Taming the Gods
By Ian Buruma | Princeton University Press | 132 pages | $19.95

In France, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote almost 200 years ago, reformers attacked Christians "more as political than religious enemies: They hate faith as the opinion of a party much more than as a mistaken belief, and they reject the clergy less because they are representatives of God than because they are friends of authority."

In the United States, by contrast, because the Founding Fathers had separated church and state, Christianity and liberty were so "completely mingled" few could conceive of one without the other.

These days, it has become commonplace to characterize the Old World as secular and the US as religious. After all, while almost half of Americans think of themselves as born-again Christians, fewer than 20 percent of French Catholics even bother to attend Mass. Less clear, however, is the role religion plays in holding modern democratic societies together.

This issue has taken on a sense of urgency with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Since September 11, 2001, Ian Buruma reminds us, many Europeans and more than a few Americans are afraid of becoming swamped by "aliens" who have lots of children. They "tend to assume that the bearded man in ankle-length trousers or the woman in a black hijab is hiding an assassin's knife or a ticking bomb."

In Taming the Gods, Buruma, a native of the Netherlands, a professor of democracy, human rights and journalism at Bard College, and a frequent contributor to the New York Review of Books, tries to sort out the impact of the tensions between religious and secular authority on liberal democracies. His erudite and elegantly written little book consists of essays on church-state relations in Europe and the US, religious authority in China and Japan and the threat posed by Islam in 21st-century Europe.

Alarmed by a growing "hysteria" in the West, Buruma emphasizes that the challenge posed by Muslims is, at bottom, social and political. Forcing "outsiders" to conform to the norms of the state, as is the practice in France, is "illiberal." Encouraging them to "stick to their own ways," as has been the tendency in Britain, does not "foster a sense of inclusion."

The "way forward," he believes, with Tocqueville, is to embrace as "democratic citizens" all people (including those who insist on wearing head scarves or veils), as long as they adhere to the rules of free speech, free expression, free elections and the rule of law.

Buruma adds an amendment to this version of Enlightenment universalism. Some Muslim fundamentalists,
he acknowledges, condemn the secular state as wicked and seek to destroy it. Democratic societies must be prepared to use force against them.

Surprisingly, although Buruma insists that revolutionary violence can’t be contained unless the borders between those who kill and nonviolent believers, including fundamentalists, become less porous, he does not support reaching out to religious “moderates.”

Any individual or organization that deals directly with the state, he asserts, “risks losing street credibility with believers” who suspect political opportunism, “sometimes with good reason.” A democratic state “has no business being an arbiter in theological affairs. Otherwise, what is the point of separating church from state?”

These reservations may well miss the point. There are risks to any strategy. Equally important, in reaching out to religious moderates who are also political moderates the state need not involve itself in theological affairs at all.

Especially puzzling in this context is Buruma’s suggestion that the secular state should reach out to Tariq Ramadan, the charismatic, Swiss-born intellectual, who has close ties to many politicians in Europe. A self-proclaimed Marxist and salafi reformist, Ramadan is the grandson of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. His goal, he has written, is “to protect the Muslim identity and practice, to recognize the Western constitutional structure, to become involved as a citizen at the social level and to live with true loyalty to the country to which one belongs.”

Buruma distances himself from some of Ramadan’s positions, including his attacks on Zionism and his call for a boycott of the Turin Book Fair, which honored the 60th anniversary of the State of Israel by inviting authors Amos Oz and David Grossman. He admits that Ramadan is “often accused of saying different things to different audiences.” But he seems willing to brush aside his call for a moratorium and not a ban on stoning as a punishment for adultery (“to expect candor from a shrewd activist might be a trifle too naïve”) and to accept at face value Ramadan’s claim that he does not want to establish a Muslim state.

_Taming the Gods_, then, is not at all helpful in identifying who secular authorities should be talking with and listening to. But Buruma does make a compelling case that although “revealed religion and politics should be prised apart,” some forms of Islamic fundamentalism should be accepted in Europe and the US, and that space, including some public space, “must be found for its practices, as long as they are lawful.”

Leaving theology to the believers and concentrating on the rules of the democratic game won’t in and of itself stop the terrorists in their tracks. But it might help. These days we should take all the help we can get.

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