Islam and Secularization

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This article looks at the relationship of the religious and the secular from a historical perspective. Contrasting historical facts, including a traditional religious consciousness, and the political religious language of recent times, it is shown that there is no natural given boundary separating the two dimensions. Instead, the whole discussion derives from an advanced state of a secular mind. In nineteenth and the twentieth century thought in institutions in the Middle East, for example, in the fields of law, education, administration and mass culture, there was experienced an irreversible process of change towards secularity. This process was facilitated by the co-existence and intersection of the religious and the secular. The dichotomy of the religious and the secular emerged within popularized fundamentalism, which itself has to be seen as a fruit of the secularization process encouraging religion to turn into a matter of politics and "social engineering".

The idea that Islam is particularly resistant to secularization is common in public discourse, both in the West and in the "Islamic world", but with different evaluations. For religious and political Muslims, it is held with pride, as a steadfast attachment to God and his revelations, valid for all times. For Western commentators, it is part of Muslim (and Arab) exceptionalism — impervious to the march of modernity and progress, heralded by the West and followed in so many parts of the world, most recently South and East Asia and China.

Ernest Gellner (1992:5–22) put forward a particularly sophisticated version of this view. He argued that whereas in the West, Russia and many parts of the world, modernity (industrialization), urban life, general literacy and social mobility have led to secularization by virtue of divorce from rural/tribal and kinship communities and authorities, these processes in Islam led from popular religion to scriptural orthodoxy. The newly urbanized and literate, he argued, progressed from the audio-visual popular Islam of village and tribe to the scriptural and legalistic Islam of the city. Thus, Islamic modernity is bound to religion in a unique way, quite unlike anywhere else. This argument feeds into the broader view that religion is the essence of "Muslim society", thus, animating all aspects of its life.[1]

In order to evaluate this argument, I should first disentangle concepts:

- I will distinguish *secularism*, which is an ideology/doctrine, from *secularization*, which is a process. The difference(s) may seem obvious, but they commonly confused, with discursive effects. The process is denied by association with the doctrine.

A.J.S.S. 33:3 (438–448)

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- The idea of the "secular" is recent. Asad (2003:23–24) attributes the first coining of "secularism" to an English writer in 1851, who used it to distinguish his position from atheism. "Secularism" is the separation of religion from other affairs, not necessarily the denial of its truth. The concept of "atheism" is more ancient (more below).
- In Islamic/Arabic parlance, the old distinction is between *din* (religion) and *dunya* (worldly affairs), without implication of a separation. For the Muslim, the rules of *din* applied to *dunya*. *Din* is *'ibada* (cult, worship), *dunya* is *mu'amalat* transactions (to rather simplify matters). The terms *'almaniya* and *'ilmaniya*, as is well known, are translations of "secular".

The Process of Secularization

In his seminal work, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*, Lucien Febvre (1982) presents a picture of that age as being imbued with religion. Every aspect of life from birth to death fell within the ambit and authority of the Church, the calendar, reckoning of time, the meal, fasting and feasting, politics, family, morality and so on. This entanglement was both institutional/authoritative and cognitive. Febvre's central argument was that unbelief was impossible in that age and not cognitively available. Yet, Rabelais, among others, was accused of atheism. Febvre argued that this was a denunciation and insult, similar to "heretic"; or immoral, in lacking God's guidance and not its more recent sense of unbelief.

The Reformation, followed by the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, represented departures from that state of religious ambience. To simplify matters, it was the processes of capitalism and the rise of the modern state that led to institutional differentiation and specialization, with various organizations and functions splitting off from religion, the churches and their authority. Philosophy, law, medicine, government, education and, more recently, family and sexuality, split off from religious institutions, authorities and cognitions. This is not necessarily a decline in religious faith as such, although in most cases it did involve that, but an insulation of that faith within limited institutional and personal spheres. "Mentalities" and psyches are also transformed (Febvre again) and we may add, new "economies of desire" created by capitalism and its associated processes.

