

IN TRANSITION

ESSAYS ON CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN MIDDLE EASTERN SOCIETIES

Compiled and Edited by

M. R. Ghanoonparvar and Faridoun Farrokh

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CAN ISLAM BE SECULARIZED?

Mehrzaad Boroujerdi

INTRODUCTION

Ernest Gellner, a towering figure of social theory, has written that "no secularization has taken place in the world of Islam."¹ Similarly, Leonard Binder believes that "secularism is declining in acceptability and is unlikely to serve as an ideological basis for political liberalism in the Middle East."² Finally, the late prominent Muslim thinker, Fazlur Rahman, writes: "secularism destroys the sanctity and universality (transcendence) of all moral values...secularism is necessarily atheistic."³

Can these thinkers be mistaken in their assessment of social and intellectual life in the Middle East? At first sight, this seems highly unlikely. After all, we can hardly find two words more seemingly antithetical to one another than "Islam" and "secularism." Moreover, considering the events that have beset the Islamic regions over the last two decades, is there any possibility that the politics and poetic of dissent can once again become secularized? Or, to ask the question differently, is not the Middle East bound to observe a multifarious and irreversible process of desecularization in the years to come? Is it then fair to say that the triumph of Islamicists would lead to the banishment of doubt, irreverence, and the moribundity of civil society?

Observers of Middle Eastern politics can hardly remember a time during which the ideational gap between the secularists and the Islamicists was wider than it is now. Today, in both the Sunni and the Shi'ite worlds, Muslim opponents of secularism are ques-

tioning the political legitimacy and the optimistic moral valency of modernity. Radical Islamicists have managed to establish themselves as the most viable contenders for political power in such secularly oriented states as Algeria, Egypt, Turkey and Tunisia, and have already succeeded in taking over the state machinery in Afghanistan, Iran, and Sudan. These movements regard the secularists' call for the separation of the political sphere from religion as an assault, or worse, a Western-inspired plot, to undermine Islam's hegemony. The protagonists of secularism, on the other hand, remain ever more convinced that Islam must belong to the sphere of private devotion. They interpret the Islamicists' resistance to secularism and modernity as a sign of the latter's intellectual archaism and cultural schizophrenia.

In this charged dichotomy can one begin to walk away from the fields of polemics toward an objective theoretical analysis? That is the path I hope to take in this paper. Before proceeding any farther, however, several theoretical and definitional clarifications are in order.

SECULARISM AND SECULARIZATION

The application of concepts such as "secularism," "secularization," and "secularist" to studies of the Middle East have often been more problematic than enlightening. A plethora of meanings and incompatible usages have dissuaded many social scientists from using these concepts as heuristic devices.⁴ A more powerful rational presented by those who refrain from utilizing these concepts has to do with the different historical and cultural experiences that Europe and Middle East respectively went through. Following Marx and Weber, many Western sociologists and political scientists argue that concepts such as secularism and secularization are only useful for explaining the historical uniqueness of the West (where these concepts first emerged), and therefore should not be extended to the rest of the world. After all, they argue, Middle Eastern societies did not have a first-hand encounter with the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, or the Enlightenment. There was no Lutheran movement to question the foundations of Islam

as the primordial religion from inside. Nor did any Voltaire ever emerge to subject the sacred imagery of that religion to a masterful mockery from outside.

Despite this prevalent skepticism, I believe these concepts are rather germane in most studies dealing with contemporary Middle East, granted they first be subjected to a deconstructive analysis.

"Secularism" is a doctrine, spirit, or consciousness advocating the temporal (as opposed to the sacred) foundation of "individual ideas, attitudes, beliefs, or interests."⁵ The term comes from the Latin root "Saeculum," meaning "age"; "to be secular" means to "be oriented toward this age."⁶ The term "secularism" was coined by G.J. Holyoake in 1854 in his book *Principles of Secularism* to express "a certain positive and ethical element, which the terms 'infidel,' 'skeptic,' [and] 'atheist' do not express."⁷

Secularism, in its characteristic Western form, is tantamount to the idea that religion and state are different and separable entities.⁸ It is based on the recognition that "religion is a subject about which human beings hold strong yet divergent opinions.... It simply asserts that people can differ on this subject while remaining citizens of the same state, and that they can do so more easily if the state as such professes no opinion on the matter."⁹ However, secularism is more than just a political concept. "It is also a philosophy of life, and its ideal is progress in human life in the present world, irrespective of man's religion, sect, caste, color, etc."¹⁰

