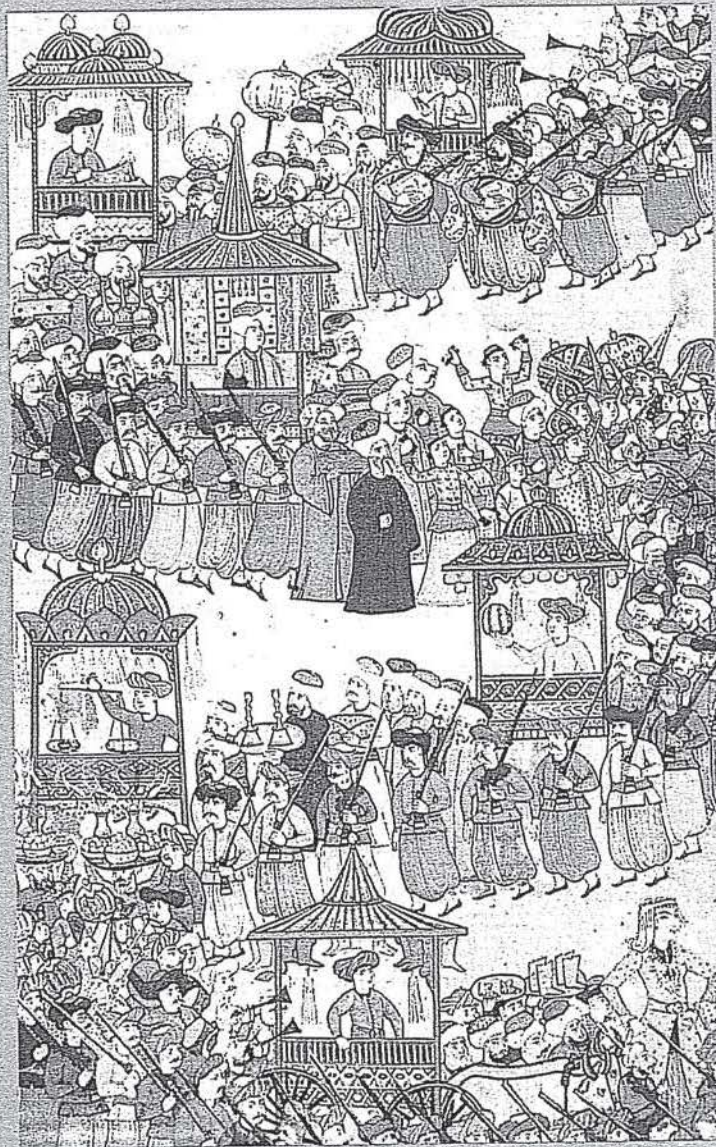


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# CIVIL SOCIETY DEMOCRACY AND THE MUSLIM WORLD



SWEDISH RESEARCH INSTITUTE IN ISTANBUL 1997

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# Is Islam Secularizable?

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Among the memorable experiences I have had in recent years was listening to the Chairman of the Anthropology Department at Cambridge University, the eminent theoretician and student of North African Islam, Ernest Gellner, declare Islam inherently unsecularizable. This came in a lecture delivered at Princeton University's Near Eastern Studies Department in the Spring of 1990. The message came through loud and clear: among the world's great historical religions, Islam stands alone - for one reason or another - in being impervious to secularization. At the time, I applauded Gellner's raw assertion for making the implicit explicit once and for all without either beating around the bush or resorting to polite euphemisms. I thought, then, that Gellner did everyone a favour by bringing out into the open (harshly, crudely and bluntly), this widely held and deeply entrenched view both in the West and among Muslims fundamentalist circles everywhere.

Now I would like to submit this assumption to some critical examination from both a historico-theoretical angle as well as from a politico-practical one. But, first, let me point out that though the immediate context in which this issue is being addressed is by and large a "Western" context, it is simply not true that the problem of the secularizability of Islam is either primarily a "Western" question or even a "new" question. The fact of the matter is that this issue, and many others like it, has been on the agenda of modern Arab and Muslim thought and history since about Bonaparte's occupation of Egypt in 1798. It is also the kind of question that Arabs, for example, have been uninterruptedly interrogating themselves about, trying to come to terms with and attempting to settle since at least the last quarter of the 19th century; i.e., since what we Arabs often refer to in our recent past as the Arab Renaissance, the Arab Awakening, the Islamic Reformation, or what the late expert on the period, Albert Hourani, aptly called the "Liberal Age" of Arab thought.

