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Roy, Olivier. *In Search of the Lost Orient. An Interview. As Interviewed by Jean-Louis Schlegel. Translated by C. Jon Delogu. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.*

Olivier Roy's book, *In search of the Lost Orient: An Interview*, captures the reader's conception of the Orient and shapes it into a new imaginary. Roy is currently joint-chair at the Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies, an inter-disciplinary center at the European University Institute. Previously, he was senior researcher at the French National Centre for Scientific Research in Paris. He headed the Mission for Tajikistan (1993-94) and was a Consultant for the UN Office of the Coordinator for Afghanistan (1988). Since 2011, he has been heading project "ReligioWest," the European Research Council. His works in the field include studies of political Islam, the Middle East, Islam in the West, and comparative religions. Roy holds an "Agrégation de Philosophie" (1972) and a Ph.D. in political science. In 2008-2009 he was a visiting professor at Berkeley University. He is the author of, among other books, *Globalized Islam* (Columbia University Press), 2004, and *Holy Ignorance* (Oxford UP), 2010. He is presently working on *Islamic Norms in the Public Sphere*, conversions and apostasy and comparative religions.

In search of the Lost Orient: An Interview is composed of six parts, with each part broken into a number of chapters structured as a series of responses to the interviewer's questions. In some cases, interview questions purposefully overlap to explore, probe, and to make stronger specific points to illustrate certain concepts with more clarity. The questions solicit numerous anecdotes that exemplify both the absurdities of the Oriental world as it is often perceived through the eyes of the uninitiated Westerners and demonstrate how the Orient became not only misunderstood but often "lost," either because of its complexities or its constantly shifting and changing nature. Roy's responses illustrate that in many respects, this shifting nature nonetheless manages to stay unchanged and grounded in its past history, which by and large is often neglected from the outside perspective.

As is clear from his biography, Roy's expertise, enhanced by the fact that his life is characterized by "donning different caps – that of the activist, the academic expert, the field researcher, and the university power broker" (xii), allows for this discussion to float seamlessly in and out of the public and the private domains. By using this structure, the book invites the reader into a personalized but never trivialized discussion. The mixture of personal anecdotes and public, political events is well-balanced. Roy's personal life serves as a backdrop that illustrates not only the life of a public intellectual deeply committed to his professional pursuits but also his political convictions. The interviews highlight Roy's transparency and willingness to be self-critical and never verge on the need for the praise. Roy's transparency is exemplified in his "simple rule": "Speak with everyone and tell everyone the same thing, write, and publish everything we think – in short, go public with one's opinions without looking to some standards of purity when it comes to the company one keeps (because one's never in control of that). And go all out" (p. 157).

The book starts with Roy's hitchhiking to Afghanistan at the age of nineteen. Throughout this book, Roy returns numerous times to the issues related to Afghanistan and Iran. His discussion of both Afghanistan and Iran is simply superb. Particularly interesting is his discussion related to religion and secularization. He connects these two topics with the French revolutions of May 1968. By reflecting on the events of May 1968, he states that these events made him realize the danger of being swept by "the spell of the group" and the possibility of becoming radicalized. He argues that the same logic leads young people to join al-Qaeda (p. 19).

He argues that though the term “terrorism” was not part of past parlance, the term “revolution” carries significant similarities with the current meaning of the term “terrorism,” as both are driven by similar militancy. He states that the 1968 ideology was animated by “sacrifice, fusion into a powerful mass, humiliating mockery of the individualism of petit bourgeois, and ultimately death” (p. 19). In Roy’s articulation, the events and the speeches of the May 1968 revolution were “deluded incantations” (p. 21). Reflecting on the May 1968 revolution and his experience on the ground subsequently led him to the following question: “Ought one to revert to an ideology of progress, even though that ideology has been seriously put into question by all the crimes committed in the name of that alleged progress?” (p. 71) and the correlated question, “How does one conceive of an ethics without moralism, and how does one think in political terms about that which derives from ethics?” (p. 72).

