

## THE MOSQUE, THE MANGER, AND MODERNITY

**“WHERE SECULARISM TAKES GOD OUT OF THE PUBLIC FORUM,” SAYS PETER D. BEAULIEU, AUTHOR OF *BEYOND SECULARISM AND JIHAD*, “ISLAM TAKES THE PUBLIC FORUM OUT OF MAN.”**

April 29, 2017 Carl E. Olson



Left: Mosque of Muhammad Ali in Cairo, Egypt (Wikiwand.com); right: Detail from "The Mystical Nativity" [c.1500] by Sandro Botticelli (WikiArt.org)

Peter D. Beaulieu earned a bachelor of architecture degree and a doctorate in urban and regional planning, both from the University of Washington. His career includes a tour as a junior officer in the United States Navy, long public service, serving on the Pastoral Council of the Archdiocese of Seattle, and being a founding member of the G. K. Chesterton Society of Seattle. He is the author of *Kristi: So Thin is the Veil* (Crossroads, 2006), a meditation on his late wife's serene path through terminal cancer, *Beyond Secularism and Jihad: A Triangular Inquiry into the Mosque, the Manger & Modernity* (University Press of America, 2012), and the forthcoming *A Generation Abandoned: Why 'Whatever' Is Not Enough* (Hamilton Books, May 2017).

Beaulieu recently corresponded with Carl E. Olson, editor of *Catholic World Report*, about his book *Beyond Secularism and Jihad*, the nature of secularism and Islam, ideology, Benedict XVI's "Regensburg Address", the rise of ISIS, and why the Incarnation provides the only true answer to current conflicts and challenges.

**CWR:** Much has been written in recent years about the decline of the West and the resurgence of Islam in our new and global century. How did you end up writing your book, *Beyond Secularism and Jihad*? And why the question mark at the end of the title? What central point or points are you getting at?

**Peter D. Beaulieu:** My interest began indirectly during my graduate work in urban and regional planning in the mid-1970s. My interdisciplinary doctorate dealt with communally-segmented and post-colonial regions, with a case study of multi-cultural Singapore. The city-state is nested in an Islamic region.

I am an unknown writer and not a specialist on Islam. I do not read Arabic, nor am I credentialed or an endowed scholar. I am more from the audience, but retired with lots of curiosity and time on my hands. In 2006 I wondered about Mohammed the man and just got drawn in. This was my "retirement project" for more than five years. One thing led to another. The question mark in the title signals that this is an inquiry, not a pronouncement. The two central points are to broaden the range and depth of contact points between worldviews, and then to focus on the deeper intercultural and interreligious levels.

**CWR:** The subtitle is both opaque and intriguing: *A Triangular Inquiry into the Mosque, the Manger and Modernity*. What exactly does that mean?

**Beaulieu:** The binary tension between Islam and the West is especially vexing because these are not symmetrical. Christianity is largely in the secular West, but not of the West. Its roots go deeper. And the West has been sucked into the historic animosities within pre-modern Islam as between the Sunnis and Shiites. Then, thinking triangularly, is Christianity fast becoming a *dhimmi* subordinated to a new religion of Secular Humanism? In the West, too, is narrow "freedom of worship" replacing freedom of religion, as under the Muslim *Declaration of Human Rights* (1981) and unlike the *United Nations Declaration of Human Rights* (1948)?

With a place at the three-sided table, authentic Christianity might have some influence on the followers of Islam and on our own divided citizenship in the Western world. For its part, the post-Second Vatican [Council] Church is richly challenged to more truly read the signs of the times and figure out what "todaying" (*aggiornamento*) and the New Evangelization can mean. This triangular approach should not imply any simplistic equivalencies between the parties, but when Muslims reject the materialism and individualism they see in the West, then Christianity must be distinguished. And, dismayed at the unitary Mosque-state, secularism likewise is wrong to simply discount the ongoing place of religion in human affairs. In both directions, what leavening influence might the Church have?

**CWR:** In your introduction you focus quite a bit on ideology. You write, for instance, that "systematic skepticism that rejects skepticism toward itself is not science but ideology." Can you give some examples of this? And why is understanding the nature of ideology so important to your study?

