

The Islamosecular: A Spatiotemporal Exploration

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Given that elsewhere I have constructively engaged with the conceptual architecture of Sherman Jackson's *The Islamic Secular*,¹ in this short essay I will move in an opposing direction by collapsing the duality of this conceptual construct—a definitive centering of the noun, “secular,” qualified by a descriptor, “Islamic”—into a single term. This adaptation will function as the basis for distinguishing the *matter* underlying these abstract concepts from the *form* which would seek to contain it, hence the turn to “spatiotemporality,” which brings to life precisely the multidimensionality of Islam, the recognition of which alone provides us with the opportunity to cease the quasi-mechanistic effort to reify—that is, make into a *thing*—what inherently lacks the materiality of “thinginess” (*shay’iyya*, to use the speech of *kalām*)—namely, concepts—such that they could be considered an objective reality and not a mere linguistic invention (*lafẓi*), like so many other non-existent categories, e.g., religion, politics, and others that mistake the map for the territory, or, rather, seek precisely to regulate the latter through the former. “Islam,” as we shall see, is one such category.

Let me begin, then, with the first half of this deconstructive construct (deconstructive, that is, of the very conceptualization of “the Islamic secular,” to which it attaches, parasitically), which I am calling “the Islamosecular.” Before the rapid colonization of the Dār al-Islām and its transmutation, gradually, into “the Muslim world,” *bilād al-muslimīn*, there was no common adjectival use of the word “Islamic”: this much is made clear by Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s path-breaking study of *The Meaning and*

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1 Abbasi, “Seeing the Secular in the Islamic”.

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End of Religion, considered by many to be a “modern classic.” In this book, Smith speaks of “the special case of Islam” whereby the “religion” is given a name in its “founding scripture” (through such verses as “He named you the Muslims”; “the *dīn* with Allah is *al-islām*”) and yet nevertheless betrays a non-reificatory tendency in its history, as seen in the noticeable frequency of *īmān* above *islām* in the Qur’ān and early Muslim thought. This trend was reversed—and no more profoundly than in the colonial period—by the elevation of “Islam” (or “Muslim”) as a stand-alone category above its function as a verbal noun, which would have presupposed an action, namely, “submission.” In a rudimentary but illuminating chart, Smith demonstrates the overwhelming use of the term in modern book titles (“Islam and Democracy,” “Islam and Women’s Rights”) in a way unprecedented in the history of Muslim literature.² That this change would take place is of little surprise given that what Muslims had called “Islam” (or *al-islām*) had transformed into a species of the genus “religion” under colonial conditions, assuming and thus constructing a new form of “religious life” wherever a Muslim public sphere had arisen, whereas previously this was generally not the case, aside from those exceptional apologetic genres of *adyān* comparison, which never gained the sustained political attention they would in the West.³ Indeed, *al-islām* appears in geographical and legal texts in a primarily territorialized and spatialized sense, to such an extent that Muslim could speak of “the dimension of Islam” (*ṭūl al-islām*).⁴ As we shall see, this transformation will have much to do with the rise of “the secular” and the attendant imposition of a deterritorialized understanding of “religion” upon subject populations. Functioning to achieve ends of colonial administration, such impositions mapped that understanding onto a territory and the ways of life connected to it, and in doing so, abstracted a lived reality from its place, demonizing it in turn with reference to a mental map to which it would always fall short. Out of this tendency would emerge the distinction between what is “Islamic” and what is not, which still appears primarily in elite circles (unlike that between *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*), where this discourse circulates within a sphere of “representation” deliberately detached from lived reality.⁵

2 Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 116.

3 Consider the example of al-Birūnī, the first Indologist, who studied the Indic religions on behalf of the imperial mission of Maḥmūd of Ghazna but whose analyses never developed into a science of imperial governance for Muslim rule.

4 Calasso - Lancioni, *Dār al-islām/Dār al-ḥarb*, 25.

5 An illuminating example may be seen in the way Pakistani (top-down, state-sanctioned) discourses around shrine attendance continue to replace the lived reality of *ḥuḏūri* (the saint’s presence)—that is, what actually happens in these spaces—with a discursified, legalistic understanding of *ziyārat* (the individual’s practice of

This temporalization of “Islam”—appearing alongside the replication of a particular understanding of the past rooted in periodization and its connection to a particular claim to sovereignty⁶ (to which I shall turn in a moment)—was not without precedent. In the earliest imperial historiographies, such as Ibn Hishām’s famous biography of the Prophet, we find the language *fi ṣadr al-islām*, meaning “in Islam’s early days.” Itself an exceptional usage, the phrase appears alongside other overly-reified usages of the noun *al-islām* and may be explained with reference to the fact that temporalization is simply what sovereigns seek to do, creating a stable form of history, of a progression leading up to (and justifying) themselves, in order to legitimize their power.

