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RELIGION AND RADICALIZATION

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Review of Beatriz Molina Rueda (*ed.*), *Studying and Preventing the Radicalization of Islam. What School Communities Can Do?* (Granada: Editorial Universidad de Granada, 2009), 4 volumes.

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The four volumes under the coordination of Beatriz Molina Rueda, published as e-books, present us with an exhaustive research that tackles various aspects of religious radicalism, a phenomenon that gets more and more attention especially after the events of 9/11 in the States.¹ This book brings forward a discussion focused on the study and prevention of radicalization of Islam in Bulgaria, Morocco, Romania, and Spain. It reflects the approach and conclusions of a research whose results have been presented in three international conferences. They are as follows: the Granada conference (Spain, April 1-4, 2008) under the title *Integration, Immigration and Islam Radicalization Experiences*, the conference in Sofia (Bulgaria, September 16-19, 2008) entitled *Studying and preventing the radicalization of Islam in Eastern Europe*, and the Rabat conference (Morocco, November 24-27, 2008) under the title *The role of peace culture and education in preventing cultural religious radicalization*. The common effort goes to the international project *Studying and preventing the radicalization of Islam. What can school communities do?*

We will discuss here only the fourth volume that presents the final reports resulting from all debates that took place. We would like to highlight that the analyses are on two levels. First, we tackle the perception of radicalization of Islam in the countries in question (we will discuss both the perceptions of leaders of religious communities and the general perception of the community). Secondly, we analyze the role of education in the prevention of radicalization of fundamentalist movements that are generated in an Islamic context. For this particular situation, our starting point is the capacity of education, generally speaking, to offer the fundamentals for understanding and explaining such phenomena, as well as the capacity of the educational system to operate and prevent such phenomena.

An overall look allows us to bring order to things. The volume is structured in four parts, under the umbrella of *The situation of radicalization of Islam in...* In the case of Bulgaria, Morocco, and Spain, we can spot some similarities, as well as visible differences, while in the case of Romania, the situation suffers more nuances. Due to this, Romania is the first to come in our analysis, whereas Spain, Morocco, and Bulgaria are discussed as a whole.

One methodology-based remark, with a critical aspect that we can also find with some of the authors of the current volume, should be expressed from the very beginning. This work, that has brought together over twenty researchers (university professors, journalists, public persons, etc.) from the most diverse areas (philosophy, sociology, statistics, psychology, history, etc.), starts from an issue overly discussed in the literature of the field. It is about the assumption that we experience a radicalization of Islam. Of course, events (here I mean the terrorist attacks) caused by Islamic fundamentalist movements are a given fact, a status quo, that implicitly create the perception according to which there

is a radicalization of Islam. This assumption makes us distinguish, as already mentioned in the literature of the field, between Islam as a religious tradition² and the new movements that develop in certain Muslim communities. The current analyses define very precisely the clear occurrences of Islam (Spain, Morocco, Romania, and Bulgaria). Moreover, Mihaela Frunză, Sandu Frunză and Claudiu Herteliu emphasize this distinction when they analyze the situation of Romania (*Muslims in Romania: a religious minority in a multicultural space* pp.187 - 209), as well as Mohamed Nouri when he analyzes the situation of Morocco (although analyses are obviously biased in *Situation report on the radicalization of Islam in Morocco*, pp. 67-86) and, finally, Carlos Echeverría Jesús when he analyzes the situation of the radicalization of Spain (*Islamist radicalization in Spain* pp.293-312). To check his assumption about the occurrence of a radicalization phenomenon, analyses of the topic bibliography were performed, interviews were made with personalities of the Muslim communities in the countries in question, and a survey was applied, relevant for the investigated group, still without the claim for a generalization at population level for the respective country. In Spain, Romania, and Bulgaria, the survey was created identically, focused on the way in which Muslims are perceived by the rest of the population, while in the case of Morocco, similar questions targeted how Muslims relate to the Western world and its values.

The detailed research of this book highlights the trends of Islam radicalization in different countries (in this particular case we talk exclusively about Bulgaria, Morocco, Spain, and even Romania). A central topic of such discourses is to give a coherent explanation of factors that can stimulate radicalization, of the perception of radicalization and means through which education can prevent excesses of such a phenomenon.

In the study case of Romania, the emphasis is on the essential differences between religious traditions and fundamentalist movements.³ What I find particularly interesting is that one of the questions attempts to settle whether, from the perspective of respondents of the Muslim community in Romania, going abroad for a religious background in Islamic universities can be perceived as a sign of radicalization. The answer to such a question makes sense in relation to accusations of radicalism raised to young Muslims that studied in such universities of Islamic countries and that later returned to their communities. The interpretation, as well as the methodological approach for creating these questions express both the mainstream perception of radicalization of Islam in Romania (both at the Muslim community level and at majority level) as well as the means through which education can prevent such a slide. However, what the study clearly presents is the harmonious cohabitation between the Muslim community and the dominant religion.⁴ The distant tone and neutral investigation, as they are rendered in the analyses of Mihaela Frunză and Sandu Frunză, can be explained in Romania by the lack of major violent