**Beaulieu:** Western ideology is a bubble. It accepts the evidence of Galileo's telescope, but rejects the evidence of ultrasound and uterine fiber optics. The European Union in its charter refuses to acknowledge its Christian roots together with its Classical heritage. In truth, Christianity helped create Europe, not the other way around. Today, on the post-Cold War globe, indifferent versions of multiculturalism risk being a doormat for a resurgent, confident and assimilative Islam. Historically, Islam is quite ready to advance either violently or, more commonly, over the longer term by population dominance and by pragmatic *osmosis* by foreign populations *into* Islam's simplifying theology and culture. The leading example was the invading Seljuk Turks who willingly assimilated and then set the table for the First Crusade by blocking Christian pilgrim access to the Holy Land. Eight centuries later the Armenian genocide came not under the Arabs, but the Ottoman Turks. Rather than conquest, Islam often metastasizes.

Where the fickle post-modern West now thinks in terms of the 24-hour news and selfies, Islam still moves in terms of sects and centuries. In the West religion is suppressed to nothing more than an individual and subjective taste. Secularism comprehends neither the human mystery nor the passion behind Islamic religion, nor the very different faith of Christians. Secularism is a closed and individual bubble ideology, while Islam is a self-referential and collective bubble culture. Both cases would like to level the historicity and fact of the Incarnation to a mere "idea" that then can then be bartered against their own ideas, either rationalist and democratically imposed or parsed from the uncreated and revelatory *Qur'an*.

**CWR:** In addressing the complex and controversial problem of the relationship of Islam and the West, you discuss "asymmetries." Say more about what you mean by "asymmetries".

**Beaulieu:** Dialogue is easily derailed by the apples-and-oranges thing. Christianity and Islam, from the start, are not directly comparable. Being clear about the asymmetry between any scripture and the historic Incarnation is especially relevant to Islamic-Christian dialogue, in my opinion. We are not equally "people of the book." When and how to make a point of this is an artful judgment call.

The Muslim response to Benedict's *Regensburg Address* in late 2006 is a thoughtful document entitled the "Common Word" which reads in part: "O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word as between us and you. . ." But from the start does this comparison of two scriptures as a *common word between us and you* already pre-empt Christian witness to the uniquely *uncommon Word in our midst*?

Within Christianity, rather than a gathering of scripture readers (as under Islam and, and to a lesser extent under Protestantism), the Catholic faithful "assemble" within the gift of the Eucharist—the Real Presence (CCC 1374). By comparison, the emotive, cultural, transnational and trans-state Islamic community (the *umma*) is "based on a common act of *will* [not reason] that identifies Muslims" (also, apostasy is treason and a capital offense). Different than both, political unity in Western societies is based on cohesion, language and history. The unifying language of the *Qur'an* and Islam is Arabic as Latin once was in Christendom, although eighty percent of Muslims (including Iran and Turkey) are not Arabs and do not speak it.

**CWR:** You mention Pope Benedict's *Regensburg Lecture*. This is discussed right at the start. How does that 2006 address inform later chapters? What is its enduring significance?

**Beaulieu:** Pope Benedict XVI invited Muslims to consider that any religion true to God cannot endorse or remain silent on the violence of suicide bombers. But he also urged the West to rethink its own blind alley of ethics-free rationalism, by recovering a more open attitude toward things of faith. This framing of contemporary issues will long endure because Benedict (and the Church) reads the current moment through the nature of the human person—e.g., faith and reason, that is, the faculty of intellect in harmony with the memory and the will (all of which are explored in my concluding chapter)—not the lens of post-Enlightenment ideology or, on the other hand, any substantially Romantic or unreasoning mindset.

My central three chapters deal first with Shari'a and the world (the Mosque), then the Human Person in the World (the Manger), and then today's broad Conversations and Monologues (Modernity). The first two of these chapters draw in part from two books from opposite sides of the globe. One is by a Pakistani scholar widely respected in the West, and written immediately after the Iran hostage crisis of 1979 (Farooq Hassan: *The Concept of the State and Law in Islam*). He explains the unitary Islamic State. The counterpart chapter differentiates the church (or mosque) and state, as has defined the Western experience (based on Heinrich Rommen, *The State in Catholic Thought and Natural Law: A Study in Legal and Social History and Philosophy*).

