Editorial

From the Sacred Canopy to the Haunted Vault: Understanding Secularism from within Islam

As the incoming editor of an academic journal in the fourth decade of its existence, I must begin with a great deal of trepidation for the task ahead and gratitude to many predecessors: those who envisioned and founded it, and those who brought it where it is today. “One who does not thank men [and women] does not thank God,” goes a saying of Prophet Muhammad (S). My first note of gratitude must go to the outgoing editor, Dr. Zakyi Ibrahim, who led the journal for several years and has been extremely kind and supportive over the course of this transition. Equally instrumental was the outgoing book review editor, Dr. Mahdi Tourage, who not only managed the book review and review essay sections, but also contributed to the forum and reports and, most importantly, worked to expand the scope and diversity of the perspectives represented in the journal. I am also grateful to the outgoing managing editor, Dr. Aliaa Dakroury, who has been available despite the recent loss of her husband, Dr. Mahmoud Eid. My deepest condolences and heartfelt prayers go to her and her family.

Gratitude and admiration are also due to Drs. Imad al-Deen Ahmed, Haifaa Jawad, and Ahmad Yousif, who served as associate editors of the journal for a number of years. And the journal is stronger, more academically rigorous, and richer for that. As the new team takes over the mast of the journal, those who have served it only nominally move on. Their contributions and guidance will continue to be just as important for the journal as they have been.

I would like to thank the leading scholars in their fields who have accepted to join our editorial board with gracious enthusiasm: Drs. Hussein A. Agrama (University of Chicago), Jonathan A. C. Brown (Georgetown University), Sherman A. Jackson (University of Southern California), Ousmane Kane (Harvard University), Andrew F. March (Yale University), Shuruq Naguib (Lancaster University), Ahmed El Shamsy (University of Chicago), and Ermin Sinanović

(International Institute of Islamic Thought). Drs. Mehmet Asutay (Durham University) and Marcia Hermansen (Loyola University) continue to serve on the editorial board, a body previously labeled as "associate editors." A significant addition as well is Basit Kareem Iqbal (University of California, Berkeley), the incoming assistant editor, whose editorial skills as well as burgeoning scholarly acumen will, I am confident, prove a great asset to the journal.

I have been given the mandate to build on the journal's legacy of pioneering accomplishments and help it become even more rigorous and widely accessible, a journal that not only encourages good scholarship on Islam and society within and across disciplines, but also goes the extra mile to deepen dialog and engagement between and among scholars. To this end, starting with this very issue, every article to which we are able to secure scholarly responses will be followed by such a conversation.

The journal's mother ship, the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), a remarkable intellectual Muslim institution that itself continues to evolve and mature, has established its reputation as a rare platform for bringing together critical as well as normative academic scholarship on Islam and Muslims. The journal, entirely independent of IIIT in terms of its substance and academic process, shares and deepens its core mission of promoting rigorous scholarship on these two topics. The institute is known for its formative emphasis on the "Islamization" of knowledge; lesser known is its more recent and still ongoing rethinking of its mission as the "integration" of knowledge through dialog and exchange between different traditions of knowledge. The journal, for its part, takes these and other descriptions of what scholarship on Islam and Muslims ought to be about as invitations for reflection and critique rather than as givens, as shown by its contents over the last several years.

The question at the heart of this debate is whether disciplinary knowledge in the social sciences and humanities is neutral or laden with an ideology, perhaps with conflicting ideologies. In the wake of contemporary critiques, especially the rise of the genealogical method in the West from Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault onward – and perhaps since Giambattista Vico (d. 1744) – the neutrality of social knowledge has been contested. More recently, emblemized by Talal Asad's work, scholarship on the intertwining of knowledge and power has shown the specific ways in which knowledge of Islam and Muslims continues to be constructed. But again, if the Orientalist knowledge of Islam is constructed, so is any other knowledge, a fact that leads us to a recognition of and inquiry into traditions of learning. If power has always been a constitutive element of knowledge, and vice versa, it becomes imperative to study traditions – even those aspiring to the divine truth – within their sociopolitical contexts rather than in the halcyonic halo of romanticized traditionalism.

Against this backdrop, talking of "Islamization of knowledge" is both justified and yet perhaps too ambitious. If Islam is the divine norm, *Islamizing* is an asymptotic goal – always to be sought, never to be deemed accomplished. As such, its rebranding as the "integration of knowledge" is not so much a change in direction as it is a turning of the gaze from the end to the means. Yet, the new label carries with it a reminder that the ever-renewing, never-accomplished mission can only be pursued in collaboration with, as opposed to isolation from, the rest of human knowledge. Finally, any aspiration to Islamize knowledge cannot neglect the study of and accounting for power, including those powers that condition one's own scholarship.