The nature of religious thought and faith were also transformed in the process. Consider Max Weber's view regarding the secularizing effects of the Protestant rejection of ceremony, magic and saint worship. A crucial element in mainstream modern Christianity is the decline of religious sanctions — of both religious authority and its punitive powers — and also of mystical sanctions of hellfire and a vengeful god. In many churches and denominations, as well as in New Age cults, religion becomes a sphere

of sociability and conviviality, of lifestyle and personal choice rather than that of authority and sanction. Mainstream religion accepts scientific authority and adjusts its teaching to it — the scriptures become myth and allegory.

This is where "fundamentalism" comes in. Fundamentalism insists that the canonical sources mean what they say. The Bible is the word of God, true for all time and place and its meanings neither allegory nor relative to time and society. Fundamentalism is ideologized religion, developed in combat and contestation against secularization and against "mainstream" religious compromise. Homosexuality in morals and evolution in education have been prominent examples of the spheres of combat in recent decades, both for Christianity and Islam.

Islam and Secularity

The processes of secularization, in the sense of differentiation and separation of institutions and spheres of knowledge and culture from religion and its authorities, has included features of modernity in most "Muslim societies". Consider the following spheres:

• *Law*

Historically, law in the lands of Islam was anchored to religious institutions and personnel. It was held to be of divine origin and derivation, based on the revealed book, the Quran, and the examples and narratives of the Prophet and his companions. Law was, then, the preserve of the clerics (*'ulama*) who were trained in the craft of the law. The ruler and his institutions and personnel included police and tribunals that judged and acted on matters of state, order, administration and taxation. The fiction was maintained that their regulations and actions did not contradict the sacred law. This sacred law, in the hands of the *ulama*, regulated the affairs of the subjects, of civil transactions, family affairs, disputes, transgressions and compensations, as well as a theoretical competence in penal law; in practice, most questions of crime and social order were dealt with by police and the administration. The modern state, beginning in the Ottoman lands in the nineteenth century, embarked on the codification of law along European models and its institutions as a branch of state. Much of the new law was adapted directly from European models. Even when the Shari'a was declared to be the source of the legislation, as in the Ottoman civil law codification of the 1860s known as the *Majalla*, these elements were cast in the European mould. The law was "etatized" and as such, divorced from its anchor in religious institutions (Zubaida, 2003:130–135). The personnel of the law were trained in modern law schools. Legal and court procedures were adopted from Europe. The *ulama* and their institutions were first confined to specialist Shari'a courts ruling on family affairs

(*ahwal shakhsiya*, a direct translation of "personal status"), and then, in the 1950s in most countries, these affairs were subsumed under state law and regular courts, even when the idea was maintained that they derive from the Shari'a. Law was thus secularized. Only the oil rich countries of Arabia and the Gulf could afford to maintain traditional *ulama* law and institutions, though at the cost of considerable tensions with the exigencies of modern societies and economies. Commercial Tribunals in Saudi Arabia are outside the legal system and beyond rule on modern economic matters, especially in relations with the outside world.[2] The Islamic movements ("fundamentalists") made the application of the Shari'a the cornerstone of their ideological advocacy. Yet, whenever the attempt is made, as in Islamic Iran, the government finds ways of bypassing its strictures. Shortly before his death in January 1988, Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, issued the following judgement: [The Islamic state] "is a branch of the absolute trusteeship of the Prophet . . . and constitutes one of the primary ordinances of Islam which has precedence over all other derived ordinances such as prayer, fasting and pilgrimage" (Schirazi, 1997:213). That is to say, the government, following reason of state and the exigencies of modern conditions, can abrogate any requirements of the Shari'a. In any case, the great bulk of legislation of the Islamic state has been on matters with little or no pertinence to the Shari'a.[3] The Shari'a, then, becomes an ideological battle ground and a sphere for the assertion of religious authority.

• *Education*

Modern education in the sciences, mathematics, languages and the humanities started in elite and military schools in the nineteenth century in the Ottoman lands and Iran. They replaced education in religious institutions that taught the religious sciences, primarily scriptures, traditions and law. Some, like the Azhar in Egypt and the Shi'i *madrasas* of Najaf and Qum, also taught philosophy, history and mathematics, but these remained largely in their medieval forms. In the twentieth century, modern education, tied to the nation-state, became widespread throughout the population. Religion became a subject alongside many others and, as such, lost its sanctity. National universities established faculties of theology and of Shari'a to rival the religious schools on their own grounds. Training in a modern law school or faculty became a necessary qualification for the practice of even religious law.