Secularism is the third side of our triangle and, detached from natural law, has devolved into indiscriminate multiculturalism and mutually incoherent brands of identity politics. Would it be more enlightening if the West recognized Islam as neither a matter of nation-state politics nor Huntington's "clash of civilizations"? The West offers a post-modern non-civilization of amateur, identity-politics interest groups; Islam fields a more professional (as in professing) culture of resurgent identity politics—inseparable from a timeless folk-hero "prophet" born a full millennium before nation-states even existed.

**CWR:** You mentioned early in the book that you began with an interest in Mohammed the man. What do you mean by this? And are there any interesting details you would like to mention?

**Beaulieu:** Cultural histories used to be written by historians, rather glossed by retrospective sociologists and economists. Biographies and tipping points are more interesting than statistics and trend lines. Mohammed was monotheistic but the fatherhood of God is mentioned not even once in the *Qur'an*. Are there personal reasons for this? Is it influenced by the fact that Mohammed was orphaned at the age of eight?

Then again did he actually reject Christianity, or did he never even hear of the orthodox Trinity? In backwater and pagan Arabia, Nestorian and Monophysite distortions were more familiar. And, since the Incarnation is the final public revelation, then is the *Qur'an* still a very alloyed and adulterated private revelation (toward monotheism)? Or did Mohammed traffic more in increasingly inventive insights of his own, or was he also subject to epileptic seizures as is often proposed in the West, or both? Was Mohammed a Christian "heretic" as Belloc claimed, or more of an eclectic reformer of ubiquitous paganism? I demonstrate that because Islam is more home grown and eclectic than it is a split from Christianity, dialogue today remains interreligious rather than ecumenical. And thinking outside the box of interreligious discourse, per se, how is Mohammed similar to Hung Hsui-ch'uan, leader of the less successful Taiping Rebellion in mid nineteenth-century China? Hung also was poorly tutored in Christianity, had mystical visions and (in his case) imagined himself to be not merely a prophet but the younger brother of Jesus Christ.

The first biography of Mohammed comes to us only in a much later and redacted version, and was not first written until more than a century after his death (Ibn Ishaq, d. 773). Much is in doubt. In one account of his own passing, A'isha, his favorite wife, assures Mohammed that he will pass directly to heaven, but he made no claim to either sainthood or divinity. His reported response: "Neither shall I enter paradise unless God cover me with his mercy." The Western stereotype still might fit, but not perfectly. How different would world history be (!) if Mohammed had not been hounded out of Mecca (at the ripe age of fifty-three) into what then became a militarized base camp in Medina—and the beginning of *jihad* (which has two contradictory meanings: internal and external conquest).

**CWR:** What are some of the common false or incorrect perspectives or understandings of Islam found in the West? How have they skewed or even obscured how we understand the Islamic religion?

**Beaulieu:** We often throw up our hands: "they don't even think the way we do!" In the West the movement is toward words that give ever greater conceptual differentiation and clarity, as between Church and state. It is not that Islam combines the two, rather Islam cannot conceive of ever having separated them. We notice that Muslims have religious license to lie to infidels, but at least part of this is a totally different mindset. The West hones its words to clearly define concepts and commitments, while Islam modifies the concepts themselves by reading continuously new revelations into the polyvalent vocabulary of the *Qur'an*. (Is this any longer so different from rogue Western courts that un-define the concept and reality of "marriage"?)

Or again, the post-Renaissance instinct of Westerners is to look for underlying laws of history, as if history is a branch of natural science or applied mathematics. Muslims look instead for patches of vindication by Allah amidst the fickle sand dunes of history. The conquest of Constantinople in 1453 is an example. And 9/11 coincides with the turning point at the Battle of Vienna in 1683, and to another exact turning point also in southeastern Europe a few years later.

**CWR:** How are the Islamic rejection of reason and the Enlightenment rejection of the Incarnation and reality of Christ related? In what way do these core orientations expose key crises in both Islam and the secular West?