The commonly expressed Muslim aspiration of "reforming" Islamic thought, similarly, is to be understood as part of a tradition of Islam, albeit one expressed variously in different times and periods, and which has gained a ubiquitous urgency in the last 150 years. Yet, tradition is inevitable and inescapable; in fact, it is ubiquitous. It is this ubiquity of its recognition in the Islamic past that there was never – and could not have been – a single term for it. And thus numerous terms indexed different aspects or formations of tradition: *sunnah*, *athar*, *salaf*, *taqlīd*, *sulūk*, *ṭarīq*, *madhhab*, and even *dīn*, to mention just the obvious ones. But equally, words that refer to reforming or challenging tradition are also numerous: *bid'ah*, *iḥyā'*, *tajdīd*, *ijtihād*, *iṣlāḥ*, and so on. To recognize the inevitability of tradition, namely, of the necessity of a cross-generational community of scholars and learners for intellectual inquiry, as much as its necessity for religious life, is to recognize tradition and reform as inextricable and intertwined. One needs to periodically check and reform one's *understanding* of prayer – and analogically, the rest of the religion – as much as one needs to reform one's performance of it. Any claim to continuity presupposes adaptation, and any claim to adaption takes continuity for granted; the advocates of one, in scholarship as in politics, rely on the champions of the other.

It is only fitting, therefore, that an academic journal on Islam and Muslims should embrace both defenders and critics of any given tradition, genealogists and systematic defenders of Islamic tradition(s), those who work within and without an Islamic (or any other) tradition, and, finally, those who write within the secular disciplinary traditions comprising the humanities and social sciences as well as those who investigate Islam from within a normative tradition. As moderns, we are all fated to inhabit multiple traditions and multiple temporalities, and scholarship is the one activity to which such multiplicity is always a boon.

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This issue is dedicated to a theme that is central to the journal's formative concerns. Professor Sherman Jackson's contribution argues for an "Islamic secular" – a space that he contends Islamic law itself creates for the domains of human thought and activity outside of its purview. Rather than a concession to secularism, this space, which may strike some as an oxymoron, is an Islamic form of worldliness – a realm in which religious and pious Muslims are free to unleash their rational, imaginal, and aesthetic faculties without fear of violating Islamic norms.

Professor Alexandre Caeiro's article, fittingly, tackles the relationship between traditional *Islamic* knowledge and social scientific knowledge in the emerging but contested models of Islamic jurisprudence, the former ostensibly furnishing the norms and the latter a presumably neutral assessment of "the reality" or "the context" in which to activate those norms. Caeiro highlights opposing sides in this debate with a view to suggesting greater caution in embracing the neutrality of "the real" as constructed by modern statistical or social scientific disciplines. Both contributions seek to consolidate the meaning of the "Islamic" in its relation to "the real" or the "the secular" and challenge, if not actually subvert, the conventional modern notions that endow the secular with the powers of oversight and determination of boundaries.

Why should scholars concerned with the study of Islam investigate secularism, and how should they do it? Let's begin by observing the obvious, the writing on the wall, so to speak. We are told that we live in "a secular age" – to use Charles Taylor's phrase. "Secularism" is what has happened to the world today. It is a transformation unlike any in human history. Life has never been stagnant in the lands of Islam, for religious, social, and military movements, as well as upheavals and revivals, were the warp and weft of Islamic life in the pre-modern past. But for the last 150 years, such intellectual and social movements have had to wrestle with an additional element that exceeds the run-of-the-mill inner corruption, religious decline, conflict, and foreign threats – something greater, something that has disrupted and reoriented the entirety of life and its assumptions. Despite its origins in Western Europe, it arrived in a colonial carriage to the rest of the world and came to stay.

A simple translation of the term *secularism* would be "this-worldism." It was first translated into Arabic as *dunyawīyah* before its partisans won for it a more glorious or neutral, if misleading, label: *'ilmānīyah* or *'almanīyah.*[1] Its substrate, "secular," has a different history. The term secularism, fittingly, was first introduced in its current meanings during the mid-nineteenth century by English freethinkers to avoid the inconvenient charge of atheism.[2] Centuries before "secularism" was coined to refer to an ideology in nineteenth-century Europe, the term "secular" referred to the domain of life outside the Church. Today, this word can have one of at least two meanings: either a neutral one to describe that which is not deemed sacred or *immediately* religiously normative without connoting an opposition to it, such as when we refer to scientific or technical education as secular education or secular pursuit. This is what Professor Sherman Jackson means by "the Islamic secular," and it is in this sense that the Qur'an calls upon Muslims to seek the good of both worlds: "Our Lord, grant us in this [*secular*] life what is good and in the afterlife what is good, and save us from the Fire" (Q. 2:201). But "secular" is also used as an adjectival phrase for secularism; that is, secular as opposed to religious, as secularized, as in secular political parties or secular countries. Finally, the third element in this trinity of concepts is *secularization*, literally, *becoming* secular. Social scientists, as both students and priests of this new ideology, have employed it to refer to the process of transformation from pre-modern and religious to modern and rational societies.

