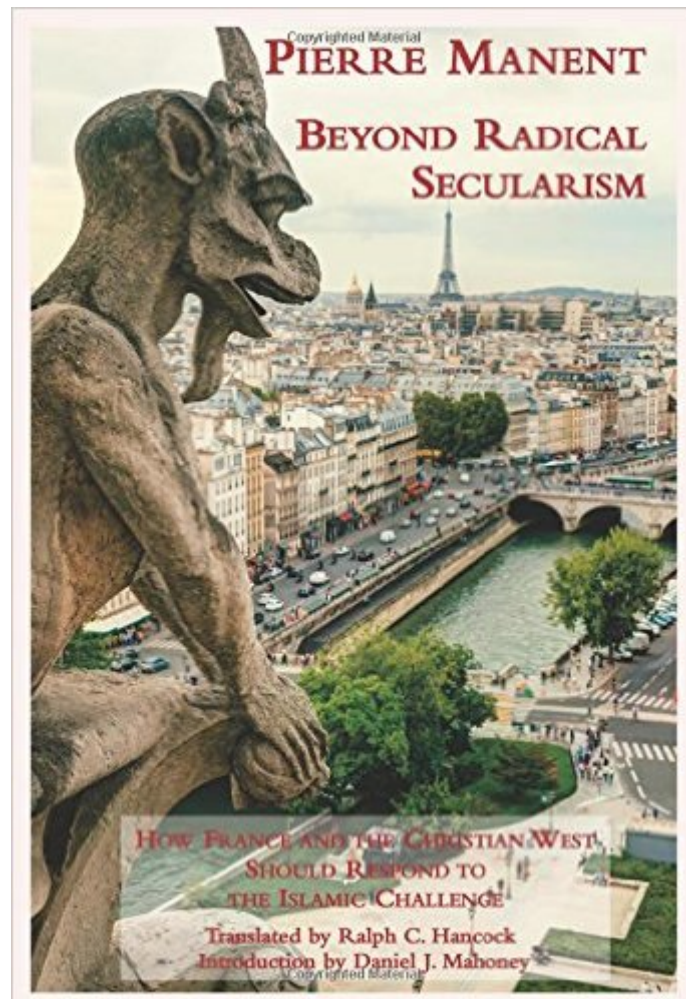


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Beyond Radical Secularism: How France And The Christian West Should Respond To The Islamic Challenge



Synopsis

This is the book that took France by storm upon its publication in the fall of 2015. It was praised by some for its rare combination of tough-mindedness and moderation and attacked by others for suggesting that radical secularism could not provide the political and spiritual resources to address the Islamic challenge. The book is even more relevant after the Parisian terror attacks of November 13, 2015. It is a book that combines permanence and relevance, that addresses a pressing political and civilizational problem in a manner that will endure.

Responding to the brutal terror attacks in France in January 2015, Pierre Manent has written a learned, passionate essay that reflects broadly and deeply on the political and religious situation of France and Europe. He freely acknowledges that the West is at war with fanatics who despise liberal and Christian civilization. That war must be conducted with prudent tough-mindedness. At the same time, serious thought must be given to the Islamic question at home and abroad. Concentrating on the French situation, Manent suggests that French Muslims are not entering an "empty" nation, defined by radical secularism and human rights alone. France has a secular state, as do all the nations of the contemporary West. That is a heritage to be cherished. But the Islamic question will not be "solved" by transforming Muslims into modern secularists devoid of all religious sensibility. It must be remembered that France is also a nation of a "Christian mark" with a strong Jewish presence, both of which enrich its spiritual and political life. Manent proposes a "social contract" with France's Muslims that is at once firm and welcoming. Rejecting radical secularism, the effort by certain "laicists" to completely secularize European society, to create a society without religion, Manent calls for a defensive policy that will allow Muslims to keep their mores, save the integral veil and polygamy. In exchange, they must accept the fact that they live in a society of a Christian mark and they must stop hiding behind charges of Islamophobia. In liberal and Christian Europe, there must be total freedom of criticism, including criticism of the Islamic religion.