• *Government, politics and ideology*

With few exceptions, governments have assumed modern forms following European models, with constitutions, some with presidents (supposedly elected), some with parliaments, always with cabinet government, and with

functionally specialized ministries and bureaucracies. The 1979 revolution in Iran established an Islamic Republic — a form unknown in Islamic history — with a Constitution enshrining Islamic principles, but also elected legislature, President and all the trappings of the modern nation-state. The distinctive Shi'i Islam of Iran became an emblem of Iranian nationalism as opposed to the predominantly Sunni Arab world and Turkey. The political fields in these countries were largely made up of secular politics throughout much of the twentieth century, with political contests among different brands of nationalists (Nasirists, Ba'thists), Fascists, Communists and other forms of socialism. Marxist-derived ideas dominated for much of the middle decades of the century. Islamism, in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, for instance, was one political group among many, and for most of the century it was not a dominant one. Nasirism inspired the masses throughout the Arab world and beyond in the middle decades, and communism acquired grassroots in mass support and organization in Iran, Iraq and Sudan, and had popular roots elsewhere in the region. The left was the primary object for suppression by authoritarian governments. Islamism came to prominence in the later decades of the century, partly in response to the popularity of the left and in an attempt to suppress it. The failure of the regimes that ruled by the rhetoric of nationalist socialism, such as that of Egypt and Algeria, followed by the collapse of communism were among the causes of the rise of Islamism in some countries. Islamic institutions and their finances survived authoritarian suppression of politics (and were often its beneficiary) much better than their secular counterparts because mosques and charities could not be suppressed. The triumph of Islamism in Iran was followed, within a generation, by widespread cynicism and rejection of Islamic government by the majority of the people, especially the young. The idea that the "common people" can only understand religious language and not secular ideologies is patently false.

• *The press, the media, the "public sphere" and their impact on religion and thought*

The rise of the press from the nineteenth century inaugurated new spheres of knowledge, thought and communication that had a profound impact on religion and its authority. First, it introduced an expanding public sphere of opinion, knowledge and ideology that was separate from religion. By reporting and criticizing public events and personalities, it detracted from the aura of inscrutable and immune power of rulers, princes, politicians and clerics (Cole 1993:115–26). It brought the affairs of state within the grasp of the common man, and by so doing, added a sense of empowerment. Many of the affairs and issues reported and criticized had little to do with religion. Crucially, it put religious affairs alongside profane and political issues, thus, further detracting from sanctity. The religious reform-

ers and modernists, notably Rashid Rida, became full participants in this new sphere by issuing their own magazines and pamphlets. Rida's *Al-Manar* became one of the most important vehicles of opinion in the early decades of the twentieth century — the mouthpiece of new religious ideas. *Fatwas* and religious rulings, became public pronouncements, proclaimed to the wide public and not just as an answer to a questioner, as it had been historically. The religious press, then, entered the public sphere as a combatant in ideological and political contests. Rida directed the polemics of *Al-Manar* against conservative clerics on the one side and against outright secularists on the other.[4] In this process, religion becomes part of plural political and ideological field, thus further diminishing its sanctity and authority; It becomes one side among many in a combative field.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the press and other print media dealt for the most part with matters of little pertinence, if any, to religion, politics, celebrities, social affairs, the arts, advice on health and welfare, and so on. Radio broadcasting, and then television, became ever more important mass media, further adding to the secular content of thought and knowledge, and contributing musical and dramatic entertainment, often frowned upon by conservative religious opinion. Religious broadcasting was always part of these media, with Quran recitations, sermons and religious instruction. This process can be seen to be part of the further "profanation" of religion, by placing it alongside news, music and other forms of entertainment.