"Secularization" or "laicization" means "the transformation of persons, offices, properties, institutions, or matters of an ecclesiastical or spiritual character to a lay, or worldly, position."¹¹ As a social process, which occurs independent of an individual's control, secularization refers to "any diminution in the scope of human life that is governed by religious laws, religious values, or religious authorities."¹² Therefore, a society becomes secularized as religion becomes progressively more marginal in regulating the individual and collective behaviors of its citizenry. Accordingly, the term "secularist" can be used to allude to those individuals who believe that art, education, marriage, politics and all other civil matters should

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*from the sacred text than traditional commentaries on it.*¹⁴

Fourth, the skeptics of secularism maintain that in the Muslim world Islam has become overly mingled with traditionalism and has indeed become the latter's fortress. This characteristic has provided its discursive practices with an imposing armor which cannot be attacked or dismantled. Finally, in the case of Shi'ism, they argue that its ideological grievances toward temporal authority, its tendency toward oppositionalism along with its communal, paternalistic and highly emotional qualities constitute an additional set of obstacles for any drive toward secularization.

Nonetheless, I believe, the prospect for Islam's secularization is not as futile as one may surmise. A glance at Islamic history provides us with ample evidence that Islamic traditions and institutions have undergone tremendous metamorphoses as required by the social realities of their respective societies. Let us look at a few of these contradictory evidences.

1) Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, has a great potential for secularization because as an organized religion it does not try to divorce itself from society and historical events. In this sense it does not share the non-historical, monastic and otherworldly orientation of Hinduism and most other Far Eastern religions.¹⁵ The chiliastic orientation of Islam in general and Shi'ism in particular which promises to deliver humankind from its wickedness into an age of justice and piety has contributed to its secular capacity. Muslim's concern with the modern breakthroughs in science and technology has forced them to reinterpret and update the tenants of their faith. The group to be particularly affected by the socio-political changes was a new generation of lay intellectuals, professionals, writers and clerics. Their adherence to Islam did not prevent them from advocating the two central principles of technological progress and political liberalism. Such individuals as Seyyed Jamal-ed-Din Afghani (1838/9-1897), Mohammed Abduh (1849-1905), Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), and Ali Shariati (1933-1977) are representative of this class. They helped pave the way for the acceptance of such

Western liberal ideas and practices as parliamentary government, constitutionalism, civil liberties, and intellectual pluralism.¹⁶

2) The fact that the field of interpretation in Islam has long been subject to contesting explications by jurists has contributed to its potential for secularization. The disagreements between the *Asharites* and the *Mutazilites*, Avicenna and Al-Ghazzali; and the *Akhbaris* and the *Usulis* serve as examples of this contested terrain. How else could the *Mutazilites*' and the *Usulis*' rationalist philosophy, sufism's emancipation, and Babism's political radicalism emerge from within this seemingly closed arena? Furthermore, one should also pay attention to the role played by Sufi mystics in Islam. The popularity of mystical teachings that emphasis individualization of faith ("inwardness in religiosity and aggressively questioning the role of the ulama as mediators between God and the believer")¹⁷ serves to demonstrate that secularizing tendencies are present in Islam. Although "secularization in Islam" is not the same as "secularization of Islam," it can nevertheless be regarded as a transient step for such sojourners. The fact that the gardeners of these ideas found a soil on which to plant their seeds testifies to the fertile nature of the intellectual politics in which they were first conceived.

3) Contrary to the vehement denials of most radical Islamicists, Islam indeed recognizes a narrow yet clear demarcation line between the realms of private behavior and that of public practice. The Quran, the Prophet, and the Imams have enumerated many instances in which the state is forbidden from interfering in the private affairs of the umma. The sanctity of the house, family and lawful business transactions constitute three such arenas. Furthermore, throughout the ages, Muslim intellectual elites have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity for acculturation and eclecticism. After all, they learned to live with the hedonistic poetry of Arab and Persian poets, and to reconcile themselves, albeit strenuously, with first the Greek and now Western philosophical thought. Whether consciously or not, these elites are steering Islam toward ideologization. This is in itself a colossal step toward secularization.

Let me introduce a note of caution here. I am not suggesting that a secularist project does not face formidable impediments in

the Middle East. Far from it. Besides such obstacles as communalism, casteism, obscurantism and ethnicity, most people maintain a nonsecular outlook on life. Religion is so intertwined with such everyday institutions and issues as family, marriage, education, language, community and politics that most Middle Eastern societies can be characterized as "non-secular" or "religious." However, to be a "non-secular society" does not mean that one should also have a "non-secular state." Many Muslims who oppose the concept of "secularism" nevertheless accept the idea of a "secular state." It means that while rejecting the idea of separation of religion from the social life they uphold the separation of religion from the state.¹⁸ Just look at what has happened in Lebanon or what can happen in a place like India if the state was to be anything but secular.

