Pierre Manent, Beyond Radical Secularism: How France and the Christian West Should Respond to the Islamic Challenge [Situation de la France], trans. Ralph C. Hancock, with an introduction by Daniel J. Mahoney

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To cite this article: Timothy Haglund (2017): Pierre Manent, Beyond Radical Secularism: How France and the Christian West Should Respond to the Islamic Challenge [Situation de la France], trans. Ralph C. Hancock, with an introduction by Daniel J. Mahoney, Perspectives on Political Science, DOI: 10.1080/10457097.2017.1330082

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2017.1330082

Published online: 28 Jun 2017.
BOOK REVIEWS


Pierre Manent, who until his 2014 retirement served as the director of studies at L’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, has risen from his very brief repose to publish Situation de la France, now available in an English translation by Ralph Hancock under the title Beyond Radical Secularism (BRS). The book takes up Manent’s “one ambition,” which is “that the analysis I propose of the European experience might be adequate to allow us [the French] to see Islam as an objective reality, instead of its remaining the reflection of our self-misunderstanding” (69). Although Manent’s argument is highly condensed—the book barely exceeds one hundred pages—with the prose often revealing merely the nerve of his premises, he evades cryptic and esoteric expression as a matter of principle. Here, Manent aims to guide political and social practice (10). He speaks in a direct and heartfelt way to fellow citizens, French and Muslim alike. Yet the book is not just civic. For Manent, the “situation” of a given time and place provides the occasion for deeper philosophical investigation. It enables reflection on the “statics” and “dynamics” of the political regime and its environment, and therefore of problems both temporary and enduring. In this respect Manent follows a rich tradition of thinkers (from Leo Strauss and Raymond Aron, to Montesquieu and Toqueville, to Thucydides and Plato) dealing with the problems of their day as problems of both immediate and permanent character.

This book marks the first time that Manent has raised the question of how Europe should address the Muslim community, yet it is only the latest in a line of work that Manent has produced to address Europe’s larger “situation,” beginning with his 1986 preface to Les libéraux and his 1990 preface to Heinrich Meier’s book on Carl Schmitt (Un dialogue entre absents), both entitled “Situation du libéralisme.” In his 1986 piece Manent criticized the inability of European liberal democracies to identify and deal with external threats, however well they managed life inside their borders. This blindness to foreign foes coincided with the onset of global civil society as well as a diminution of “the instinct for civic existence.” This analysis laid the stage for others to come. In 1990, with the political landscape changing quickly, Manent began an evaluation of the victory of liberal democracy over Soviet communism, as well as an initial assessment of theawning postwar political situation. In Manent’s eyes the threat of complacency in a post-Soviet world was real and doubly so for Europeans who had not earned the victory over communism in the same sense as the United States had. Europe, however, could redeem itself by learning the lessons of the Cold War, including important political ones. Instead, however, it opted for an individualistic, humanitarian, postpolitical politics. This positioned Europe poorly for its current situation, especially in connection with Muslim communities abroad and at home, and their consequences for the European way of living.

Manent’s previous writings accordingly critiqued the European Union rather severely. His 2001 Cours familier de philosophie politique (translated by Marc LePain in 2006 as A World Beyond Politics?) took aim at the “illusion” of a virtually united Humanity, one “without significant differences,” which the structure of the EU naively assumed. His 2006 La raison des nations (translated by Paul Seaton in 2007 as Democracy without Nations?) sharpened the critique laid out in WBP, while it mounted a stout defense of the nation-state as an estimable “political form” for common life. It also considered the great “communions” of the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian faiths. These religious communions make a return in BRS as ingredients and protagonists in the contemporary world. The year 2013 saw a pair of works of broader sweep, both civilizational and personal, Metamorphoses de la cité and Le regard politique. These publications continued Manent’s argument against the EU, but they also placed the contemporary European project alongside previous western endeavors “to put things in common,” the better to show the hollowness and superficiality of Europe’s latest antipolitical politics—but also the bountiful cultural sources Europeans still have today for inspiration and recourse.

Given Manent’s past positions and the “one ambition” of his new work, readers should not let the invocation of radical Islam in BRS’s subtitle deceive them into seeing Manent as a harbinger of a “clash of civilizations” à la Samuel Huntington (15). Despite what the work’s title might suggest, Manent does not dwell on the violence perpetrated by Muslims, although he affirms that some Muslims are in fact bent on “war” against the West, against Christians, Jews, other Muslims, and France herself. But significant, impactful violence is recognized in other forms as well. He bookends his argument with reflections on French responses to the Holocaust, which raised a poignant and difficult question for Jews and others, one that Manent also raises “with a trembling hand”: Where was God? (70). As devastating as the Islamic terrorist attacks have been for peace-loving citizens, they had no such existential effect on life in Europe as
did France’s neighbor Germany. Thus, in Manent’s optic the West’s present spiritual-political situation encompasses World War II and its aftermath, which includes the widespread discrediting of the biblical God and the nation. France’s own postwar situation was exacerbated by the rejection of de Gaulle’s efforts to save his country’s sense of nationhood at a time when the nation was in disrepute. The seams came further apart with France’s embrace of “unbound society” after the widespread agitations of 1968 (5). Manent’s focus therefore involves not only Muslim “them’s” but also and primarily “us’s,” France and Europe. His perspective as a political philosopher allows him to see what they have, and could have, in common.