In my attempt to formulate a more realistic answer to the question: Is Islam secularizable? I shall start by raising another question: Was the simple, egalitarian and unadorned Islam of Mecca and Medina (Yatherb) at the time of the Prophet and the first four Rightly-Guided Caliphs (chosen by the then emerging Muslim community as his successors) compatible with the hereditary dynastic kingships of such complex empires, stratified societies and hierarchical polities as Byzantium and Sassanid Persia at the time of the Arab-Muslim conquest of those mighty realms? The accurate answer is twofold: (a) dogmatically No; the two were completely incompatible; (b) historically Yes; the two became very compatible and in an incredibly short period of time. The historical Yes issues, then, in the imperial hereditary Caliphate that lasted through the thick and thin of history until its formal abolition by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk soon after the First World War. The dogmatic No of that same charismatic founding moment issued in Islam's famous historical opposition movements with all the multifarious forms that they eventually assumed. Probably nothing in Islam's early history represents the dogmatic No more pristinely and paradigmatically than the Kharijite armed opposition to the institutionalization of early Muslim rule in the form of a hereditary dynastic caliphate of the imperial sort.

I am using "dogmatic", here, not in its current pejorative sense, but in its classi-

cal meaning of what the community of believers takes to be the correct system of beliefs, i.e., orthodoxy. The early Muslim dogmatists, literalists, purists, scripturalists were absolutely right at the time of the first Arab conquests to insist that nothing in the Muslim orthodoxy of the day could make the Islam of Medina, Mecca and the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs compatible with hereditary monarchy of the imperial kind. But the historicists won the day and prevailed, as we all know. Furthermore, I can confidently assert that, broadly speaking, whenever the dogmatic No in Islamic history - correct as it may have been scripturally and literally in its own time - came in outright conflict with the historical Yes - incorrect and unorthodox as it may have seemed at its own moment - the historical Yes tended to win out and prevail over the dogmatic No. This victory used often to reach the point of completely obliterating and supplanting the purist No of the moment.

To bring this matter nearer to Western readers, I would like to give a European example of what I mean by the historical Yes and dogmatic No. I would regard, for instance, the movement of Monsignor Marcel Lefebvre and his followers in Europe and the United States as an excellent example of the Church's persisting purist dogmatic No to modern times' reigning paradigm of a dynamic, spreading and evolving secular humanism, religious pluralism, mutual tolerance, freedom of conscience, a scientifically based culture and so on. At the same time I would regard the Second Vatican Council, convened by Pope John XXIII, resulting in the Conciliar Church as an equally excellent example of the final triumph of the historical Yes in the life of the Roman Church over that classical dogmatic No.

By the same token, I would argue that the accurate answer to our primary question: Is Islam secularizable? is also twofold: (a) dogmatically, No, it is not secularizable; (b) historically, Yes, it is secularizable. In fact I would contend that without a good grasp of the ups and downs of this on-going Yes to the secularization process of contemporary socio-historical Islam, no explanation of the ferociousness of the current fundamentalist reaction or of the accompanying aggressive resurgence and assertiveness of the dogmatic No all over again, can be regarded as either adequate or satisfactory.

Islam, as a coherent static ideal of eternal and permanently valid principles, is, of course, compatible with nothing other than itself. As such, it is the business of Islam to reject, resist and combat secularism and secularization to the very end - like any other major religion viewed under the aspect of eternity. But Islam as a living dynamic evolving faith, responding to widely differing environments and rapidly shifting historical circumstances, incontrovertibly proved itself highly compatible with all the major types of politics and varied forms of social and economic organization that human history produced and threw up in the lives of peoples and societies: from kingship to republic, from slavery to freedom, from tribe to empire, from ancient city state to modern nation-state. Similarly, Islam as a world-historical religion stretching over fifteen centuries has unquestionably succeeded in implanting itself in a whole variety of societies, a whole multiplicity of cultures, a whole diversity of life-forms, ranging from the tribal-nomadic to the centralized bureaucratic, to the feudal agrarian, to the mercantile-financial, to the capitalist-industrial.