Muslims must forgo funding from Arab Islamic states (not to mention extremist movements) and must recognize they are henceforth participants in the common life of the French nation. They must become citizens in a nation that does more than defend individual or communal rights, as crucial as those rights are.

Beyond Radical Secularism also provides a luminous reflection on the necessary coexistence of the liberal state and a nation of a Jewish and Christian mark in a Western liberty worthy of the name. Europeans have succumbed to passivity in no small part because they reject the nation which is the indispensable framework of democratic self-government. They no longer have confidence in human action, in the elemental human capacity "to put reasons and actions in common." That faith in individual and collective action ultimately

depends on belief in the primacy of the Good, or in theological terms, in faith in a benevolent and Providential God. The West at its best combined the pride of the citizen and the humility of the believer. Europeans and Americans, too, governed themselves in a certain relation to the Christian proposition. The nation was the instrument par excellence for combining the cardinal virtues—courage, prudence, justice, moderation—and the confidence which is specific to the Christian religion. A capacious sense of Europe and the West, one that acknowledges its Christian and Jewish mark, is ultimately necessary to face the Islamic challenge. The Jewish idea of the Covenant provides a powerful reminder of the ultimate ground of democratic self-government and of deliberation and action that respect limits while acknowledging the full range of human possibilities in a world where the good is not ultimately without transcendent support. Only by recovering something of the European faith in a higher ground of freedom will the nations of Europe be able to muster the realism and the hope necessary to meet the challenge of Islam.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Mament's 'Beyond Radical Secularism' is a profound book. In its own powerful way it asks the question: What values are at the core of modern France? By extension, that same question should be asked of all modern Western nations. For Mament the question is framed within the reality of France's encounter with radical Islamic terrorism. His book was first published there after the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack, but before the terrorist carnage in Paris that took place during November 2015. This English translation (by Ralph C. Hancock) was published in July

2016. Mament contrasts the cultural views of "an average Western and the average Muslim" (p. 13). For Westerners, Mament claims that "we" view the primary role of society to be the guarantor of individual rights, while Muslim society "is first of all the whole set of morals and customs" (p. 13). The central problem is, of course, how peaceful reconciliation can be achieved. How can the individual rights of Muslims be respected in a nation that has effectively banished religion and spirituality from the public sphere? How can we reconcile the West's respect for basic human rights, especially basic women's rights, with a culture that holds contrary values? How far can the bounds of multiculturalism be stretched while retaining meaningful social cohesion? One suspects that the prototypical Western nation has been hollowed out of any objective moral standards or spirituality ("spiritual evisceration" is Mament's term - p. 68), and therefore lacks the community-forming mechanisms necessary for the retention of core beliefs, common convictions, and, ultimately, true social cohesion. In a world where the overwhelming emphasis is upon our subjective rights, materialism, and personal well-being, "we" have become what Tocqueville feared. "We" are held together by the most tenuous bonds, having largely shunted aside the "common beliefs" of the culture, convictions, customs, and morality ... of our ancestors. Tocqueville wrote, "without such common belief no society can prosper; say, rather, no society can exist; for without such ideas there still may be men, but there is no social body" (DA). One thing should appear obvious: Smugly assuming "we" are "on the right side of history" is not working. Mament characterizes a current prevalent and naive viewpoint: "Humanity is irresistibly carried along by the movement of modernization, and modern humanity, humanity understood as having finally reached adulthood, is a humanity that has left religion behind" (p. 10). He writes of "modern humanity" as incredulous that any religion could be the source of personal animation in the enlightened 21st Century. This secular posture leaves modern humanity smugly "waiting only for the slower ones to kindly join him" (p. 61). Sometimes the greatest measure of a book's worthiness is the quality of the questions it forces us to ask ourselves, the humility that comes with the realization that good answers are very hard to come by, but also the sense of urgency it creates for the crucial undertaking. In the Preface Mament writes, "Eventually, as Machiavelli said, some 'extrinsic accident' such as war or revolution forces the members of a nation to 'recognize themselves' and to take up again the frayed reins of common life" (p. 3). Now should be one of those times.

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