For much of the twentieth century, the reigning social science paradigm has been the belief, dubbed "the secularization thesis," that societies become more secularized as they adapt to modern life. This *descriptive* belief is closely followed by its *normative* counterpart, namely, that societies must become secularized over time as they adopt modern forms of life. The descriptive and the normative, and this is the point that Alexandre Caeiro's article aims to drive home, are inextricably related. To say, for instance, that something is statistically unlikely is not too far from saying that attempting to do so is wrong and foolhardy. To observe that people just do not behave in a certain way is also to suggest that any norms that expect people to behave in those ways are questionable.

The secularization thesis, therefore, has always carried these dual meanings. After all, every notable revolution for the last several centuries, since the French, American, and Industrial revolutions of the eighteenth century as well as the Russian Revolution of 1917, has been secularizing, albeit in different ways. According this timeline, the overtly religious nature of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 represented an anomaly, a reversal, a shock that turned out to be the harbinger of rising "seismic activity" in the Muslim world ever since, and has challenged social scientists, purportedly awakening them from their neglect of religion.

To say that secularism is the ideology that upholds the separation of church and state, or religion and politics, while true, says as much about secularism as the assertion "Islam means submission to one God" says about Islam. In other words, even though it is true, it does not begin to describe how such a separation is, in fact, made possible, enacted, and reenacted. The enactment of a proper sociopolitical community, norms, culture, and sensibilities, the power needed to do so and its justifications are all part of secularism. Add to this the need to instill a culture of neutrality and separation while also demanding adherence to secularism's own values – values it imports after pruning their background justifications from the religions it displaces, often without acknowledging the source, an operation that one scholar has called "smuggling."[3]

Secularism even has its own "seventy-some sects" like any respectable religion; the constant bickering within these various denominations – liberal, republican, socialist, fascist, and so on – all are essential parts that make up this phenomenon. Crucial to the act or aspiration of separating is the characteristic set of distinctions that secularism requires between public and private, law and ethics, and so on, that are presumably prior to the act of separation, but often need to be created, defined, and promulgated by the state.

This analogy can be pressed a little further. Just as Islamic theology separates all beings into the Creator and the created, secularism divides all authority into state and church. Unsurprisingly, the former takes the place of the Creator, and the latter, the created. "Religion" is created in secular thought in two ways: (1) procedurally, "religion" as the very category along with (2) its proper place, definition, and limits, which are created by the state, primarily through law. But more interestingly, in the secular imagination, the secular realm (e.g., human fears, needs, and sense of wonder) constantly produces religion.[4]

The act of separation, which lies at the heart of secularism, is never-ending, fragile, even aspirational – it must be vigilantly carried out one legislation or cultural conflict after the other, one generation after the other. The state is the active agent and master of the public space here, for it defines "religion," constantly readjusts its boundaries, and confines it to the private sphere. Just like belief in one God and the primacy of the afterlife constantly need to be enacted in the Muslims' personal and collective lives through rituals and remembrance, so in secular life the "holy" separation needs enactment and reenactment ceremonies, because public and private, religion and state, constantly expand into each other's territory unless vigilantly checked.

This separation is achieved first and foremost through the courts. Lawyers and economists, as the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre once quipped, are the priests of liberal secular society. Just as God has produced this world, which is potentially deceptive, tempting, and seductive, in secularist mythology it is the secular that is constantly being seduced and tempted to produce religion – religion being a product of the human imagination trying to cope with life's terrors and uncertainties. Just as *tawḥīd* (submission to the one God) is seen in Islam as natural to human beings who are, at the same time, ever prone to idolatry, secularism similarly sees itself as natural and its antithesis as ever-present: "[T]o most humans, curiosity about higher things comes naturally, it's indifference to them that must be learned," worries Mark Lilla, a noted skeptic (a troubled theologian of atheism, if you will) and author of *The Stillborn God* (2007).[5]

Secularism is an all-encompassing view of reality, suggests Charles Taylor in his seminal *A Secular Age* (2007). Social scientists, on this reading, cannot exhaust their study of it any more than Muslim theologians can get past debating divine attributes. In secularism, Islam has met its first match as an all-encompassing, rational, and universalist view of reality and engagement with the world. But just as Muslims state that Islam did not start with Prophet Muhammad, secularism did not begin with the French or the American revolutions. The Qur'an speaks of some of its interlocutors as eloquently making the claim that lies at the heart of the secularist philosophy of life: "And they say, 'There is nothing but our worldly life; we die and live, and nothing destroys us except *time* [*dahr*].' And they have of that no knowledge; they merely conjecture" (Q. 45:24). Modern secularism applies this precise charge to Islam, but in reverse: God and the afterlife are merely conjectures. To this impasse, the Qur'anic response ultimately is a divine warning: "This precisely is the choice you must make and live with" (Q. 41:23).

