



John M. Owen IV, *Confronting Political Islam: Six Lessons from the West's Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015). 232 pp., \$29.95 hardcover

In *Confronting Political Islam: Six Lessons from the West's Past*, John M. Owen IV examines three ideological struggles in European (and North American) history to see what lessons these might offer for dealing with modern political Islamism. The result is an intellectually fascinating bridge across academic disciplines and regional studies, as well as a work offering practical advice.

Owen defines “ideology” as “a set of claims about [the] best way to order society” (131). The historical ideological struggles Owen studies are first, the religio-political machinations, including bloody wars, of 16th/17th Europe, second, 18th/19th-century monarchical and republican upheavals and revolutions, and third, 20th-century communism, fascism, and democracy.

This is a book with “Lessons” rather than chapters. The six lessons Owen identifies are the following:

- (1) *Don't Sell Islamism Short*. It is complex and may not be going away soon;
- (2) *Ideologies Are (Usually) Not Monolithic*. Just as there were more varieties of communists than one could count on two hands, we need to recognize and understand the nuanced variations in political Islamism in order to be able to identify threats as well as opportunities for engagement in a timely, strategically astute manner;
- (3) *Foreign Interventions Are Normal*. States pursue protection of their own interests, outside their borders if they deem necessary. This should not surprise us;
- (4) *A State May Be Rational and Ideological at the Same Time*. Ideologies and rational interests are not always mutually

exclusive. At the same time, it is wise to exercise some caution since otherwise rational ideological actors can slip into irrational, often self-destructive behavior, as Owen deftly demonstrates with historical examples;

- (5) *The Winner May Be “None of the Above.”* This “Lesson” should be mandatory reading for policy-makers. Owen provides historical examples in which conflicts of ideologies “A” versus “B” resulted in C, (AB)², and (C+1)³—this is to say, we need to have our minds open to possible the emergence of variations, hybrids, of other offshoots of the currently dominant ideologies and political systems of today. Owen demonstrates that the struggle of “secularism” versus “political Islamism” is already producing variations on each side of the struggle, with hybrids in between;
- (6) *Watch Turkey and Iran*. With Turkey leaning toward constitutional democracy with a twist of political Islamism added in, on the one hand, and Iran pushing political Islamism with nary a nod to constitutionalism or democracy, on the other, Owen recommends watching to see how these “exemplary” states, as he calls them, fare for an indication of which end of the ideological spectrum is most likely to take root elsewhere.

The Introduction to *Confronting Political Islam* is subtitled, “It Did Happen Here” (i.e. in the West). Political Islamism is not so alien as to be unintelligible. Instead, *Confronting Political Islam* offers a lens which, refreshingly, steps away

from “orientalist” exoticization of “eastern” Islamists, treating them as if they were incomprehensible and *sui generis*, and instead considers them within the context of human experience. Owen describes his book as “the first sustained analytical comparison between the Middle East today and various region-wide legitimacy crises in the history of Europe and the Americas—crises that exhibited remarkably similar chains of events.” (5)

This book is not an introduction to political Islamism. Owen focuses on what he knows best, namely Western political-religious and political-ideological history.

By and large Owen approaches Islam with nuance, observing, “It is not Islam the religion that is generating the problems ... It is rather a deep and prolonged disagreement among Muslims over how far Islam ought to shape the laws and institutions of society” (5). There is a bit of tension in the book between occasionally

overly simplistic references to the insistence of Islamists “that law must be *Sharia*” (7), a topic alone on which one could write volumes, on the one hand, and Owen’s important Lesson 2 that “*Ideologies Are (Usually) Not Monolithic.*” But Owen can be forgiven for this and I think should be commended for packing this romp through European history, which is also a comparative study with modern political Islamism, into a mere 164 pages.

I recommend this book for teaching advanced undergraduate and graduate courses, for policy analysis, and last but not least for an appreciation of how very much the study of history has to offer for understanding the human condition. Owen’s book is, among other things, a reminder of why it matters to keep the study of history alive. ❖

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