In the light of these palpable historical facts, adaptations and precedents, to declare Islam inherently unsecularizable is over-hasty, biased and premature, to say the least. For, obviously, Islam has had to be very plastic, adaptable, malleable and infinitely reinterpretable to survive and flourish under such contradictory circumstances as referred to above. Thus, to insist *a priori*, à la Gellner and Co., that Islam is forever incapable of somehow coming to terms with and adapting to the reigning humanist-secularist paradigm of our times is epistemologically to rush in where angels fear to tread.

In fact I can see some confirmation of this general conclusion coming from the

most unlikely quarter of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Even there, one can detect a kind of left-handed compliment paid to the power of the contemporary historical Yes as against the standard dogmatic No of the purists. Consider, for instance, that the Iranian Ayatollahs, in their moment of victory, did not proceed to restore the Islamic Caliphate - and there was a Shi'i Caliphate in Muslim history - nor did they erect an Imamate or vice-Imamate, but proceeded to establish a republic for the first time in Iran's long history. A republic with popular elections, a constituent assembly, a parliament (where real debates take place), a president, a council of ministers, political factions, a constitution (which is a clone of the 1958 French Constitution), a kind of supreme court and so on, all of which has absolutely nothing to do with Islam as history, orthodoxy and dogma, but everything to do with modern Europe as practices, institutions, political accommodations and governmental arrangements. What makes this phenomenon doubly important is the fact that the Iranian clerics and guardians of Shi'i orthodoxy, dogmatic purity etc., have always been ferocious opponents of Republicanism and republics, denouncing them as absolutely un-Islamic. They successfully frustrated all previous attempts at declaring Iran a republic by earlier reforming rulers in the name of the dogmatic No of orthodox Islam and the rejection of European models, imported institutions, alien political arrangements and so on.

Note also that in spite of the Islamic idiom, the politico-ideological discourses, debates and polemics of the Iranian clerics and guardians of correct belief are substantively dictated by the historical Yes of the present socio-economic-political conjuncture rather than the exigencies of the dogmatic No of orthodoxy. This is why we find the public discourses of Iran's ruling Mullahs dealing not so much with theology, dogma, the Caliphate and/or Imamate, but with economic planning, social reform, re-distribution of wealth, the right to private property as against the right to distributive justice, imperialism, economic dependency, development, the role of the popular masses (as against that of technocratic elites), without forgetting such issues as identity, modernization, authenticity etc. Consider the following words of admonition addressed by a Third World leader to his country's religious schools:

If you pay no attention to the politics of the imperialists and consider religion to be simply the few topics you are always studying and never go beyond them, then the imperialists will leave you alone. Pray as much as you like: it is your oil they are after - why should they worry about your prayers? They are after our minerals, and want to turn our country into a market for their goods. That is the reason why the puppet governments they have installed prevent us from industrializing, and instead establish only assembly plants and industry that is dependent on the outside world.

These could have been easily the words of such secular leaders of the sixties as President Nasser of Egypt, President Sukarno of Indonesia and/or the very early Fidel Castro of Cuba, but they are in fact the words of Ayatollah Khomeiny himself. Obviously the historical and republican Yes has scored some kind of a victory in Iran against the long standing and officially declared dogmatic No.

Since the question of the secularizability of Islam is really neither a pure matter of the spirit nor the mere clashes of ideas nor of conflicting theological speculations and interpretations, but is an affair of real history, power politics and clashes of material forces, the dialectical opposition and interpenetration of the historical Yes and the dogmatic No tend to work themselves out in human affairs and societies quite violently with all the attendant destructions, dislocations, breakdowns, protracted struggles, creative energies and innovative outcomes. This is attested to historically by the ever recurring inter-Islamic armed conflicts, civil wars, insurrections etc., and at present by the current violence of and against armed insurrectionary fundamentalist Islam, practically everywhere.

To be noted in this connection as well is the fact that in such key countries as Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Algeria, Turkey etc., there is hardly anything in society, econo-

my, polity, culture and law that is run anymore according to Islamic precepts, administered along the lines of Shari'a law or functions in conformity with theological doctrine and/or teachings. Outside the realm of personal status, individual belief and private piety and/or impiety the role of Islam has unquestionably receded to the periphery of public life. In other words, inspect, in any one of those states, the factory, the bank, the market place, the officer corps, the political party, the state apparatuses, the school, the university, the laboratory, the court-house, the arts, the media etc., and you will quickly realize that there is very little religion left in them.