events against a religious background, as well as by the limited number of members of Muslim communities in Romania or by the traditional multicultural character of areas inhabited by Muslims. If we compare this with the analyses of Carlos Echeverría Jesús in the current book, we can notice that the reality being investigated is radically different. The live memory of terrorist attacks in Madrid, the tense situation of immigrants, declared as Jihad members, justify to a certain extent the analysis of the Spanish professor. Carlos Echeverría Jesús shows us, crystal clear, the characteristic elements of the Jihad cells: the Jihad leaders do without the guardianship of Imam communities of origin, they have a Western academic background and want to install the supremacy of Islam in Islamic countries that they consider to have slipped away from the genuine Islam message, there are kinship ties between the different members of the terrorist cells, geographical ties, etc. At the same time, the Spanish professor criticizes the great freedoms that such Western-based communities enjoy. For instance, multiculturalism has for Carlos Echeverría Jesús a negative connotation, because it facilitates militant actions within Muslim communities; moreover, members of such radical fractions use liberties that are specific to democratic countries for antidemocratic purposes. To this end, the recommendations that Carlos Echeverría Jesús tries to sketch at the end of his text seem to me of good omen: we must understand the ideology that animates Jihad to be able to counteract it by all means that Western societies are capable of.

When he examines the situation of Morocco, Mohamed Nouri changes the approach, trying, unlike Carlos Echeverría Jesús, to think the whole situation in positive terms, free from the negative connotations of a conflict-based thinking. In the vision of the Moroccan author, radicalization is a marginal phenomenon in the middle of Islamic communities and, to use his own words, it is more likely that *de*-radicalization would be a better concept to define and understand the current situation of Islam.

In the case of Bulgaria, radicalization is an assumed fact and *de*-radicalization strategies seem to be part of a national program. We can mention, in parallel, both elements considered to indicate the radicalization of Islam and the prevention elements for this radicalization. Among radicalization factors, the Bulgarian researchers mention: penetration inside Bulgaria of elements that are foreign to the traditional message of Islam; the obligation to bear religious symbols against the will of those who bear such symbols; manifestations that promote intolerance; organization of Koran courses without the approval of the Minister; denial of the secular state status of Bulgaria, etc. Among the prevention factors, the following are listed: compliance with all constitutional rights regardless of religion, ethnicity, nationality, etc.; ongoing support for compliance with the specific laws of a secular state as Bulgaria; compliance of religious-based schools with the laws and regulations;

development of intercultural programs; ongoing cooperation between civil society, scientific society and institutions so as to prevent dissemination of radical elements within religious communities, etc.

A global look on the book allows us to state that, despite extended studies, interviews, analyses, the radicalization concept misses a definition that is generally applicable, in any cultural context. A definition that sheds analytical precision related to the concept, its implications and general characteristics would have been expected. However, this book provides us an excellent analysis tool for a phenomenon with major implications in the behavior of religious communities. Thus, this book succeeds in bringing order, moderately, both in the representations that members of Islamic communities have of themselves (see, for instance, the many interviews of religious personalities of Bulgaria, pp. 13-22) and in the way that the identity of Muslim communities is built by the members of the non-Muslim communities. At the same time, this book gives a good description of the possible means to reach, through education, a better understanding of the other, the alterity, which implicitly leads to a better communication among different religious communities.

Notes:

¹ The current text is part of an exhaustive review program of the literature in the field run within the CNCIS-UEFISCU ID_1809 project, *Influence of religion on social processes in Romania – a neo-Weberian, quantitative approach based on statistic survey techniques*.

² I mean the study proposed by Azzedine Guellouz, *The Islam*, in Jean Delumeau (ed.), *World Religions*, (București: Humanitas, 1993), 251-334.

³ See also Sandu Frunză, *Fundamentalismul religios și noul conflict al ideologiilor* (Cluj: Limes, 2003); Claudiu Herțeliu, *Metode cantitative în studiul fenomenului religios* (Cluj-Napoca: Napoca Star, 2009).

⁴ On cohabitation, religious pluralism and multiculturalism in Romania see also Mihaela Frunză, "Fețele Toleranței: Între fragilitatea conceptuală și politicile conviețuirii", in Mihaela Frunză (ed.), *Fețele Toleranței* (Iași, Editura Fundației Axis, 2003), 9-12; Claudiu Herțeliu, "Statistical Comparisons of the Results of Censuses", in Sandu Frunză, Michael Jones (eds.), *Education and Cultural Diversity* (Cluj: Provopress, 2006), 178-203; Radu Carp, *Religia în tranziție. Ipoteze ale României creștine*, (Cluj: Ed. Eikon, 2009); Nicu Gavriliuță, "Toleranță și pluralism religios în România", in Sandu Frunză (ed.), *Pași spre integrare. Religie și drepturile omului în România* (Cluj: Provopress, 2004), 50-56; Sorin Dan Șandor, Marciana Popescu, „Religiosity and values in Romania”, in *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences*, 22E (2008): 171-180.