**Beaulieu:** Islamic rejection of reason and the Enlightenment rejection of Christ are both similar and dissimilar. Where Islam rejected fledgling rationalism by suppressing the Mu'tazilites in the mid-ninth century, the eighteenth-century (Enlightenment) Reign of Terror converted Notre Dame into a Temple of Reason. Islam rejects reason because to the un-nuanced seventh-century mind it created a dichotomy. That is, it opens the door to an autonomous will separate from the will of Allah. This is blasphemy. The Enlightenment rejects the Incarnation and Christ because its own willfulness wants God to get out of the way. The possible parallel might be that Islam and the Enlightenment are both deistic—God creates stuff but then exits the scene as sort of an absentee landlord, still "compassionate and merciful" in the first case and totally indifferent in the latter.

Early Islam strangled reason in the cradle while the Enlightenment guillotined ancestral Christianity. For Islam, reason is restricted to parsing the *Qur'an*, and there are stratified rules on how to do this. What keeps coming back to me is Jean Guittou's insight into Islamic "contradictions": "Islam has not wanted to choose between Heaven and Earth. It proposed instead a blending of heaven and earth, sex and mysticism, war and proselytism, conquest and apostolate. In more general terms, Islam

proposed a blending of the spiritual and the temporal worlds which neither in Islam nor among the pagans have ever been divided" (*Great Heresies and Church Councils*). But, does this also sound like the secular West today? What about the life issues and "the culture of death" and now the formlessness of so-called gender theory? It might be that Islam's historic authorization for polygamy and our courtroom *fatwa* to un-define marriage will someday make strange bedfellows. Goulash multiculturalism in the West invites a very troubling commingling of civil and Shari'a courts as we already find in Great Britain. Post-Christian culture goes silently in the night.

The crises of Islam and the secular West are that both trajectories are entering their twilights, one for being pre-modern and the other for being post-modern. To both the Church proposes that the Incarnation is the moving center of history, the only "thing" ever new under the sun. All else is artifact. Modern day Islam is big screen identify politics—an eclectic folk literature, an iconic tribal and military genius, and an inherited and prescribed cultic way of life. When interviewed, suppressed Muslim women anonymously say that they would like their situation to change, but also would like to keep their culture. For its part, disoriented ISIS longs for the simplified world of past glories and a caliphate.

But notice that the Reformation and Enlightenment are also unknown to the Eastern Rite Catholic Churches. One Providential link with the Latin West is larger than history. Here is the transcendent family thing—St. John Paul II's mother was a Byzantine Catholic. He promoted a pre-Gutenberg and symbolic kind of grammar—that the Church has to "breathe with both lungs." Islam looks at Mohammed in this way, symbolically and as part of their bloodstream. The difference in Christianity, as St. Paul alerts us, is faith (more than the belief of natural religion) in the reality of the Incarnate Christ and then the Resurrection.

In contrast with our recognition of the graced human person, the Islamic predisposition is to "Let God be God and Man be man." Again, the mysterious and reasonable truth of Christianity is that it lets the willful and Triune God become man if He so wills. To the Christian mind, it seems that as a religion of divine willfulness, absent any analogy to human reason, Islam is ironically unwilling to permit God the freewill to become one of us if He so wills (Emmanuel: God with us).

**CWR:** Your book predates ISIS but very briefly suggests the possibility of a caliphate phenomenon. To what degree, if any, do ISIS and similar groups reflect or actualize an authentic form of Islam? Is there such a thing as "moderate" Islam? If so, what does it look like?

**Beaulieu:** Whether ISIS is an authentic form of Islam or not depends on whether Islam is reasonably homogeneous or, instead, a collage of Velcro sectarianism. Choose one. Haasan defines Islam as a "congregational theocracy." In my view the Western term "fundamentalist" doesn't fit ISIS quite so well as, say, zealot. It is crucial, again, to not be deceived by our own mindset in trying to understand or read a structure into Islam. In the past few years our own domestic political discourse has morphed from a substantive tension between conservatives and progressives into a catchy and media-driven contrast between the mainstream (the moderates?) and "extremists". Political adversaries are now "bigots" and whatever-phobes. So, now we look at ISIS and with the minds of media talking heads dutifully ask if they are part of "moderate" Islam. All of this is increasingly incoherent.