Roy discusses his 1970s trip to Yemen as the time when he developed “another obsession, now with guerilla warfare” (p. 36). His subsequent travels made Roy realize that for a long time, he “had been traveling in an imaginary Orient,” and he made a commitment to “avoid becoming a prisoner of cultural illusions and to better understand a society by paying attention to the banal” (p. 47). A new set of questions animated his explorations, particularly questions related to the distinctions between the universal and the particular, specifically, “What belongs to a universal framework that is common to all humanity, and what belongs to a particular culture?” (p. 47). Roy’s next discovery broke his idealized vision of cultural syncretism according to which he imagined that “Afghans, Turks, and others had integrated elements of Western philosophy and culture and that we were all moving toward an intermingling of cultures” (p. 48). A more focused exploration of the cultural particularities made him realize that “the real people on the ground don’t live it in that way” (p. 48).

The Russian invasion of Afghanistan was seen by Roy as his “moment of truth,” and “war seemed to be the way to penetrate into a society that was refusing [his] admittance” (p. 78). Roy’s field experience in Afghanistan and Pakistan provided him with a platform for his subsequent theoretical analysis, which he used in his teaching and publications. In his words, this experience led him to build “the concepts of Islamism, of rural guerilla activity, of tribalism and ethnic groups, and especially the reconstructions that resulted from the war” (pp. 92-93). Most significantly, these travels sensitized and nuanced Roy’s views of the pressures of war. He states, “It’s a vain pursuit to always be looking for the just norm, distinguishing between the good guys and the bad guys, always siding, of course, with the good guys, keeping one’s hands clean, even if that means washing one’s hands by pulling out” (p. 116).

Roy argues against “secularizing religion” (p. 112). In this view, secularizing religion leads to the development of neo-fundamentalism (p. 113). In addition, he argues, neo-fundamentalism is the impact of the “globalization and deterritorialization of Islam” (p. 114). The failure of political Islam, according to Roy, resulted in neo-fundamentalism and epitomized itself in martyrdom as “the proof of failure of political Islam” (p. 115). His analysis of religion’s impact on politics (and vice versa) is thought-provoking and provocative. Roy differentiates between the martyr and the terrorist. In his view, the martyr, contrary to the terrorist, “does not choose death, he meets it” (p. 226). The terrorist, in contrast, seeks death because “this world is so rotten that one ought to blow oneself up” (p. 226).

Roy provides a rather biting critique of what he calls “the culturist version” of Islam maintained by the cultural studies. In his view, this version presumes the existence of “an implicit cultural software that determines Muslim behavior” (p. 218). He is rather consistent in his skepticism of *laïcité* – secularism, which is the core concept of the French constitution,¹ often

coupling *laicite* with the term “militant.” In his articulation, the attempts at confining the religious to the private sphere demonstrate a nondemocratic and authoritarian behavior. Consistently critical of secularization, Roy maintains that Western secularism often misinterprets what should be defined as religious.² A Westerner tends to interpret visible signs as “an explanatory factor,” whereas it might be nothing but a manner of speaking. This does not, however, apply to Jihadists, who, he says, “had the honesty of real fanatics” (p. 128). Roy reminds us that many Jihadists are converted Westerners and in his view, there is nothing essentially Islamic in their radicalization (p. 130).

Discussing the origins of the Afghan Taliban, Roy notes that it came from Sufism but that “the Sufi [peaceful] spirit disappeared quickly in the 1980s,” unable to compete with Wahhabism, which was “more congruent with the ideal of the ‘Arabs’ in al-Qaeda, even if al-Qaeda was never a religious movement in the sense that it never advanced a particular preaching but always stuck to jihadist activism” (p. 134). The madrassas that attracted many of its students were an alternative to secular educational institutions, attendance at which was often cost-prohibitive.

Roy refers to Sartre’s³ “rupture” as a condition for freedom and war. This moment of rupture, Roy claims, can also be a question of revolt or various battles against dominant power. When asked whether his references to Sartre place Roy’s analysis of terrorism in more existential than political terms, Roy posits that for him, fighting terrorism requires first understanding *why* al-Qaeda attracts so many converts. Looking in the Qur’an for explanation is pointless and misguided. The logic of these movements is internal to each society. Referring to al-Qaeda, he argues that the explanation cannot be found “vertically (from the Koran to Bin Laden via Ibn Tayyimiyya and Sayyid Qutb)” but from “a horizontal perspective: individualization, the crisis of cultural reference, the growing autonomy of the religious person and their deculturation, and a new intergenerational crisis” (p. 198).

