Secularism
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The Debate on Secularism in Contemporary Societies of Muslims[1]

The 'Islam and secularism' debate began a century ago and does not seem to have progressed. Prevailing attitudes, both 'pro' and 'con', are apparently locked in a stalemate and an endless 'war of positions'. Why are the actors of different trends restating more or less the same formulations on this issue? Is it possible to find a likely interpretation for such a phenomenon?

The Misunderstanding about Secularism

The issue of secularism is addressed in different ways, depending on whether the context is Muslim or Christian. In the latter case, it is treated as a process, i.e. a set of historical changes supposed to have affected the regulation of the social and political order, and to have permeated the prevailing conceptions (or worldviews) within society. When the context is 'Islamic', a clear opposition is posited at the very beginning between 'Secularism' and 'Islam', taken as broad and substantive categories, which are supposed to refer to two separate and irreducible realms of meaning. The question asked in the first case seems to concern 'how secularization *happened* in some European societies at some time, and how it influenced their functioning, and the dominant attitudes of their members'. In the other case, however, the question is most often: 'Is Islam compatible with secularism?' The discussion is therefore drawn to conceptual, theoretical aspects: from the outset it adopts an approach based on the manipulation of broad concepts and discoveries, at one stage or another. It is led to, and often locked in, a kind of *aporia*. Very few studies address the historical aspects of secularization within societies of Muslims,[2] i.e. ask how it affected the life and views of Muslims, or attempt to describe what *actually* happened since the category was discovered and the changes were experienced by Muslims. Therefore, an ideological bias seems to dominate the debate in this field.

The few studies which concentrated on the historical changes within societies of Muslims since the 18th century point to the fact that, although secularization as an ideology (i.e. what the French call *laïcisme*) was received from outside, a real, observable 'secularizing' process began much earlier. This process was indeed a reaction to the perceived European advance and menace. The need for deep reform, and the actions taken in order to set a new organization of state and society based on rational criteria rather than religious traditions, stemmed from the perceived weakness of Muslim polities and from internal drive to overcome this situation. The irruption of the European-originating ideology of secularism, and its imposition on societies of Muslims through the erection of modern nation-states, interrupted the evolution of the initial, 'endogenous' secularizing process.

Whichever credit is given to these conceptions, and assuming that secularization (the 'real' and durable phenomenon) was brought into societies of Muslims from outside, i.e. from an alien culture, it has stirred waves of changes and numerous reactions which deeply influenced the regulation of the social and political order and gave birth to an intense and continuous debate within these societies. On one hand it is remarkable that, since the distinction between the 'secular' and the 'regular' had no equivalent in Arabic, the word chosen initially for secularism was *dahriyin*, a Qur'anic term for atheists.[3] Although it was replaced later by *ladiniyyin*, the semantic choices which were made convey a strong assimilation between secularism and atheism, or at least an opposition to, and reaction against, religion. Even the term ᶜ*ilmani* (this-worldly) which was introduced at a later

stage and which prevails to this day, conveys the impression of rejection of the fundamental base of religion, i.e. the idea of transcendence. In all cases, secularism was understood as an alternative to religion, not as an alternative way of ordering society and of conceiving the world. The majority of Muslims thought that secularization imposed abandoning altogether their religious faith, their traditions, their values, etc. Secularization was equated to a complete negation of the self, to a total rejection of all the views, wisdom and practices inherited from the ancestors, and, above all, it was perceived as an alien phenomenon, introduced into societies of Muslims by those who were the 'historical enemies', crusaders of yesterday and colonizers of the day. Then, as still now, it was perceived in the fullest sense of the word, as *alienation*. Hence, the turn taken by the debate in the public arena, with the small exception of some academic circles.[4]

Secularists found themselves, except during some short intervals, (as, for example, when nationalism dominated) on the defensive. Their enthusiastic and vibrant apologies of rationalism, progress, development, freedom, democracy, etc., as by-products of secularism, were often successfully faced with accusations from their opponents of unbelief, disrespect for the 'authentic' values of society and sometimes, implicitly, if not openly, of treason.

Secularism vs. Secularization

The consequence of this evolution may be described as boldly *paradoxical* in a double sense. On one hand, one cannot avoid deep surprise at the fact that Islam, which potentially has less to oppose secularist worldviews and ideals, would come to be seen as the most resistant to secularism. As E. Gellner says: 'The high culture of Islam is endowed with a number of features – unitarianism, a rule-ethic, individualism, scripturalism, puritanism, an egalitarian aversion to mediation and hierarchy, a fairly small load of magic – that are congruent, presumably, with requirements of modernity or modernisation.'[5]

Of course, one cannot push aside the widespread argumentation linking the success of secularization within European societies to specific features of Christianity, i. e. the relationship it establishes between the sacred and the profane, between God and Caesar. However, when one considers the long and painful process through which the changes were achieved and the secular order implemented, one can only question the accuracy of this formulation and wonder whether it is rather a late justification than a real understanding.