Take the very origins of “the secular”: *saeculum*, which begins at the very nexus of periodization and sovereignty. “The secular games,” or *ludi saeculares*, were initiated—and appear upon minted coins, the locus of much of the sovereign’s attention—in order to substantiate the dynasty’s claim to power by quite literally slicing up time into pieces (centennial, bicentennial; think the peculiarity of the Olympics) so that the subject-population is captured within a particular movement of time, taking as its telos the continuity of the name in which this entire change is consecrated: the dynasty or nation.⁷ The centrality of temporality to the effort to establish “sovereignty” as a stand-alone conceptual construct (most famously with Jean Bodin) was noted by Ernst Kantorowicz in his historical excavation of the idea of *The King’s Two Bodies*. In this monumental work, he traces and underlines the significance of the revival of the radical Averroist strand of the doctrine of the eternity of the world—famously rejected by al-Ghazālī—to not only the social and political thought of the West and to a novel understanding of perpetuity attached to “sovereignty,” but to every sector of society, inasmuch as it centered a new, radical orientation to time in all aspects of life.⁸ Charles Taylor would appear to be partially correct, then, in naming his book *A Secular Age*, with the attendant qualification that the very notion of “the age” is itself intrinsic to the idea of “the secular”; recall, for instance, the Latin translation of the Christian New Testament’s oft-repeated phrase: *in saecula saeculorum*, “forever and ever.” “The age” must not, therefore, be taken for granted in the manner that Taylor does, undermining his aspiration to overcome prior supercessionist accounts of modernity. We

visitation) in order to contain precisely this power, associated as it is with the poor. See Khan, *Re-centering the Sufi Shrine*.

6 See, on sovereignty more generally, Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*.

7 Dunning, “saeculum”

8 Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*, 273–91.

may think here of the very distinction of “the modern,” not from the familiar “ancients” (“the first” and “the last,” *awwalūn* and *ākhīrūn*), but from the *pre-modern* (modernity centering itself, like the Gregorian calendar before it: *before* and *after* Christ). This distinction would eventually map itself onto another: that between different peoples and their respective ways of living, together reinforcing the evolutionary dogma by which the rest have not yet attained that point in the progression of “humanity” as the West—a point unconsciously internalized by the very Muslim elite who would start to speak *in the name* (not of *Allah*) but of *Islam*.

This new mode of communal self-appraisal would give the Muslims “the golden age,” “the decline thesis,” “the Islamic tradition” (*turāth*), each of which emerges as central categories in the debates about the path “the Muslim world” must take in order to achieve the proper synthesis between “the modern” and “the Islamic.” That many of these positions would align with a distinct discursification of “Islam” connected to the demonization of certain spatial arrangements (e.g., shrine pilgrimages in South Asia and East Turkestan) gradually seen to be less “Islamic” (or rather the cause of Islamic malaise) illustrates the clear process of abstraction by which what previously inhered within individuals (circulating between bodies, whether dead or alive) comes to be textualized—that is, documented in a way admissible to and productive of the formation of “the state.” Though such textualization reflects the logocentric assumptions of the Graeco-Roman-Christian framework for civilizational flourishing, this hardly implies that there were not already movements from bodies to texts in (the space of) Islam prior to this process, such as the increasing regulation of Ottoman ‘ulema or the shift towards common basic madrasa texts. Textualization in (the space of) Islam simply did not reflect the philosophical assumption of a stand-alone “state’s” existence (Greek *hexis* or Arabic *ḥāl*); instead, it actively fought against it by continuously unraveling the hold of such texts through the bodies which were its oral locus, as well as those “friends” (or “authorities”), *awliyā* of Allah, who explicitly rooted their claims in their ability to surpass text in favor of “presence” (*ḥuḍūr*), which by its very nature is open to change.

This formless, landed Islam (earthly, like *arḍ*, which in the Qur’ān also refers to “land”) would give rise to and sustain that multiplicity of expression so characteristic of “premodern Islam,” under attack by the monolithic, celestially modelled (Platonic form of) Islam that facilitates the aims of global stateification (today: neoliberalization)⁹—a project that returns us once again

9 For a powerful analysis of one such bottom-up expression of Islam’s capture into the hegemonic fold of global (Western) logics, see Tuğal, *Passive Revolution*. Tuğal writes: “moderate Islam is the culmination of a long process of passive revolution