Secularism's (insider) observers often suggest that, like all human projects that have risen to the level of epochal presences or self-evident truths, it is both a thing to be understood and critiqued yet also a condition of modern life, an inevitability that one can neither fully understand nor opt out of. One studies biology (and even history) to understand how the human body functions in order to restore its natural functioning, but not to alter the way it works. Secularism, similarly, understood as the natural order of things, can no more be reversed than we can go back to believing in geocentricism. This is the view particularly of the mainstream social sciences, that very profession being historically coterminous with secularism.

In contrast to these naturalizers of secularism, others seek to historicize it so that they can contest it. The Islamic and other religious thinkers who have aspired to eliminate, curtail, or reshape it have naturally seen secularism as a project, a historical choice, a failing – explicable as the folly of one religious group or another. To the Catholics, the Protestant Reformation tore apart the sacred canopy; to the Muslims, Christianity always carried within it the seed of this fateful separation. Some of our best observers of secularism, such as the Catholic liberal philosopher Taylor and Muslim anthropologist Asad, are precisely those who are situated somewhere in between the two camps, who see secularity's tragic nature most intimately.

These two camps are represented in an important debate between two Arab intellectuals trained in the West: Aziz al-Azmeh, a thoroughgoing secularist, and Abdel Wahhab Elmessiri, an Islamist intellectual and former Marxist.[6] Both of them write in a language shaped by the secular humanities; both are outsiders to traditional Islamic scholarship, notwithstanding the latter's unmistakable sympathy for it. Their disagreement turns on the aforementioned contention. To Elmessiri, secularism can be classified into kinds, such as "partial" and "total"; embracing one kind or the other, or rejecting both, remains a moral choice for individuals and societies. Partial secularism, which leaves some room for belief in transcendent values, might be acceptable, he suggests. Azmeh, in contrast, excoriates this understanding that proceeds as if secularism were served with a menu of choices. Rather, he contends, it comprises institutional and epistemological developments that are much larger than any one individual or even society, developments that have made it impossible for people to take certain beliefs for granted any longer and to relinquish certain freedoms once made available.

Whereas Elmessiri's account may be naïve in its excessive optimism against structural and epistemic transformations, Azmeh too easily gives in to a progressivist ideology, to a belief in irreversibility and inevitability where there is no ground for belief. Be that as it may, secularism's irreversibility remains an article of faith to many, no less sacred than any other article of faith. Even as the "secularization thesis" has come under fire, secularism's epistemic triumph in the domains of natural sciences and social and economic life is seen as a fait accompli.

For Muslim scholars and intellectuals, understanding secularism *qua Muslims* through the lens of a coherent Islamic tradition is a task of the highest priority, one that requires understanding secularism not merely as an ideology or a competing religion, which is how many have construed it, but also as a background framing modern institutions, scientific knowledge, and epistemology. Secularism must be understood in different ways simultaneously. On the one hand, it must be understood from within Islam as a timeless human urge to focus on the here and now and deny the significance of ultimate and eternal realities. As the Qur'an puts it: "Those who love the life of the world more than the Hereafter, and debar (people) from the way of God and would have it crooked: such are far astray" (Q. 14:3). Yet, this *foundationalist* understanding of human seduction to this-worldliness still requires a more concrete understanding. We must also comprehend secularism *on its own terms*, as a modern phenomenon with no exact parallel in the pre-modern period.

Both its supporters as well as its detractors present it as a bequest of Christianity (viz., its tradition of rendering unto Caesar his due and God His) and also as a total rejection of Christianity. Internal Christian polemics must also been seen as constitutive of secularism's self-understanding. Catholics blame Protestants for enabling secularism, just as Protestants accuse the Church's corruption and overextended reach against the backdrop of centuries of Crusades and the devilish deal in which it allied with sanctified royals, thereby monopolizing the bounties of heaven as well as Earth at the laity's expense.[7]

This intra-Christian sectarian polemic is one that some Muslim are now beginning to adopt wholesale. Lacking sufficient historical depth in Islam's own tradition and scriptural and theological repertoire, they seem eager to import these fights into Islam for their own sectarian reasons. Muslim scholarship on secularism's rise from the ashes of Christianity has yet to go past copying and pasting Western narratives about itself, a practice for which Orientalists have long been criticized but which, in the absence of better self-knowledge of Islamic tradition, remains an easy cop-out.