On the other hand, it is easy to observe that secularization has found its way to Muslim societies, and has *deeply* and *irreversibly* permeated their ordering and the prevailing conceptions within them. In almost all countries

belonging to the 'Muslim world', positive law and state regulations have replaced traditions and rules drawn from religion or linked to its tenets, with the exception of personal status and family law, which remains the last resort for conservation, or maintenance, of the 'Islamic' identity. At the same time, the prevailing worldviews are strongly permeated by conceptions and attitudes linked to modern science and ideologies. A real 'disenchantment of the world' has made its way to the most disseminated conceptions, even if authors as famous as E. Gellner interpret the change as a mere replacement of 'low' or 'popular' by 'high' Islam.[6] In fact, ideas of determinism, modern expectations, and belief in continuous progress have by and large replaced the traditional attitudes based on resignation and belief in static or cyclical time and in mysterious forces.

The resulting situation is therefore marked by strong contradictions: although *secularization* has, in a way, *happened* (or at least achieved many of its effects), *secularism* is seemingly rejected by the majority of the population. The call for implementation of the *shariᶜa*, which constitutes the main slogan of fundamentalist movements, shows how conservatives feel the disruption of the traditional order and its drifting from what they consider to be the religious norms.

It was Ali Abderraziq (1888-1966) who, in the mid-twenties, proposed what may be the best approach to bring to a match the prevailing conceptions and the actual situation within societies of Muslims. His main idea, which he exposed in his famous essay, *Al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm* (*Islam and the Foundations of Political Power*. Cairo, 1925), was to introduce a clear distinction between Islam as a complex of beliefs, moral norms and rituals, which can be traced to sacred texts (first 'meaning'), and Islam as the history of a community who attempted to live up to its beliefs and to implement the morality and perform the rituals which stem from them (second 'meaning'). The community has chosen, for particular historical reasons, to live its faith in a particular way, i.e. through the creation of a polity designed to prolong the sacred community of the Prophet. However, this is not the only way to live the faith and to implement its ethical principles. The real, and most important turn in the history of Muslims is not, as is widely believed, the end of the 'rightly-guided caliphate' (*Al-Khilafa ar-Rachida*), but rather the death of the Prophet, which signalled the end of a sacred community and the creation of a 'caliphate' intended to continue his action. The caliphate, even in its early phases, is Islamic only by name. No such political system could legitimately prevail, since nothing in the sacred corpus (i. e. Islam in the first meaning) allows a claim of this sort.

The reasons for an Impasse

The ideas of Ali Abderraziq were strongly opposed. He was finally silenced, as were other creative thinkers before and after him. In his case, this did not happen as a consequence of popular unrest or of pressure from massive social movements. The 'masses' seemed to be rather sympathetic to his ideas, as they were perceived at that time as an open rebuke of despotism. However, although he had a number of followers in the subsequent years, especially in the academia, the direction he explored remained neglected.

Thus one may nowadays wonder whether the impasse of societies of Muslims is due to the continuous presence of small groups of determined activists who, in the absence of centralized religious authorities, exert a strong censorship on public discourses and blackmail political authorities. The recent events in Iran offer a strong case for this interpretation: although the majority of the population has shown a clear option for liberal attitudes (through the election of Mohamed Khatami), a small group succeeds in blocking the way to any real and durable progress in this direction. ◆

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Notes

1. We opt for this expression instead of 'Muslim societies' for its greater accuracy.
2. To the exception of few authors, like A. Al-Azmeh, A. Charfi and D. Eickelman. See for example: Abdelmajid Charfi: *Al-Islam wa al-Hadathah* (Islam and Modernity). Tunis: 1990, Aziz Al-Azmeh: *Al-ᶜIlmaniya min Mandhur Mukhtalif* (Secularism from a Different Point of View). Beyrouth, 1992 and Dale Eickelman, 'Inside the Islamic Reformation', in *The Wilson Quarterly* 22, N° 1 (Winter 1998).
3. This choice was made by Jamal-Eddin Al-Afghani in the essay he wrote in reaction to attacks on Islam by Ernest Renan.
4. Even in academic circles, most approaches address the question from the framework of the contrasting terms of Islam and X (X being modernity, democracy, human rights, secularism…) strengthening the reduction of complex issues to mere oppositions between categories. In this, a large number of scholars seem to be driven in their work by media-defined issues and approaches. They contribute to the consolidation and legitimation of artificial or prejudice-born ways of asking, and therefore of answering, questions.
5. Ernest Gellner, 'Up from Imperialism', in: *The New Republic*, 22 May 1989, pp. 35-6.
6. Ernest Gellner (1992), *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*. London.