Human beings, Manent maintains, possess a “political nature,” and therefore they need and are drawn toward an arrangement of common life that addresses the differences between them, even as it raises all to something higher than themselves, a common good. This view, however, requires him to critique currently dominant opinions about human beings and their living together. These opinions are summed up under the rubrics of “secularism” and “individualism.” Among their shortcomings is intellectual blindness, an inability to see political and social reality as it is, as well as an inability to provide any source of political cohesion. In different but complementary ways they are denials and assaults on the human need and desire, in Aristotle’s phrase, for “putting and having [things] in common.” In this light the challenge that Islam provides is superadded to that posed by contemporary depoliticization; it is what Manent calls an “extrinsic accident.” This accident, though, forces France to consider whether it ought to continue its pursuit of a postpolitical way of life, or whether it would be better to recover aspects of the country’s “ancient constitution” (50), to restore “the Covenant” with the biblical God (72, 113), and to proudly wear its “Christian mark” (115). Assuredly, there is much here that needs explanation!

“Extrinsic accident”: Now there is a strange—and seemingly out of place—turn of phrase. Manent’s characterization of Islam as such an “accident” overtly follows Machiavelli (3). The thrust of the book, however, as we have indicated, is much more in the spirit of Aristotle, as when Manent writes that “every action, and especially civic or political action, is carried out in view of some good, especially in view of the common good” (70). For Manent, France’s major problem is a blindness to this good, which was historically expressed in spiritual terms, now combined with the need to accommodate Europe’s relatively new Muslim population.

The striking confluence of ancient and modern thought informing Manent’s argument arises from the failure of each to independently address Europe’s woes. On the one hand, “the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas was able to provide the principles [of religious and political freedom], but not to show the way to put them concretely into practice” (64). Hence the invention of the modern State that served this end for several centuries, albeit imperfectly. Yet the State ultimately sacrificed the common good (and finally itself) to the priority of individualism, to the point that contemporary “citizen-individuals” fail to see the persistence and political significance of relationships, families, and the group or collective (79, 95). Hence France’s “challenge”: the need to reconcile theory and practice by using ancient and modern intellectual resources that provide “an embarrassment of riches that we do not know how to set in order” (113). In a way the challenge for Europe is more difficult than that identified by Aristotle of appropriately delineating and securing the common good. Present-day Europeans need not only to restore belief in a common good but also in a God that is commonly good and so capable of helping to secure it.

Strong prejudices, however, prevent the proper ordering of the riches that could address or improve the situation. First, there is the “enlightened opinion” that with some justification sees danger in all forms of communal life, especially its religious iterations. But as Manent observes, communal life became most dangerous when it was stripped of its religious aims and took on a secular character that resembled ancient Greek autochthony. The error of “enlightened opinion” is equating all forms of substantive community, out of fear that such communities create rigid in- and out-groups (112). This is, however, precisely the difference between the Christian nation and the ethnic nation. The Christian nation displays a warmth to strangers and enemies that the intolerant, sheerly ethnic nation lacks. Ignorant of this difference, Europe today flees community in favor of “rootlessness” and lives a “life without law” (14, 111). Yet Manent also writes with palpable disdain of those on the “xenophobic right” who seek to save an impoverished, misguided notion of the nation and European “culture” deprived of its real core, and therefore really more akin to the tribalism of old (46).

Manent calls for what he terms “the politics of the possible” as an antidote to the situation so understood. Throughout, he urges a “defensive” mode that accepts the growing presence of Muslims in Europe as a fait accompli (43, 46). But by returning to the Covenant, which entails a Christian Europe that embraces paganism and other non-Christian forms of life, Manent rejects the false dichotomy of autochthony versus rootlessness. Both of these dispositions simultaneously torture a more natural way of life and misread the history of the development of religion. The “mark” of Christianity that entered into the formation of the various European nations signifies the rejection of these alternatives, because it ties nature to grace and reminds of imperfection in the quest for perfection. This “mark” suggests, pace rootlessness and autochthony, that Europe cannot deny its origins, which are also what make it distinctive, beautiful, and therefore what Europe essentially is.

Skeptical readers may wonder whether a Christian entity ever had or could have such a salutary effect on political life in France or Europe. They, however, will have to take seriously the various strands, historical and theoretical, of Manent’s argument, which draws illuminating comparisons between communities of Christians,
secularists, and Muslims. All three forms have been guilty of imperialism at different times (39), and secularism itself shares surprising affinities with Islam, especially in its denigration of reason classically conceived (54). I leave the more striking comparisons for the pleasure of discovering them while reading the book. I will simply say that no matter where you stand on the questions of Islam and European governance, Manent can provide you with a refreshing and singular analysis of the most urgent issues before his native France and Europe more broadly. This, above all else he accomplishes in BRS, is the kind of civic discourse that France and the West direly need. And not least of all, with BRS Manent shows very well the usefulness of political philosophy without distorting its activity. He brings, as Cato said of Socrates, philosophy down from the heavens. Yet with this Catholic thinker, that sense of heavenly presence remains. Perhaps we should say that by drawing on the Christian tradition, Manent is helping to bring his fellow citizens up, via philosophy, to the heavens, and to thereby allow them to become aware of their full selves.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2017.1330082