It is time to give up the crutches. But this cannot be done by simply denying that one is dependent on crutches, as those who sloganize against "Western knowledge" but simply substitute new words for the same borrowed concepts do. Rather, it must start by slowly training one's own limbs to carry the burden. Writing in English about decolonizing concepts is self-evidently a burden. Yet, it may be more conducive to decolonizing concepts than the common practice of superficially translating terms into "Muslim" languages and deeming the task nearly accomplished. If a thing or an idea can be rendered in Arabic with the proper peppering of Qur'anic verses here and there, "Islamization" is seen as having been achieved. This will not do; there is no alternative to long, patient, meticulous, and wide-ranging inquiries and debates that make up the stuff of scholarship.

In this spirit, a few thoughts follow. Modern scholars have come to differentiate between various *domains* of secularism. To use one of Taylor's typologies—and he offers more than one—secularism could be philosophical, which is the same as atheism; it could be social, which means the decline of indicators such as church attendance and ritual significance in social norms and relations; and finally, there is political secularism. This last category is similar to the notion of institutional differentiation proposed by José Casanova (see Sherman A. Jackson's article for more on this).

Despite secularism's history and reputation, *political* or institutional secularism, which postulates the state's neutrality with respect to religion, has appeared seductive to even religious thinkers, Muslims included, for its promise of social peace. In fact, as one of its ardent advocates writes in *How to Be Secular*: "In an odd and inadvertent way, the religious moderates – every bit as God-loving as their Revivalist counterparts – are doing the work of secularism. … *they are the future of secularism!*"[8] One cannot help note the power (or is it arrogance?) of secularism here that enables those who lack or have lost faith to become the arbiters of what counts as proper "God-loving" religiosity, and turns perfectly "God-loving" religious people into "the future of secularism." In addition to the promise of politically neutral states to deliver religious peace, perhaps the most potent pro-secularism arguments have been those of modern science. In the words of a leading American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, writing in 1926,

> The secularization of modern civilization is partly due to our inability to adjust the ethical and spiritual interests of mankind to the rapid advance of the physical sciences. However much optimists may insist that science cannot ultimately destroy religion, the fact remains that the general tendency of scientific discovery has been to weaken not only religious but ethical values.[9]

Had Niebuhr witnessed the Second World War and the ensuing systemic cruelties and self-destructive atrocities of modern human beings, his pessimism in the potential abuse of science would have only redoubled. Yet, it has become increasingly clear since he wrote that science can be yoked to the service of any number of masters, and that its complicity in engendering secularism may have been the result of Europe's particular trajectory rather than any kind of causal necessity. In fact, as historians and philosophers of science point out, not only have the majority of scientists until very recently been theists, but also, and more importantly, monotheism is said to have played a crucial role in the birth of modern science, as the *distinctively monotheistic ambition to unify knowledge* and empirically test inherited theories passed from Islamic to European hands during the early modern period.[10]

As for the aspiration to harness secularism exclusively for its political promise, two problems immediately arise. First, the different "types" of secularism are not, as Azmeh would insist, independent choices on a menu from which one can pick; rather, they are different aspects of a complex whole. The logic of why French laïcité functions differently from American secularism cannot be understood as if secularism were no more than a volume on a CD player that could be turned up to yield an "assertive" French secularism or down to furnish a "passive" American or Canadian one.[11] Rather, as Asad, Agrama, and others have shown, secularism functions through and is the ideology of the modern nation-state, which asserts its sovereign authority by enacting the requisite separations in order to protect the public sphere or public order from the competing authority of religious claims.

Once the state has been constituted as a self-authenticating entity (albeit one that theoretically draws its sovereignty from the people), it continually acts in response to domestic infractions as well as international interests and threats, *using* religion (populist religious nationalism or religious establishment, as the case may be) to its advantage as and when desired. Those who wish to embrace a certain limited variety of secularism may wish in vain. Each of the political, social, and philosophical domains of life constantly seep into the other two. Second, overwhelming evidence suggests that secularism in any of its forms fails to eliminate violence and guarantee peace; rather, it only rebrands and reconfigures violence. Blood is now shed not for God or sectarianism, but for liberty, the nation, national or group interests, human rights, and the like.[12] This is the point I take up next.

A Haunted Heaven

Without necessarily denying the existence of other-worldly realities and the prophetic message in the private sphere, secularism insists on the irrelevance of the other life, or at least its subordination to the concerns of this-world (*dunyā*). But behind the plausibility of the secularist political project is the transformation of the social and psychological worlds, which renders belief in the unseen increasingly fragile.

