Chapman University

Chapman University Digital Commons

Economics Faculty Articles and Research

Economics

2-8-2022

Coping with Defeat: Sunni Islam, Roman Catholicism, and the Modern State. Jonathan Laurence (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021). Pp. 606. $35.00 paper. ISBN: 9780691172125

Jared Rubin

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/economics_articles

Part of the Catholic Studies Commons, Christian Denominations and Sects Commons, Christianity Commons, Cultural History Commons, European History Commons, History of Christianity Commons, History of Religion Commons, History of Religions of Western Origin Commons, Islamic Studies Commons, Islamic World and Near East History Commons, Other History Commons, Political History Commons, Public History Commons, and the Social History Commons

Coping with Defeat: Sunni Islam, Roman Catholicism, and the Modern State. Jonathan Laurence (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021). Pp. 606. $35.00 paper. ISBN: 9780691172125

Comments

This book review was originally published in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* in 2022.
https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743821001318

The Creative Commons license below applies only to this version of the review.

Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License.

Copyright

The author

Jonathan Lawrence, *Coping with Defeat: Sunni Islam, Roman Catholicism, and the Modern State*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. xxvi + 578 pp. $35 (paperback), ISBN: 9780691172125.

Reviewed by Jared Rubin, Chapman University

Throughout the medieval and early modern periods, Catholic and Sunni Islamic religious authorities had substantial spiritual *and* secular power over their flock. The papacy governed a large swath of central Italy, and the Church was by far the largest landowner in Europe. In various Muslim empires in North Africa and the Middle East, religious authorities played a central role in legitimating rule and were independent from secular power. By the mid-19th century this changed. The papacy was under assault from Italian revolutionaries, its secular power nearly dissipated. A large fraction of the world's Muslims lived under European colonial rule. Yet, what could have been a death knell to both sets of religious establishments ended up as simply a fork in the road. In the 20th and 21st centuries, both have reasserted their *spiritual* authority, although without the same degree of secular power as in centuries past. Meanwhile, the two religions are the largest in the world and continue to grow (there are around 1.6 billion Sunni Muslims and 1.3 billion Catholics). How did this happen? How did Catholic and Sunni Islamic religious authorities lose so much power, only to salvage their important role in providing spiritual guidance to nearly half of the world's population?

These are the questions Jonathan Lawrence grapples with in his extensive, highly-learned, meticulously-researched *Coping with Defeat: Sunni Islam, Roman Catholicism, and the Modern State*. Using a combination of historical narrative, archival research, and interviews, Lawrence identifies three "defeats" faced by both the Catholic and Sunni Islamic religious establishments, all of which resulted in the surrender by religious authorities to state supremacy. The first was the "end of empire." This happened for the Catholic Church after the Reformation. By the end of the 16th century, the Church was no longer the monopoly provider of religious services, and religious legitimation took a back seat in those places under Protestant influence. In Sunni Islam, this defeat came in the 19th and first two decades of the 20th century, as more and more of the world's Muslims came under the suzerainty of European colonizers. In Lawrence's eyes, this is among the most important causes of today's relationship between religion and the state in the Islamic world: "today's theological disunity within Sunni Islam can be traced to Europeans' decision to undermine the caliphate in lands they briefly ruled actors the Middle East, North Africa, and South and Southeast Asia" (p. 3). The second defeat occurred with the rise of the nation state. In Europe, this happened in the early modern period, and it resulted in a massively reduced role for the Church in politics and an increase in policies not favored by the Church. In MENA, this happened after World War I (in Turkey) and after independence (in the 20th century) elsewhere. It ultimately resulted in religion become subjugated to the state in bureaucratic organizations such as ministries of Islamic affairs, which are direct descendants of "the Ottoman model of legal subordination and spiritual monopoly" (p. 156). This was a direct consequence of the dismantling of the "universal caliphate" by European colonizers in the previous century, as well as the fact that the colonial powers "never reassigned [a consensual Islamic center], thus leaving huge numbers of believers who were open to other influences—especially the political Islam movement growing in the 1920s in British-occupied India and Egypt" (p. 115). The third defeat was the movement of Catholics

and Muslims out of the traditional religious heartlands: the Catholic diaspora to the US and the Islamic diaspora to Europe. Both posed new challenges for religious authorities, who had to devise new ways to exert influence over believers who resided outside of their political boundaries.