Furthermore, I am not claiming that secularization in the Middle East has or will follow along the same line as it did in Europe. Secularization in the Middle East has so far differed from its European predecessor in at least five important respects. First, in those Middle Eastern countries that have experimented with it, "secularization did not spring solely and automatically from economic modernization, but was the consequence of a series of difficult political choices."¹⁹ In other words, secularization was forced through as a political measure under the control of autocratic and statist governments. Second, judging from the examples of Turkish and Iranian secularization drives, one can say that these attempts were "consciously mimetic in that they took Europe as their specific model of adaptation."²⁰ Bear in mind that in Iran, for example, Reza Shah emulated the German model of guided economy, French educational system, and the Franco-Belgian judicial system. Third, in the Middle East secularization did not go hand in hand with democratization or pluralism. The so-called "secularist" leaders were more interested in coercion than consensus and viewed their fellowmen more as subjects than citizens. Fourth, as Sadik J. Al-Azm has put it, the Middle East was deprived of an important prerequisite for secularization, i.e., a religious hallucination:

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Islam's "subjective secularization," meaning the loss of religious credibility at the level of human experience. Secondly, they need to work toward an "objective secularization" of Islam which involves the latter's structural isolation and eventual departure from the political domain. The first concerns a scholastic debate over the values of atheism and religion as well as a deconstruction of Quranic exigencies. The latter, however, revolves around a political battle over laicism and theocracy. In light of this important distinction, I believe, the secularist forces have to rethink the various set of tactics and strategies (i.e., political appeasement, intellectual dialogue or armed confrontation) that they have chosen in their dealings with their Islamicist adversaries. The question to ask is which method has been more efficacious? Why? And more important, what remains of the possibilities for dialogue in the future?

NOTES

¹ Ernest Gellner, "Islam and Marxism: Some Comparisons," *International Affairs*, vol. 67, no. 1 (January 1991), p. 2.

² Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 19.

³ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 15.

⁴ For a general discussion of some of the conflicting and inconsistent meanings associated with these concepts see: Peter E. Glasner, *The Sociology of Secularization: A Critique of a Concept* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977).

⁵ Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1964), pp. 3-8.

⁶ Bassam Tibi, *The Crisis of Modern Islam: A Preindustrial Culture in the Scientific-Technological Age*, trans. by Judith von Sivers (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), p. 130.

⁷ Tamara Sonn, "Secularism and National Stability in Islam," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Summer 1987), p. 302.

⁸ The dictionary definition for secularism is "indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations." *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1990), p. 1061.

⁹ Edward Mortimer, "Christianity and Islam," *International Affairs*, vol. 67, no. 1 (January 1991), p.7.

¹⁰ R. L. Chaudhari, *The Concept of Secularism in Indian Constitution* (New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1987), pp. 10-11.

¹¹ Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, p. 5.

¹² Terrance G. Cartoll, "Secularization and States of Modernity," *World Politics*, vol. xxxvi, no. 3 (April 1984), p. 364.

¹³ Chaudhari, p. 10.

¹⁴ Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 87.

¹⁵ Roy R. Anderson, Robert Seibert and Jon Wagner, *Politics and Change in the Middle East* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), p. 23.

¹⁶ Binder goes as far as to say that "without a vigorous Islamic liberalism, political liberalism will not succeed in the Middle East." Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism*, p. 19.

¹⁷ Tibi, *The Crisis of Modern Islam*, p. 134.

¹⁸ Chaudhari, p. 12.

¹⁹ Bryan S. Turner, *Weber and Islam* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 168.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Sadik J. Al-Azm, "The Importance of Being Earnest About Salman Rushdie," *Die Welt des Islams* XXXI (1991), p. 42.

²² An indication of this structural and ideological weakness can be seen in the fact that with the exception of Lebanon and Turkey, all other written constitutions in the region make accommodations for official state religions. See Bernard Lewis, *Secularism in the Middle East* (Rehovot, Israel: Weizmann Institute of Science, 1991), p. 24.

²³ Some of the equivalent terms used to describe secularism in Turkish, Arabic and Persian are *ladini* (non-religious), *alamani* or *Donyavi* (worldly), *'ilmani* (scientific) and *Urfi* (temporal).

²⁴ Ibid., p. 26.