• *Arts, entertainment and leisure*

Music and song have always constituted a vital part of Middle Eastern society and culture. Though often denounced by orthodox religious authorities, they continued to thrive in elite as well as popular spheres and, indeed, in the covens and gatherings of Sufi orders. Drink, too, though forbidden, continued to form part of sociability and entertainment among many groups in Muslim societies. Modernity and secularization, however, added many dimensions to these activities. I have already mentioned broadcasting as a crucial medium in spreading and generalizing musical and dramatic entertainments. It also contributed to the formation of a "national" cultural imagination and the rise of celebrity performers, often on a pan-Arab scale for the Arab world. The cinema was an overwhelming addition to this process. Throughout the twentieth century, the cinema occupied a central place in the popular imagination. Egyptian cinema, prolific from the early decades of the century, was ubiquitous throughout the Arab world. Hollywood and Bollywood were sources of great entertainment and fascination for the public in most Muslim countries — these were "democratic" forms of entertainment enjoyed by most sectors of the population (at least the urban population). Market porters, taxi drivers, domestic servants

as well as students, teachers and merchants all frequented the cinemas (with seating stratified by price, of course). Devotees saw the same adventures and romances repeatedly until they learnt the songs and the dialogue and joined in rendering them with the actors. The great Egyptian singers such as Abdul-Wahhab, Um Kalthum and Farid al-Atrash became idols, and their songs were on every tongue. This absorption and fascination for the cinema, its idols and its songs is, perhaps, one of the most notable signs of the secularization of the popular mind. This is not to say that people abandoned their religion (although many did) or their popular magic (often more powerful than "orthodox" religion) but that these became compartmentalized to particular corners of their lives. Television furthered these processes and brought entertainment to people's homes and cafes. Spectator sport, especially football, came to occupy a central position in broadcast media and exercised ever greater fascination, mixed with nationalism and regionalism, on the popular mind. It is significant that football playing and watching have become such important issues of contest between the clerics and the public in Iran in recent years, with the authorities attempting to restrict the crowds and prevent women from playing or watching in the stadiums, only to face tenacious resistance.

Islamic Reform as Secularization

Crucially, what is called Islamic reform of *'asr al-nahdha* (the Arab Renaissance) from the nineteenth century includes elements of secularization of religion itself as well as the social spheres of its operation. The reformers (Afghani, Abduh, Rida, Kawakibi, Young Ottomans) proceed with their reforms by first putting aside the historical accumulations and traditions of *fiqh*, that is to say, the historical accumulation of authority and *ijma'*.[5] They do so in favour of *ijtihad* (the exercise of reason in the re-interpretation of religious sources) and *tajdid* (innovation), referring back to the original divine and prophetic sources, the Quran and Sunna. Their concept of *ijtihad*, however, is abstracted from the ratio and methodology of *fiqh* — it becomes a free intellectual pursuit. Indeed, some prominent contributors to reforms were general intellectuals with no *fiqh* credentials, such as the Egyptian Qasim Amin, who wrote an influential treatise on liberating women at the turn of the twentieth century (Amin 1899).

The reformers further diluted the rules and claims of religion by acknowledging the authority and superiority of modern science. In Al-Azmeh's words:

> . . . the Reformists had to confront the new scientific, natural and historical knowledge, which was based completely on secular authority, and which was unequivocally incompatible with the text of the Koran. They therefore relied

> on the same strategy employed in the interpretation of the *shari'a*, that is, to begin by restricting the domain of binding certainty and narrowing the sphere of religion vis-à-vis an expanding world endowed with an independent secular authority completely dissociated from Islam or any other religion (Azmeh 1993:116).

This permissiveness is directed to adjusting the rules and procedures of religion and the Shari'a to what is perceived as the needs of the modern age, of progress and enlightenment (including interest on loans and insurance policies), as well as modern sensibilities regarding family, women, morality, punishment and so on. A crucial concept that allows this permissiveness is *maslaha* or "public interest". This word is used in historical *fiqh*, from Ghazzali (d. 1111) to Shatibi (d. 1388) (its most important theoretician). Like *ijtihad*, it was used subject to the ratio and methodology of *fiqh*. In its modern usage, however, it is invoked freely and with little restraint to justify adjustments and compromises with perceived needs and functions.[6] In a different context, it was famously used by Ayatollah Khomeini in his 1988 ruling to justify departure from Shari'a dictates for *raison d'etats*. *Maslaha* even became an institution of the Islamic government in *Majles-e tashkhis maslahat-e nizam*, literally, Council for Identifying the Public Interest, generally called Expediency Council — a legislative body that was added to the earlier Council of Guardians, of *ulama* pronouncing on the compatibility of legislation with the Shari'a.