Even in a state like Saudi Arabia where the ruling tribal elite wraps itself so conspicuously in the mantles of strict Muslim orthodoxy, moral purity, bedouin austerity and social uprightness, the contradiction between outward official pretence, on the one hand and the real substance of life on the other, has become so wide, sharp and explosive that those still taking the religious pretences seriously staged the armed insurrection which occupied the Meccan Holy shrine in 1979, shaking the kingdom to its foundations in the process. Their declared goal was no more than rectifying that schizophrenic condition, i.e. putting an end to that ludicrous discrepancy between official ideology and reality by bringing the substance of Saudi life again in strict conformity with religious orthodoxy as officially announced and propounded.

In the above mentioned countries, the modern secular-nationalist calendar, with its new holidays, symbols, monuments, historical sites, battles, heroes, ceremonies and memorial days, has come to fill the public square, relegating in the process the old religious calendar and its landmarks to the margins of public life. This is why the truly radical Muslim fundamentalists complain not so much about the unsecularizability of Islam, but rather about "Islam's eclipse and isolation from life", about "the absence of Islam from all realms of human activity, because it has been reduced to mere prayer, the fast, the pilgrimage and alms giving", about how "Islam faces today the worst ordeal in its existence as a result of materialism, individualism and nationalism", about how "school and university curricula, though not openly critical of religion, effectively subvert the Islamic world-picture and its attendant practices", about how "the history of Islam and the Arabs is written, taught and explained without reference to divine intervention causal or otherwise", about how "modern and nominally Muslim nation-states, though they never declare a separation of State and Mosque, nonetheless subvert Islam as a way of life, as an all-encompassing spiritual and moral order and as a normative integrative force, by practising a more sinister *de facto* form of functional separation of state and religion". Obviously these radical fundamentalists have a superior appreciation, in their own way, of the nature of the modern forces and processes gnawing at the traditional fabric of Muslim societies, cultures and polities, than the social scientists, experts and mainstream Mullahs who keep repeating the formula: "Islam is unsecularizable".

Consequently, these radical insurrectionary Islamists keenly resent the fact that contemporary Islam has gone a long way in the direction of privatization, personalization and even individualization to the point of allowing its basic tenets to turn into optional beliefs, rituals and acts of worship. To reverse this seemingly irreversible trend they literally (and not figuratively) go to war in order to achieve what they call the re-Islamization of currently nominally Muslim societies, cultures and polities.

They resent no less keenly: (a) the extent to which traditional gender hierarchies continue to be destabilized, shaken and altered in contemporary Muslim societies; (b) the slow erosion of the traditional power of males over females accompanying such major social shifts as urbanization, the switch to the nuclear family, the wider education, training and gainful employment of women; (c) the steady growth of competing obligations, opportunities and openings attracting women from strictly traditional roles; (d) the tendency towards greater egalitarian gender relations in marriage and life in general; (e) the reproduction of society, through the socialization of children,

according to norms that they regard as totally un-Islamic. Hence, their anger over the whole feminist issue, their nervous discourses over the Muslim family and its fate, their preoccupation with Muslim socialization of children and their militant demands for such measures as: The reimposition on women, the young and the family in general of the norms of traditional respect, obedience, gender segregation and undivided loyalty to the male head of the household.

It should not escape attention, in this connection, that Muslim countries in general and Arab societies in particular have witnessed, since the end of the last century, an uninterrupted commotion of sharp debates, discussions, polemics, rebuttals, counter-rebuttals and struggles over the gender issue and its ramifications for the family, the role of women in society at large, the socialization of children and the kind of norms according to which society is to reproduce itself. For example, Naguib Mahfouz's trilogy of novels about Cairene life in the first part of this century dates the collapse of the male dominated and dictatorially run traditional Muslim household in Cairo at exactly the moment of Egypt's great revolution against British colonial rule in 1919. The society of Muslim Brothers - the mother of all Islamic fundamentalisms in the Arab World - was founded a few years later as a reaction to the secularizing forces and processes unleashed by that revolution.