Lawrence dedicates a large portion of the book to detailing how these "defeats" took shape in various places across the Catholic and Sunni Muslim worlds. He delves into the histories of each region, deftly moving between medieval Christianity, Ottoman Islam, back to post-Reformation Christianity, onto post-colonial Islam, and so on. An appealing aspect of Lawrence's argument is that he does *not* treat the religions as monoliths. When discussing both religions, he provides a country-by-country account of how the three "defeats" transpired in their boundaries. This is important for multiple reasons. For one, there was much heterogeneity between countries. Lawrence is particularly strong on showing this in MENA, where he sprinkles in snippets of interviews with key religious figures or bureaucrats. Moreover, studying individual cases separately helps shine greater light on what they all have in common. This is especially true of the post-colonial Sunni Islamic world, where the institutionalization and state-sponsorship of religion became ubiquitous. It was impossible to come away from these case studies without having learned a significant amount about the changing role of religion in the state in a variety of Middle Eastern, North African, and Western European contexts.

The book is not just about the "three defeats," but—as the title suggests—how the Catholic Church and leading Muslim clerics have *coped* with these defeats. Lawrence makes a compelling case that both Catholic and Muslim religious authorities were ultimately able to gain their footing, even if it meant a vastly different institutional context and less secular political power. To cope with defeat, authorities in both religions embraced *spiritual* power, which transcends national borders and is not necessarily dependent on state patronage. Religion became increasingly depoliticized, a point that Lawrence emphasizes as critical for the future of the regions, particularly MENA: "just as democratic nation-states struggled to find the right balance of power in civil-military relations, an apolitical framework for civil-religious relations is required for democracy to thrive" (p. 16). In other words, "depoliticization has everything to do with how the religion is structured and organized" (p. 434).

The paths to this end result were different between the two religions. In the face of a rapidly changing world, the Church instituted reforms in Vatican II (1962-65) which enabled it to embrace modernity (to some degree). Lawrence argues that the embrace of borderless spiritual power, along with more international training and larger bureaucracies, is what has enabled the Church to grow so rapidly outside of Europe in the last half-century in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia. Meanwhile, the fate of "caliphate Islam" was quite different, in part because of the dismantling of the "universal caliphate" by colonial authorities (in contrast to the papacy, which maintained its spot in the Vatican). Muslim religious authorities in the late 20th and 21st centuries have had to cope with the rising influence of Wahhabism, autocratic governance, and violent extremism (both in MENA and the West). Various countries in the region have "coped with defeat" differently, but common to most are renewed state investment in religious infrastructure (mosques, training for clerics) and outreach to Muslim diasporas abroad, particularly in Europe. Importantly, "governments did not Islamicize the public sphere in service of divine conquest or a theocratic endgame. Rather, they preempted and co-opted hostile takeovers by strengthening schools, mosques, seminaries, and faculties as a buffer from the ground up" (p. 332). On the other hand,

these changes have also created the conditions for groups such as the Islamic State to claim a "new caliphate," one that replaces what was lost under colonial domination. In this telling, violent extremism is a direct result of the "defeats" that Lawrence lays out. This leads him to conclude that "one policy implication is that governments leave their religious communities underserved and unprotected at their own peril" (p. 436).

These arguments are compelling and provide important insight for the future of Islam and Catholicism around the world. If there is one structural feature of the book I found less compelling, it is the framing of a "reversal" between the Catholic Church and the "Sunni Caliphate" between the mid-19th century and today. Lawrence motivates the argument by noting the calamity faced by the Catholic Church in light of the Italian Revolution, where it appeared as if the papal seat may vanish forever. On the other hand, the "Ottoman caliphate flourished as a spiritual project during its final century" (p. 394). Much of the book attempts to describe how these religious establishments, in reacting to the "three defeats," have switched positions: the Church has re-emerged as a spiritual force emanating from the Vatican, whereas there is no universal caliphate, and Islam across MENA is subject to state control and funding. While this argument is nicely substantiated, the choice of the mid-19th century as a starting point for a reversal is not obviously a good one. One could make the case that the situation in the mid-19th century was a major deviation from historical norms, and modern arrangements are much closer to a depoliticized form of historical arrangements prior to the 19th century.

I learned a lot from reading this book. It is sure to be of interest to scholars of (historical) political economy, political science of MENA and Western Europe, and religion. The case studies were full of detail typically reserved for books focused on a specific region. If I had to quibble with any feature of the book, it is that its greatest strength is also its greatest weakness. The historical detail is so vast and wide-ranging that it is often easy for the reader to forget how it fits into the bigger argument (which Lawrence lays out in the introduction and recaps in the conclusion). Rarely are signposts given, save for occasionally in the short conclusions of chapters, for how the historical details fit into the bigger picture. For instance, it was initially unclear—to me, at least—why Lawrence spent such a large chunk of the middle of the book discussing Catholic and Muslim diasporas in the US and Europe, respectively. It all came together at the end of the book, but I suspect many readers will not make it to the conclusion (beginning on p. 393), where the arguments are tied together. In the grand scheme of things, this is not a bad problem for a book to have; after all, it does indeed present an argument and substantiate that argument over hundreds of pages. In any case, even if the reader does not connect the dots the way that Lawrence wants them to, they will certainly learn a lot along the way.