Are all these reforms and adjustments not forms of secularization? They encourage the creation of religious constructions that are compatible with the perceived needs of modern societies and states and conform to perceived modern sensibilities. As such, they evoke the reaction and ire of "fundamentalists". At the same time, however, they lay the grounds for fundamentalism. The reform framework of Rashid Rida, for instance, expanded religious and Shari'a competence, in theory, to all areas of modern life at the cost of emptying it of its religious content. In his framework, this expansion is permissive with weak connection to the sacred sources, but in the advocacy of his fundamentalist successors, these universalist claims become ever more authoritarian.

Religious 'Revival' as Part of the Process of Secularization

Religious revival, "fundamentalism" and "political Islam" are phenomena of secularization. They are ideological and cultural reactions against the *fait accompli*. Iran is a good example: the Islamic government does not differ from other kinds of modern governments in terms of economic policy, government structure and administration, and legislation (of the large number

of decrees of the Revolutionary Council, then bills before the Majles, few had any relevance to the Shari'a in the judgements of the Guardians Council). Religious authority is then expressed in symbolic forms, by imposing the *hijab*, on family law (with many pragmatic departures from initial positions), and on selective applications of "Quranic" penalties, especially in high-profile political cases. This, in turn, renders the political nature and corruption of the religious classes transparent, and leads to discontent and cynicism of a youthful and rebellious population. In these respects, Islamic Iran is much more secular than secular Turkey or many of its Arab neighbours.

The Question of Islamic Government

The call for Islamic government rests on the idea that Islam is *din wa-dawla*, religion and state, with no separation between religion and politics — the opposite of secularist assertions. Muslim modernists and secularists have countered that Islam does not have or require a system of government, that God and the Prophet have left these matters to the discretion of the believers to proceed according to their circumstances and intelligence. Such was the gist of the argument presented by Ali Abdul-Raziq in the 1920s and repeated by modernists in various versions up to the present day (Hussein Ahmad Amin, Muhammad Said al-Ashmawi, Abdul-Karim Soroush). If we concur with this view — and the historical evidence favours it — then are we saying that the separation between religion and government, the hallmark of secularist advocacy, is original to Islam? Is secularism, then, not recent and a feature of modernity? To argue this position would be to misunderstand the nature of these historical societies and polities, Christian as well as Muslim.

Government was distinct from religion in that it did not proceed in accordance with religious precepts (Shari'a, church doctrine) but according to *raison d'etats* and the dominant interests. Religious institutions and personnel were separate from the government or subordinate to it. Nevertheless, religion supplied the language of political legitimacy and of contest. The king of France may fight the Pope, but always in the name of a superior religious virtue. The idea of the Shari'a (as against any specific provisions) was always emblematic in the demands for justice. Ceremonies of state (*bay'a* or oath of loyalty to a new ruler, coronation, victory parades) often contained religious procedures and symbols. Magical and mythical notions, perceived as part of religion, played important roles in matters and ceremonies of government; the king of France was credited with a magic touch that could cure certain afflictions, while Muslim rulers followed astrologers and mystics in planning war and matters of state. Febvre's world, imbued by religion, prevailed. Religion, however, was not a uni-

tary system, ideologically or institutionally, and the government and rulers always appropriated elements and strands of religion to their rule. Above all, they were not subordinate to religious authority except perhaps under certain conditions of weakness and crisis.

Modern rulers, notoriously, also resort to religious claims for legitimacy (Anwar Sadat, Saddam Hussein), but they do so in a transformed world in which religious symbols and language compete with a wide array of discourses and ideologies, and where the rulers' religious credentials are often transparently fake.

Notes

1. For a critical evaluation of Gellner's arguments, see Sami Zubaida, 1995.
2. For an account of the Saudi legal system see Vogel, 2000; also Zubaida 2003 153–156.
3. For elaboration, see Schirazi 1997 and Zubaida 2003, 182–219.
4. For an account of the development of the religious press and *fatwa* forms and institutions, see Skovgaard-Petersen, 1997.
5. On the Arab Renaissance and reformist thought, see Hourani, 1983. On Young Ottomans, see Mardin, 1962.
6. For the history of *maslaha* in Sunni legal thought. see Hallaq 1997:162–206, 214–231.

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