I would like to emphasise my general point by the following citation from one of Naguib Mahfouz's articles describing the murky and confused condition of a typical Cairene Muslim struggling willy-nilly with the paradoxes, anomalies and antinomies generated daily by a long-term historical secularization process, glimpsed by most only intermittently and through a glass darkly:

He leads a contemporary [i.e., "modern"] life. He obeys civil and penal laws of Western origin and is involved in a complex tangle of social and economic transactions and is never certain to what extent these agree with or contradict his Islamic creed. Life carries him along in its current and he forgets his misgivings for a time until one Friday he hears the imam or reads the religious page in one of the papers, and the old misgivings come back with a certain fear. He realizes that in this new society he has been afflicted with a split personality: half of him believes, prays, fasts and makes the pilgrimage. The other half renders his values void in banks and courts and in the streets, even in the cinemas and theaters, perhaps even at home among his family before the television set.

This account feels so genuine and true to the actually lived experience of Muslims everywhere that no *a priori* unsecularizability formula should ever be allowed to obscure it.

As far as the Arab World is concerned, one source of confusion concerning this question of unsecularizability lies, as it seems to me, in the fact that Arab societies never witnessed a high dramatic Kemalist instant where the state is declared from the top secular and officially separate from religion as happened with the emergence of modern Turkey from the ashes of the First World War. This process attained its climactic moment in Mustafa Kemal's famous abolition of the Caliphate in 1924.

Now, to sensitize Western readers to the enormity of Mustafa Kemal's act and the great dismay and shock it spread throughout the Muslim World at the time, all that is needed is a moment's reflection over what would have happened had the triumphant Italian nationalists in 1871, proceeded to abolish the Papacy - after annexing the papal domains to the Italian kingdom - instead of recognizing the Pope's sovereignty over the Vatican City and his spiritual leadership of all Roman Catholics everywhere. We know, of course, that in 1922, Atatürk did toy with the idea of an "Italian" solution to the problem of the Caliphate, but he ended up rejecting all such compromises to cut at the root all future legitimist claims and restorationist movements.

In contrast to the Turkish-Kemalist instance, the secularization process in key Arab societies has been slow, informal, hesitant, adaptive, absorbent, pragmatic, gradualistic, full of halfway houses, partial compromises, transient marriages of con-

venience and plenty of temporary retreats and unending evasions, but no striking moment of high drama. That sort of climactic point could have come to pass - somewhat on the Kemalist model - at the hands of President Nasser of Egypt soon after the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 (a heroic and immensely popular act all over the Arab World). But, Nasser never took that step and the real high drama arrived with the reaction to all that in the form of Islamic fundamentalism, revivalism, armed insurrectionary Islam and so on.

Let me note in passing that while Turkey, the core of the old empire, had the sufficient resources, will and fighting power to beat back the invading allies of those days, the much weaker Arab periphery fell easy prey to colonial rule, dismemberment and fragmentation.

The subscribers to the unsecularizability thesis, both East and West, should have received a rude shock from the way in which the Soviet Union collapsed. I mean, here, those who for many years now have been expecting the break up of the "Evil Empire" at the hands of its Muslim people and components. For example, such experts on Soviet Islam as Helene Carrere d'Encausse, Alexander Benningsen and Amir Tahiri have held for a long time that the mortal danger to the Communist Union lay in the unchanging bedrock of the Islamic identity which, they predicted, would one day bring about its demise through some sort of a Muslim revolution, explosion or eruption against the secular and secularizing center. For them, "a Soviet Russian remains a Russian, a Soviet Muslim simply a Muslim". In other words, according to this static identitarian logic a Soviet and/or socialist and/or secular Russian is a historical possibility, while a Soviet and/or socialist and/or secular Muslim is something of a contradiction in terms. For, *Homo-Islamicus* will always revert to type under all circumstances and regardless of the nature and depth of the historical changes he may suffer or undergo.

We all know by now that neither *Homo Islamicus* nor his supposed eternal dogmatic No to secularism had anything to do with the demise of the USSR. The main components of the Union that opposed the center and brought it down were all Christian and in the European part of the empire. And while the minuscule Baltic Republics played the leading role in the break up of the whole system (way out of proportion to their size and strength), the Muslim republics inclined to the last minute in the direction of saving the Communist union. Even after its collapse they did their best to attach themselves to its remnants, in spite of the neighboring models of revolutionary Islam in Iran and of armed insurrectionary Islam in Afghanistan.