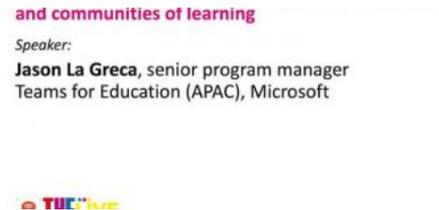


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