

4-1-2011

Frédéric Volpi, *Political Islam Observed*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Robert D. Lee

Colorado College, rlee@coloradocollege.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lee, Robert D. (2011) "Frédéric Volpi, *Political Islam Observed*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 2: No. 2, Article 11.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1056

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol2/iss2/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of International and Global Studies* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Frédéric Volpi, *Political Islam Observed*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Historically speaking, whether or not they have lived under Muslim rule, few Muslims have been directly involved in politics. Subjects? Yes. Soldiers? Yes. Citizen activists? Until the 19th and 20th centuries, not frequently. (The same thing might be said of most Christians and most Jews, for that matter.) This is not to say, of course, that Islam has ever been irrelevant to politics. On the one hand, leaders of nations with Muslim populations have historically sought the approval of the religious establishment to solidify the legitimacy of their political leadership. On the other hand, the Ulama, a body comprising Muslim's legal scholars and clergy, have historically depended upon political leaders for enforcement of the law they have interpreted.

It was in response to European incursion and the advent of participatory politics, however, that Muslims began to make their voices more prominently heard in the political realm, sometimes evoking Islam itself as rationale for failure or a recipe for success. How can one best describe these voices and the movements they represent? We can all list some of the terms employed: reformists, *fundamentalists*, *militants*, *salafis*, *ihadists*, *radicals*, *neo-Islamic totalitarianism*, *Islamofascists*, etc. In the last 20 years, the term "Islamist" has become the favored umbrella adjective and "political Islam" the favored collective noun to describe these voices and movements.

In *Political Islam Observed*, Professor Volpi questions the utility of the term "political Islam." He calls it "slippery" and predicts that it has no future in social scientific analysis because it does not accurately or precisely describe any phenomenon distinct from the Western conceptual frameworks from which it has emerged. Insofar as it can be defined in essentialist fashion, it falls to the common critique of Orientalism, and to portray it instead as a "contextual construct," as Volpi does, is to confirm its evanescence and "chameleon-like" properties. Volpi illustrates his argument by analyzing a number of different contexts in which political Islam has been invoked, including post-colonial studies, international relations, the sociology of religion, the politics of democratization, debates about multiculturalism, the struggle against terrorism, and controversies about globalization. Volpi's chapters consist of annotated bibliographies for each of these contexts.

The title of this volume represents a "wink" (Volpi's term) toward Clifford Geertz and Geertz' collection of lectures entitled *Islam Observed*. The wink, however, is misleading. Volpi does not follow Geertz in observing aspects of Islamic behavior but rather observes the observers of political Islam. Volpi's book more closely resembles Edward Said's *Orientalism* (in which Said argued that romanticized images and false assumptions formed the body of Western attitudes toward the Middle East) than it does Geertz' *Islam Observed* because Volpi's work is, in fact, a commentary on scholarship (although Volpi does follow Geertz in his criticism of "unreflective nominalism"). Geertz asks whether it makes sense to put a single label on two utterly distinct forms of mysticism, two distinct forms of Islam, as he observed them in Morocco and Indonesia. Volpi asks a similar question about political Islam, but he looks for his evidence in what others have written. Graduate students may be grateful for the extensive list of sources; scholars may also be pleased about making an appearance in Volpi's work, especially if they are treated favorably; uninitiated readers lured to this book by the importance of the subject and the relative brevity of the treatment, however, may find it difficult going.

Among the scholars whose work Volpi examines, who are the favorites? Talal Asad receives more attention than anyone else, or such is my impression. The names Olivier Roy,

Gilles Kepel, Saba Mahmoud, Nazih Ayubi, Dale Eickelman, James Piscatori, and Mahmood Mamdani seem to appear with more frequency than others among the hundreds of authorities cited. Some works get a page or two of consideration and others only that many sentences. A reader cannot help but wonder how those authors will respond to such brief encapsulation of their arguments.

Political Islam Observed bears some resemblance to Said's *Orientalism* in its debt to Foucault and, perhaps as a result, in its failure to provide alternatives to the flawed, perspectival, and contextual ways in which writers have treated political Islam. Volpi argues that there can be no definitive account of political Islam. He suggests that "subaltern voices" and "micro-social" approaches might conceivably bring fresh meaning to the term, but he acknowledges that any such voices and approaches would necessarily be as contextual as all other definitions he has considered. They could not possess superior "truth status" because there exists no exit from perspective. On the one hand, this assertion condemns to failure the search for a single coherent understanding of political Islam. On the other hand, lack of an objective understanding does not negate the utility of partial, segmented, "modular definitions." If there is no definitive answer, every response may have value, and the Volpi argument lends itself to precisely this interpretation.

As a concept, "political Islam" suffers from many of the same problems as "Islam." The boundaries are unclear; the unity of the phenomenon, uncertain. When Olivier Roy proclaimed the "failure of political Islam," he was referring to the efforts of political movements to seize control of states in the name of Islam. Does "political Islam" refer only to such groups? What about groups that promote education or social advancement in the name of Islam but do not propose candidates for office or seek violent overthrow? What would constitute an "Islamist state" such that it would deviate from the nation-state model common to international relations? How does one distinguish an Islamist from an ordinary Muslim who seeks to exercise his or her democratic rights by speaking, contributing, voting, or running for office? Eickelman and Piscatori have insisted that Islam has become the language of politics in Muslim countries. Is everyone who uses such language an Islamist? Are Muslim politics different from politics?

The difficulty of defining boundaries may be common to just about every discipline that uses political Islam as a concept. Almost as common is the difficulty of separating that which is to be explained from the explanatory factor, i.e. differentiating *explanans* and *explanandum*, as Volpi puts it. He compares political Islam with globalization in this respect, even as he tries to show how political Islam could be understood in that context. The spread of political Islam appears to be explained by globalization. Roy points out that Islam has been separated from the cultures from which it arose as a result of globalization. But emphasis on scriptural, universal religion has also encouraged separation of belief from culture and promoted globalization. Is change in political Islam that which explains or that which is explained?

Volpi argues that the very definition of political Islam varies with the disciplinary paradigm within which it is called upon to perform. Volpi's argument is easier to follow in chapters in which disciplinary perspectives (e.g. modernization and secularization theory) are clear and tougher to follow in places where a disciplinary paradigm is more difficult to identify, such as the chapter on multiculturalism. This organization by chapter does give some sort of order to the argument, but the chapters lack conclusions, a fact that undermines the notion that there is at least some commonality of treatment within a discipline. Presumably, the author

wishes to convey that very message.

This is a volume produced by a prominent university press in the United States, yet it retains British spellings and punctuation. Moreover, the number of typographic errors seems extraordinary even in this age of editorial sloppiness. I marked more than a dozen on first reading. The errors don't interfere with the message or diminish the value of a carefully argued, thoughtful, stimulating book. They just annoy.

Robert D. Lee
Colorado College
rlee@ColoradoCollege.edu