Islam is not easily comparable to any ideology, moderate or otherwise. Over the centuries Islam remains more of a “way of life.” It is a culture more than an ideology. It does not yield easily to Western-type analysis *du jour*. When the West wants to discuss the relationship between faith and reason, Muslims instinctively steer the discussion toward cultural harmony as in the idyllic and largely fictional harmony of Andalusia.

As for ISIS, this is cult worship, bloodlust, and marketable anomie—all on steroids. These are psychopaths, but their self-validation also can be found in many scattered one-liners in the *Qur’an* that recount violent injunctions from the seventh century. Yes, ISIS is an outrigger part of Islam, in my opinion. Peace is seen as what happens after Islam absorbs the last of the infidels. Unlike the *Qur’an*, the Gospels offer no such warrant for our history of religious wars within Christendom. These are violations of the Gospel rather than its fulfillment. Where secularism takes God out of the public forum, Islam takes the public forum out of man.

**CWR:** In your opinion, what can or must the Church do in her relationships with Islam and secularism in order to, first, survive and thrive and, secondly, to witness and evangelize as effectively as possible?

**Beaulieu:** In my opinion the Church first and always must simply be what it is. Will the center hold? The purpose of the Second Vatican Council was effective evangelization, not to align itself too much with the secular culture even as it still existed in mid-century. This can go only so far until the salt goes stale. *Aggiornamento* (engaged “todaying”) is rooted in resourcement—going deeper into sources and the Source. The Benedict Option makes sense to me, but not at the expense of intelligent and continued civic engagement. This unwillingness to lose must be a clearly elementary defense of nature, families and freedom of religion. Christ never promised that his followers would “thrive”.

Unread tomes imitating the trappings of secular scholarship aren’t doing the job. In his *Everlasting Man* G. K. Chesterton points to the apostles and the apostolic succession: “Those runners gather impetus as they run. Ages afterwards they still speak as if something had just happened . . . . We might sometimes fancy that the Church grows younger as the world grows old.” We can be encouraged (if only moderately!) by what we hope is well-informed interreligious dialogue with Muslims at several levels. After a few years of Muslim suspension the dialogue Pope Benedict initiated through the *Regensburg Lecture* seems to be back on track.

There’s an intriguing episode in the *Qur’an* from probably a year or two before the death of Mohammed in 632. He proclaims: “If the Merciful had a son, I would be the first to adore him” (Q 43:81). All but one of the 114 chapters (*surahs*) in the *Qur’an* begin with the refrain that God is “compassionate and merciful,” but nothing approaches St. John’s “God is love” (1 Jn 4:16). A possible discussion point, but this verse (*ayat*) might be among many possibly inserted later by nostalgic Syrian scribes only half-converted to Islam. Mohammed understood divine Sonship only in the carnal sense, and therefore he tarred Trinitarian Christianity with the same brush as he did pagan polytheism.

The message to both Secularism and Islam is that all serious political issues are ultimately theological at their source.

**CWR:** Related to the mission of the Church, but also distinct, you raise the possibility that natural law is a hypothetical avenue for intercultural dialogue. As a religion believed to be “dictated” by Allah, is there anything in Islam that might be open to a discussion of natural law?

**Beaulieu:** Yes, but historically this is a thin or even a broken reed. Natural law for Muslim scholars remains a subset of the *Qur'an*. On the street, regular Muslims find natural law imbedded directly in their hearts, but they attribute it to Mohammed and the *Qur'an*. The Western (Classical) opening to natural law came historically before the Incarnation, such that the Incarnation is received as both distinct and confirming natural law. Christ elevates the natural human person into the graced “new life.” In writing the book I discovered the difference between self-defined Islam as “a way of life” and the “new life” proclaimed by St. Paul.