Taylor's bold and ambitious *A Secular Age* chronicles this transformation in Europe over the last five centuries. He starts with an observation that is now nearly ubiquitously sensed – our age is haunted, empty of transcendent beings but not quite acclimated to the emptiness. Modern humanity levitates in a cold and dark space, in the twilight of both gods/goddesses and idols, but "the ghosts have refused to depart, and every once in a while we might be surprised to find ourselves tempted by belief, by intimations of transcendence." Yet, believing is now as difficult, like swimming upstream, as nonbelieving was once. All of those who profess faith are aware of the contestability of their claims. "We don't believe instead of doubting; we believe while doubting. We're all [Doubting] Thomas now."[13]

Taylor lists a number of underlying epistemic conditions or background beliefs, the "social imaginary" as he puts it, that have changed over the last five centuries in Europe. It goes without saying that in his mind, the rest of the world follows the same pattern, possibly with some lag. These conditions, or "obstacles to unbelief," have now disappeared and made secularity and exclusive humanism imaginable. First, "The natural world they lived in, which had its place in the cosmos they imagined, testified to divine purpose and action; and not just in the obvious way which we can still understand and (at least many of us) appreciate today, that its order and design bespeaks creation; but also because the great events in this natural order, storms, droughts, floods, plagues, as well as years of exceptional fertility and flourishing, were seen as acts of God, as the now dead metaphor of our legal language still bears witness."[14]

Second, society itself was understood as something grounded in a higher reality. "A kingdom could only be conceived as grounded in something higher than mere human action in secular time." The foundations of society and its political ruler, in other words, were grounded in supernatural grounds. Third, "[p]eople lived in an 'enchanted' world," a world charged with presences – "spirits, demons, and moral forces" – a world that was open and vulnerable, not closed and self-sufficient. This is not to say that all medieval inhabitants "believe[d] in God;" but it does mean that "[a]theism comes close to being inconceivable in a world with these three features." The medieval "self" was open and vulnerable to these forces; "porous," as he calls it. If the self was porous to angels and demons, it was also open to and in need of a community, and thus the social bond was also invested with sanctity. "Living in the enchanted, porous world of our ancestors was inherently living socially."[15]

As a result, a premium was placed on consensus, and turning "heretic" was not just a personal matter. "This is something we constantly tend to forget," Taylor notes, "when we look back condescendingly on the intolerance of earlier ages. As long as the common weal is bound up in collectives rites, devotions, allegiances, it couldn't be seen just as an individual's own business that he break ranks, even less that he blaspheme or try to desecrate the rite. There was immense common motivation to bring him back into line." So if there is going to be room to not believe (or believe in exclusive humanism), then this very sociality or communitarianism had (and has) to be removed as yet another obstacle.

Taylor's diagnosis of how we (i.e., Westerners) got here, such that now it is belief that seems unlikely and unrealistic, points fingers at the Protestant Reformation, which he argues did not so much create secularism as furnish the conditions for it. As it rejected the elitism of the medieval world, the inequality between the laity and the priestly and royal classes, the compromises of the Catholic Church – reform movements of various kinds being the underground rivers of our secular age – ultimately paved the way for a radically different world. Taylor's is a widely learned saga of this great transformation, but also a deeply Catholic story, a polemic even, one from which Muslims have much to learn, albeit cautiously.

Protestant thinkers, too, have frequently sensed the existential threat secularism presents to faith. Those who see American "passive" secularism as potentially a religious success corrupted only by avoidable misdeeds of policy or capitalism would do well to heed once again the words of Niebuhr, who wrote in 1926:

> Unqualified optimism on the present state or future prospect of religion in modern civilization can emanate only from a very superficial analysis of modern life. In America such optimism is justified by the undeniable prestige of the church in the popular mind and the vitality of the institutions of religion. In Europe optimism is not even supported by these facts. Yet America is in many respects more pagan than Europe, which means that the vitality of the institutions of religion is not in itself a proof of authentic religious life. The fact is that we are living in a completely secularized civilization which has lost the art of bringing its dominant motives under any kind of moral control.[16]

American religiosity, Niebuhr prophetically noted, is even more impoverished than Europe's barely existent one. It is not accidental that it colluded at every moment with America's worst military and capitalist projects – as Bethany Moreton, author of *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (2010), reminds us – responsible not only for unprecedented wealth and power but also for the worst ravages of both human community and the environment globally.

It should be remembered that neither the Catholic nor the Protestant story, neither the French nor the American version, is or can be the same as the Islamic story. But this brief detour does remind us that thoughtful people of other faiths are our indispensable interlocutors, and having preceded us in facing this loss of the "sea of faith" that we all once inhabited (one not without its own set of sins and errors, of course), their stories and polemics serve to both guide us in a shared quest and as a cautionary tale. Those who believe that Islam began as a divine intervention that challenged and altered, albeit without entirely rejecting, the prevailing assumptions of life have no reason to give in to the inevitability of "a secular age."

