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Review of *Islam Instrumentalized: Religion and Politics in Historical Perspective*

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Political institutions across the Muslim world have been relatively unstable, autocratic, and corrupt since World War II. One ubiquitous feature of these institutions—from Iran to Saudi Arabia to North Africa to South Asia—is that rulers use Islam to justify their rule in the face of opposition or popular discontent. How can we account for this? Is there something unique about Islam and its institutions? What are the historical channels through which these seemingly stylized facts arose? Jean-Philippe Platteau addresses these questions, and many more, in his wide-ranging, highly learned book, *Islam Instrumentalized*. His primary thesis, which builds off of theoretical work published with Emmanuelle Auriol (Auriol and Platteau 2017), is that the decentralized nature of Islam means that rulers looking to legitimize their rule via religion have to garner the support of a sufficiently large fraction of the religious establishment, offering them perks in return (such as high-salaried bureaucratic jobs). Yet, it is generally not worth it for Muslim rulers to “instrumentalize” the most extreme religious clerics, whose desires are not aligned with those of the ruler, and thus these clerics serve as a potential opposition force that contributes to the instability of the regime. This is in contrast to Catholicism, which for centuries prior to the Reformation was the centralized, dominant religion of Europe. The centralization of medieval Christianity meant that rulers had to negotiate with only one cleric (the pope or perhaps a powerful local archbishop) and the rest of the hierarchy would fall in line. This created greater stability in European polities, since there was no group of outsider clerics who could potentially undermine the regime’s stability. In Platteau’s words (p. 154), “the autocrat’s decisions are driven by the *average* cleric under a centralized religious structure, whereas they are driven by the *marginal* cleric under a decentralized one.”

Islam Instrumentalized attempts to tease out the implications of Islam’s decentralized institutions. Platteau quickly dismisses alternative

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Islam Instrumentalized: Religion and Politics in Historical Perspective. By Jean-Philippe Platteau. Cambridge Studies in Economics,

institutional theories based on the idea that rule in Muslim states is intrinsically bound to Islam, as famously suggested by Bernard Lewis (2002). Instead, he argues that religion has, since the generation after Muhammad, been subservient to politics, being instrumentalized to serve the needs of the politically powerful. Platteau is almost certainly correct that Islamic religious institutions have historically been subservient to the political class, and he raises the important point that Muslim political elites and religious elites should be viewed as two distinct sets of actors. Indeed, since the first few caliphs, religion has played an important role in legitimating Muslim political power, even if rulers themselves were not overly pious. Most Muslim rulers, especially those with weak claims to religious power (either as non-Arabs or lacking in bloodlines to the Prophet, as was the case with the Ottomans) relied on the religious establishment, rather than simply claiming all religious power unto themselves. Thus, Platteau's conception of religious authorities being instrumentalized as part of a broader political equilibrium is useful for understanding much of the historical and contemporary politics of the Muslim world. Indeed, Platteau suggests that his theory provides the political complement to Kuran's (2011) argument in *The Long Divergence*, which focused on aspects of Islamic law as the root of the economic divergence between Western Europe and the Islamic world.

Platteau provides *significant* and impressive narrative support for his argument. The reader is provided with historical and contemporary accounts from almost everywhere in the Islamic world: the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires, Afghanistan, Turkey, Sudan, Pakistan, Algeria, Indonesia, Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, India, Tunisia, Morocco, and more. These case studies are hardly glossed over. Almost every one involves in-depth historical and contemporary analyses of the role that Islam has played in politics. For this reason alone, it is impossible to come away from this book without learning something, no matter how well-versed one is in the political and economic histories of the Islamic world. Platteau's command of these histories is impressive, and they are quite usefully employed to show how different equilibrium outcomes can arise in an Islamic political setting. For instance,

Platteau skillfully uses insights from postcolonial Egypt, Sudan, Pakistan, Algeria, Indonesia, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and Malaysia to show how the Muslim religious establishment can be instrumentalized in support of kleptocratic regimes. In each of these cases, cynical rulers used Islam as a readily available instrument of ideology in order to implement corrupt regimes. Meanwhile, the twentieth-century histories of Turkey, Tunisia, and Afghanistan are employed to show how an "enlightened despot" equilibrium might emerge in an Islamic setting, and why this can ultimately lead to a rise in Islamist politics.

There is much to like in Platteau's theory. Very little theoretical work in the economics of religion or the economics of Islam has focused on the consequences of (Sunni) Islam's decentralized institutional structure. His (and Auriol's) theory of "religious seduction" thus helps make sense of numerous aspects of Muslim political economy. Yet, it is for this reason that the reader may leave the book wanting more. Platteau spends the bulk of the book (chapters 5–9, which comprise over 250 pages) on a variety of case studies, even venturing outside the Islamic world to analyze the role of religion in Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist revival movements. While the reader will learn much from these chapters, the role that the decentralization of Islamic institutions plays in these various histories is almost absent from the discussion. What *is* made quite clear is that Muslim religious authorities are frequently "instrumentalized" for political ends. But this stylized fact could also be indicative of Islam simply being better at legitimating rule than other religions. Platteau dismisses this idea, instead arguing that (p. 144) "regarding the political instrumentalization of religion, it is hard to detect substantial differences between Islam and Christianity." Yet, the evidence put forth is simply that Europeans also instrumentalized religion to legitimate their regimes. This is correct, but it does not necessarily follow that the relationship is the same in the two religions. Religious legitimacy is inexpensive, and it will be used as long as its benefits outweigh its costs. Just because rulers of both religions instrumentalized religion does not mean its benefits were the same.

There is plenty of Islamic doctrine, some cited by Platteau, which indicates this Islam is more

effective than Christianity at legitimating rule. Numerous hadith (important religious traditions) suggest that rulers should be obeyed unless they disobey Allah. And, of course, religious authorities are tasked with determining what involves disobedience to Allah (Rubin 2017). This makes them attractive to “seduce,” especially when the ruler desires to implement a controversial policy or act like an autocrat. It is thus unclear, theoretically, that decentralization of religious authority is the salient reason for the widespread use of Muslim religious authorities in legitimating rule. Moreover, the vast set of case studies Platteau provides do not do much to bolster the importance of decentralization, as it is rarely discussed. It is possible, even likely, that both the relative effectiveness of Muslim religious legitimacy *and* the decentralization of Muslim religious institutions have played decisive roles in contributing to political economy outcomes. Yet, the sole focus on decentralization also leaves important questions unanswered. For instance, if centralization of religious authority helped create stability in medieval Christian polities, why did religious legitimation begin to wane in the late medieval and early modern periods in Europe? Why were the same dynamics Platteau finds in Muslim political history not found in Protestant political history? (Platteau does address this issue, noting that Islam and Protestant faiths had certain similarities, including numerous puritan and fundamentalist movements; that said, their political economy outcomes are strikingly different).

Yet, none of these issues should detract too much from the importance of *Islam Instrumentalized*. The intersection of politics and religion is central to all types of outcomes in the Islamic world, and it must be grappled with by any social scientist interested in the region. Platteau’s book is an important addition to this literature, both for its theory relating decentralized religious institutions to political economy outcomes and for its wide-ranging use of case studies. Scholars of East Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa will all find many useful ideas and theoretical insights applicable to their region of interest. The sheer amount of detail Platteau provides from history and the present from around the world is an impressive achievement in itself, and it makes for an enjoyable read. Readers will learn much from this learned book.

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