Again and again, Roy invokes the events of the 1968 to draw some parallels with Islamic extremism. Similarly, he consistently argues against secularization and disputes the idea that a society first needs to be secularized to attain democratization. He refers to the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which, as he says, articulates no established religion, hence allowing for diversity within the religious space (rather than no religion). In his view, the First Amendment creates a “homothetic situation alongside the development of democracy.” He adds, “If, in the religious sphere, every individual is completely free, then democracy is possible” (p. 211). This does not mean that being religious is prescribed within a democracy, but it does mean that the incorporation of religion within the public domain should not be prohibited, nor should attention be directed to a particular religion. Yet, Roy laments, this approach is “discredited by ultrasecularists as insincere and duplicitous” (p. 211). Roy uses the example of veiling to demonstrate his point. He argues that the increased presence of veils and headscarves does not point to an upsurge in religiosity but rather, increased visibility. As he states, “What makes the religious visible today is its disconnection from the dominant culture, and that is as true for Christianity as it is for Islam” (p. 215). The presence of veils is the mark of “the entry of pious women into public space and the labor market – and their exit from the traditional setting of the housewife” (p. 215).

To further demonstrate that secularization is not a pre-condition for democratization, Roy invokes the example of the Tunisian Constitution of 2014, which “explicitly recognizes the right to change religions” (p. 216). In his view, the attempts to confine religion to the private sphere are nondemocratic and authoritarian. He suggests that “the Muslim world is going through a

crisis of the religious sphere” and adds that “the Muslim world is very diverse and changing all the time” (p. 217). He is, however, critical of its emphasis on religious control and the obsession with Orthodoxy. He differentiates between religion as a normative corpus and religiosity as the way one believes and lives one’s religion.

Roy challenges readers’ assumptions on many levels. Particularly interesting is his critique of cultural studies: “It’s only with postcolonialism and the advent of cultural studies that the culture of the dominated will be ascribed a militant dignity of resistance, even if unconscious to the actors themselves” (p. 203). Roy’s discussion of the replacement of cultural specificity with what he calls “uniformization” and the use of codes such as “smiley face” or a “high five” is particularly thought-provoking and engaging. He points out the replacement of the implicit by the explicit that requires no need for any interpretation (or contemplation for that matter) as a lazy way of communicating. He, as mentioned, prefers transparency.

In sum, the narratives that Roy provides in these interviews testify to his approach of someone who is not afraid to question assumptions and is someone who “does not keep his lamp under a basket or hidden under a cloak of neutral academic prose” (ix). In fact, he repeatedly addresses his discomfort with what he calls “pseudo-neutrality,” which reduces “everything even remotely subjective” and philosophical and replaces it with statistics and quantitative analysis. In his words, “Everything interesting really follows from the quality of the questions being asked at the onset” (p. 245). As a traveler-researcher, Roy fearlessly went places abandoned by others and asked many hard and controversial questions. His comments related to many important events of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries might perhaps be troubling to some of our unexamined assumptions.

This book will be particularly relevant and engaging for those who are interested in philosophy, religious studies, Islamic studies, and political science and focus on East-West relations. In addition, because of its genre, it might be illuminating for those who like the personal narrative intermingled with the serious philosophical and religious explorations, often presented in a self-probing and provocative voice.

Notes

¹ In addition, he shows the deepest understanding of “the mental tragedy that occurs with the fall of the Soviet Union.” He writes: “Millions of people [woke] up one day with an identity and nationality that didn’t necessarily mean that much to them before, and then, by inertia, weariness, choice, or simple twist of fate in a history without history makers, it becomes real. In the years that followed, the dragon that is history regularly spit out pieces of the past that no one wanted to inherit” (p. 121).

² Roy also objects to applying the term “liberal” to religion. In his view, it is up to a believer to be liberal or not.

³ In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre discusses the concepts of identity and freedom and claims that anguish (of the reformed gambler) leads to his apprehension of “the permanent rupture of determinism.” This anguish, in turn, results in manifestation of freedom and cannot be avoided.

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