Through the institutions of the nation-state and nationalist social and intellectual movements, secularist ideologies have come to dominate all cultural production in the lands of Islam, ranging from the revival of languages and historiography to importation and reform of legal codes. The scholarly community remained unimpressed for the most part. Ever since ʻAli ʻAbd al-Raziq's claim in the wake of the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924 that Islam is a "religion" that requires nothing of politics, something of a consensus has developed among Muslim scholars against such a doctrine. Yet, the issue has remained far from settled, and the West's constant, awe-inspiring domination throughout the twentieth century has constantly deepened deliberate as well as *unwitting* secularization in Muslim-majority nation-states.

Ironically, as the public discourse has become increasingly littered with Islamic references, the institutional and economic realities have, with equal obstinacy, dragged Muslim societies toward secularization. The breakdown of the global Muslim community (*ummah*), the local community, and family, as well as the increasing significance of the nation-state and global corporations – the latter particularly in the wake of the neoliberal economics since the 1980s – have all contributed to this unwitting secularization. Some scholars have even suggested that the anti-secularist Islamists may too aid the process of secularization inasmuch as they help expand the nation-state's reach.[17]

Such pioneering studies no doubt offer tentative conclusions, but they also provide crucial points of departure for further work on the nature, means, limits, and consequences of secularization in Muslim contexts. What is difficult to contest, however, is that despite their consistent rejection of secularism as an ideology and attempts to find modus vivendi – such as the one suggested by Elmessiri, willing to compromise with "partial" as opposed to "total" secularism, or excavating concepts and practices in Islam's own history that appear to deliver the goods that secularism promises – Muslim societies, communities, and movements across the world seem to be fighting a losing battle against secularism in not only the political realm, but also in the psycho-social realm.

When Muslim scholars and intellectuals first encountered European secularism, they patently rejected it. But it is worth remembering that their rejection was first and foremost grounded in both politics (e.g., in defense of the Ottoman Empire) and society (e.g., in defense of local communal norms), and not merely in the purist sense of Islamic norms. This was precisely Taylor's point: Secularism is enabled or made possible, although not necessarily caused, by religion's loss of political and social grounds. What, asks the religious reformer, if those grounds have become polluted and the compromises they had erected had betrayed the truth of God? This precisely was the question that birthed the Protestant Reformation. Should the corruption of religious truth, political and social inequalities, repression of thought and spiritual life itself, all be eternally tolerated simply to save those "grounds" no matter how misguided the compromise, how barren its yield and bitter its fruit?

This is the epochal question being asked with colossal poignancy once again in the Middle East. But there is something different, possibly more perverse, than what happened in medieval Europe: The Muslim clerical class today defends not the ancient grounds of faith, but the illegitimate states born of colonialism into the lap of nationalism; they defend those in power mechanically and self-servingly. At least the compromise of the old Church had faith and history behind it; today's establishmentarian ulama offer their faith for only a mirage and deception in return, all the while claiming championship of truth and tradition from their hollowed and borrowed pulpits. Be that as it may, neither the Catholic compromise nor the Protestant reformation can be our salvation – a lesson we cannot miss if we heed our more perceptible interlocutors in their own ranks: "Ask those given remembrance if you do not know" (Q. 21:7).

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The first article of this issue is Professor Sherman A. Jackson's contention that Islamic law (Sharia) accords recognition and legitimacy to the "secular" as a *relatively* autonomous aspect of life. According to this understanding, Islamic tradition can accommodate the secular without giving any quarter to secularism. Islam furnishes the ultimate meaning of life and its divinely approved concretization, and, as such, provides the overarching narrative as well as a number of concrete norms, which are not stagnant but rather guarded by a scriptural logic regulated in the *fiqh* discourse. All human endeavor must be placed within these. Yet, and despite the oft-touted claim that Islamic law covers all aspects of life, it accords a great deal of room to free human endeavor. What is the nature of this room, its contours, its justifications? This is the question that his article addresses head-on.

Jackson enumerates a number of issues as falling beyond the Sharia's pale, by which he means scriptural norms as interpreted by the jurists or, in other words, *fiqh*. We do not fully appreciate his definition until he elaborates that "*sharīʿah* is the medium through which God's will is made known in concrete, objectively verifiable terms." The operative concept here is *objective*, namely, publicly reasoned interpretation of scripture, and thus excludes the subjective as well as rational (except inasmuch as both subjectivity and reason are employed in hermeneutic, legal reasoning). Put differently, what are conventionally understood to be Islamic religious activities, ranging from the personal insights and epiphanies of the Sufis (or efforts to attain such) to the practice of administration or policymaking for the Muslim community by caliphs or judges, not to mention art and aesthetics, fall within his definition of the "Islamic secular."