Still, in the mix there are some verses (*ayats*) in the *Qur'an* well worth noting. Readers find that: “The true believers, both men and women, are friends to one another. They *enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil* . . .” (Q 9:71, italics added). Christianity also reads: “to do what is good and avoid what is evil” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 16), but in Islam does this injunction protect only Muslims and their culture (*dar al-Islam*) versus infidels (*dar al-harb*, the House of War)? The universal common good of natural law and of the supporting Christianity anthropology is displaced by the silo of Shari’a Law.

From the *hadiths* (the actions and sayings of Mohammed) it is said that “there is not a child that he or she is born upon this *fitrah*, this original state of the knowledge of God [natural law?]. And his parents make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Zoroastrian . . . and if they are Muslims, Muslim.” This *fitrah* is variously defined as the “natural disposition, constitution, temperament, e.g., what is in a man at his creation, a sound nature, natural religion, (and) “the *germ of Islam*”. But, again, this original knowledge is still held to be the absolutely original Islam *and* inseparable from the *Qur'an* and Shari’a as an indivisible whole. The essence of Islam is to not make any problematic distinctions except between Islam and infidels. Religious Westerners are seen as Muslims who don’t yet know it. Dialogue drifts into Islamic monologue. For Christians the touchstone is the Incarnation. As the Second Vatican Council remembers and proclaims: “It is only in the mystery of the word made flesh that the mystery of man becomes clear. . . Christ. . . in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father. . . fully reveals man to himself” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

Getting back to our triangular inquiry, in the Catholic Social Teaching (CST) the Church defends and articulates the natural law. It seeks to leaven a range of worldly or “secular” matters—social, political, economic and cultural. Other than protection of the moral absolutes it does not specify concrete proposals (a task mostly for a well-formed laity), but still offers principles based on the “transcendent dignity of the human person.” While CST derives from a Christian anthropology and moral theology, there are still many overlaps with Islamic prescriptions, but also differences. Islam does not have a laity because at least theoretically it has no hierarchy (especially not the Apostolic Succession). Solidarity is one dimension of the CST, and so too is subsidiarity, and especially the family. Solidarity is non-exclusive, unlike the *umma*, and the principle of subsidiarity is as foreign to the Mosque-state as it is to Western totalitarianism. And, just as the CST is not a “third way” between capitalism and collectivism in the West—based as it is on “moral theology”—CST also is not an opportunistic third way between disbelieving Secularism and Islamic monotheism.



Turkey and Indonesia are among the more pragmatic states, but are becoming more shaky. Then there's the multi-religious and constitutionally civil society of Jordan. During a visit St. John Paul II singled out Jordan as more than a nation, but as "a message. . . ."

**CWR:** Your book was published in 2012, but the topic is, if anything, more important than ever. Has there been any reaction?

**Beaulieu:** I think the triangular format ventilates dialogue at all levels. One reader suggested that my effort places things in "clear relief." Book sales are minuscule, but people are busy and I am an unknown writer, and the book is not a breezy read. Probably a hundred colleges and universities have bought copies. But my themes have a long shelf-life, and we can expect that the confluence of the West and Islam remain on the burner for centuries. Just look at Church history since the ruptures of 1054 in the East, or 1517.

I am delighted by a book presentation at the Prince of Peace Newman Center at the University of Washington. Afterward, I was faced by a visitor, a young Muslim graduate student. He was in Seattle to study constitutional law. He appreciated my familiarity with Islamic details and my interest in seeing Mohammed at least partly through his eyes. It was a revelation to this first-time visitor to the West that not all Americans and students are atheists! In his words: "It surprised me that religion—as a critical, cognitional, communal and active engagement with divinity—is, in some ways, far more alive here in the United States (the supposedly "atheistic West") than in some of the Muslim circles that I hang around in."

Instead of dialogue between Islam and Christianity, individual *witnesses* to Christ or *citizens* in the West can have a good chat with individual *followers* of Islam. John Henry Newman got it exactly right: "*Cor ad cor loquitor*" (heart speaking to heart). On whether we live in Allah (as Islam assumes) or whether the Triune Oneness chooses to fully redeem and live in us (the "Good News" of the Gospel), St. John proclaims the Catholic "both-and": "Whoever acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, *God remains in him and he in God*" (1 Jn 4:14-15).