He complicates this distinction somewhat by noting that such fields of activity may still fall under the banner of "Islam" but not of Sharia. Islamic norms may require that something be done to address, say, a great injustice, but its modality may be outside the scope of a *sharʿī* discussion. This is no different, it would appear, from figuring out the correct direction of the *qiblah*, for while establishing the norm and times of proper prayers may be a matter of *sharʿī* discussion, the scientific knowledge needed to establish the right direction would be the "secular" half of the equation. In fact, every Islamic norm, inasmuch as it requires the knowledge of the ever-changing world, what some modern jurists have called *fiqh al-wāqiʿ*, is coupled with the Islamic secular. Furthermore, every activity that Sharia declares to be neutral (*mubāḥ*), as well as the relevant prerequisites and conditions of obligations, would all be regarded as secular. In listing modern examples, Jackson includes policies and laws such as pertaining to traffic, zoning, education, child psychology, and the like. He notes that assessments such as efficient, safe, profitable, beautiful, fun, and so on are simply not *sharʿī* categories.

The article is followed by the comments of two notable scholars in their fields, Professors Mohammad Fadel and Humeira Iqtidar, who challenge him in important ways, followed by his clarifying response. This conversation makes for an exhilarating dialog rich enough for any number of scholars, not to mention searching graduate students, to find food for their future thought and research.

Whereas Professor Jackson's contribution seeks to construct a framework within which the activities of Muslim jurists can be placed, Professor Alexandre Caeiro's anthropological approach begins by exploring debates among contemporary Muslim jurists, one party among whom grant the relative autonomy of the secular social and natural sciences and wish to base their religious verdicts on the secular world and its demands as articulated by its experts. The challenge that Caeiro wants to address is one that lies in the endless ambiguity as well as normative valence of secular knowledge, or, alternatively, of the self-knowledge of the secular world. He shows that Muslim jurists have already adopted concepts and categories from secular institutions and social sciences. Thankfully, his work is an indication that the urgent task of examining how these concepts may have transformed the enterprise of jurisprudence is beginning to be undertaken.

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On behalf of the editorial team of the journal, I offer heartfelt condolences to the family of Dr. Mahmoud Rashdan who passed to His Lord on March 20th, 2017 in Jordan. He is survived by his wife, eight children and eight grandchildren.

According to *Islamic Horizons* (May-June 2017), Dr. Rashdan was a pioneering leader of the Muslim Student Association (MSA), Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), and International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT). He directed IIIT's Education Department between 1986 and 1990. He subsequently served as professor of education and development at the International Islamic University in Malaysia (IIUM) and professor and dean of the faculty of education at Jordan's Zarqa University. In 2009, he was honored with ISNA's Mehboob Khan Community Service Recognition Award. He was also the inspiration behind the well-regarded Islamic Cooperative Housing Corporation of Canada. A devoted educator, leader, and visionary, he dedicated his life to serving the Muslim community wherever he went.

We beseech God to grant him the highest bliss in His company and give his family patience and strength.

Endnotes

1. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 206-07.
2. Ibid., 23.
3. Steven Smith, *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 26.
4. Asad, *Formations*, 193.
5. Mark Lilla, "The Hidden Lesson of Montaigne," *New York Review of Books* 58, no. 5 (March 24, 2011): 20.
6. Abd al-Wahhab al-Masiri (Elmessiri) and al-Aziz al-Azmah (Azmeh), *Al-'Almānīyat taḥt al-Majhar* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1421/2000).
7. See, for instance, Brad S. Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press: 2011),

which chastises Protestantism for contributing to the rise of modernity at the expense of Christendom. In a more triumphalist fashion, this connection between secularism and Christianity is asserted by Karl Löwith in the argument that secular modernity is an outgrowth of Hebrew and Christian beliefs and, more recently, in Michael A. Gillespie's *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009). Hans Blumenberg, in his *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Boston: MIT Press, 1985), famously contests that idea.

8. Jacques Berlinerblau, *How to Be Secular: A Call to Arms for Religious Freedom* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2013), xxiii.
9. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Our Secularized Civilization." The article was published in the *Christian Century*, April 22, 1926, www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=472 (Accessed 4 April 2017).
10. For various explanations of why monotheism played such a role, see Steve Fuller, *Science vs Religion? Intelligent Design and the Problem of Evolution* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007), 13-15. Immanuel Kant, in fact, "went so far as to consider the [monotheistic] belief as a necessary precondition for objective knowledge" (p. 15).
11. Cf. Ahmet T. Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
12. Talal Asad and others have often made this point. See Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
13. James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).
14. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25-29.
15. Ibid., 42.
16. Niebuhr, "Our Secularized Civilization."
17. Humeira Iqtidar, *Secularizing Islamists? Jama'at-e-Islami and Jama'at-ud-Da'wa in Urban Pakistan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). A similar argument can be read, although implicitly, in Hussein A. Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

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