to the secular, this time with attention to its inherent spatiality. The original meaning of “secularization,” which signified the transfer of *property* from ecclesiastical to civil use, as in the English abolition of the monasteries or the “German mediatization” (*deutsche Mediatisierung*), points us to the violent and unprecedented spatial rearrangement whereby “religion” came directly under the control of the state. This model is replicated to this day in non-Western nations: consider, for instance, the Turkish “Presidency of Religious Affairs” (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) or the centralization of al-Azhar University (*Jāmi‘a al-Azhar*), institutions reinforcing the fact that secularization is less about the separation of religion and state as it is the active regulation of the former by the latter, as Talal Asad and others have shown. But secularization is also more than that: the fundamentally Pauline hierarchialization of the spirit over the flesh, manifested through the elevation of the ecclesiastical over the laity, and even more specifically, the “regular” clergy (those who follow a laid-out rule: a law, a principle) over the “secular” clergy (those “worldlings”), function precisely to demonize the earthly ways of life that the “elevated” ones, who see themselves as representatives of a heavenly truth that always hovers above (ready to adjudicate morality here and now), cannot help but encounter to source their livelihood.¹⁰ Such demonization is quite literal: as Willie Jennings demonstrates in one of the most important studies of the “secular modern” (emphasizing, once again, its spatiality), a closer reading of an important discursive legitimization of and witness to the colonization of the so-called New World reveals a fundamental view of the land as possessed by the devil, requiring a veritable exorcism akin to the hauntings seen in modern film. Colonization in this sense would call for a process of abstraction from the land in order to facilitate its transfer over to a new regime of zoning and legal regulation—one more ordered, rational, and “pure”—as would take place across the entire colonial apparatus.¹¹ To borrow an example from another colonial context, we may consider the shift from well-sharing among hundreds of owners around the Indus basin to a new epistemic regime rooted in modern engineering and predicated on increased access to an elite class.¹² In both of these colonial cases, a current regime of distribution of land in relation to its inhabitants is pathologized as irrational and religious and “cured” by the administration of a legal-epistemic medicine measured through an entirely this-worldly metric, or so it was claimed.

as a result of which erstwhile radicals and their followers are brought into the fold of neoliberalism, secularism, and Western domination” (4).

10 On this hierarchization, see the exceptional “argument” in Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom, 257–337.

11 Jennings, “Binding Landscapes”, 207–37

12 See Gilmartin, *Blood and Water*.

But the matter of what makes a thing a part of *this world* is not so straightforward. The modern Arabic neologism for “secularism,” *‘almāniyya*, is taken from the Arabic word for “world” (*‘ālam*), famously used in the plural at the outset of the Qur’ān, and referring most likely to the idea of “world-dwellers,” which is to say, its inhabitants. Its use builds possibly on Christian Arabic roots, in which the Syriac *‘almanaye* represented the “outside,” or the laity, as opposed to the “inside,” or the ecclesiastical,¹³ again conjuring a distinction completely absent from Muslim communities. Meanwhile, the Arabic *dunyā*, which is the closest thing in the classical and Qur’ānic lexicon to a notion of “this life” refers, in the most popular *ḥadīth* to speak of it, to a *dunyā* that belongs to *you*: the Prophet says, “you know better the matter of *your dunyā*” (*dunyākum*), and speaks not of “the world” in abstraction from the particular location in which the individual exists. Indeed, if we are to take seriously Heidegger’s claim regarding the invention of “the worldview” in “The Age of the World as Picture,”¹⁴ considering it alongside the emergence of the phenomenon of the World Fair, which placed “the world on display” for the first time,¹⁵ it would seem that the secular matrix is essentially a conjuring of a colonial imagination, reproduced through the projection of a specific image of a global reality that is, in fact, far from the living reality and serves principally to keep a particular legal regime of control and regulation over land and resources in place.

That this image would clash foremost with Islam, that great unraveller of the secularization thesis (not only within the academy but in reality, as seen in the cases of Turkey and Iran), should come as no surprise given the highly territorialized nature of its rule—which is to say, of “Allah’s rule,” understood as a law quite literally “of the land.”¹⁶ This “land” refers not to the imagined borders of the nation but to a landed regime of rights distribution that would always have the potential to counter human judgements with another, higher law—particularly not one abstracted but in tune with the *‘urfi*, the customary, respected by many implementations of the *shari’a* across Muslim lands—which would indeed be upheld foremostly within the body of the individual, beginning always with purificatory rites.

13 Brock, “The Chronological Development of Adjectives in –aya up to 725,” 53–125. I am grateful to Thomas A. Carlson for this reference. See also Bishara, “Lafz ‘Almāniyya’ min al-Qarn al-Rābi’ al-Hijrī, 2-3.

14 Heidegger – Greene, “The Age of the Worldview”, 340–55.

15 See Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*.

16 Indeed, some have considered the *shari’a* capitalist (though we must be careful with the term) insofar as it was rooted in the productive use of land and labor by “private” individuals. See Messick, “Property and the Private in a Sharia System”, 711–34.

The *Islamosecular* may be read then as a signifier pointing to the mutual implications of these terms as they appear in this day and age, to such an extent that the prestige attached to the study of Islam in relation to the secular remains unrivalled among the species of “world religions” (see, once again, the influential works Asad and company). As such, the Islamosecular reveals that the *matter* at hand is one hardly reducible to a *form* drawn away from the historical reality but rather the very condition which is “nearest” (*adnā*) to us: our spatiotemporal existence. Uncannily, you might say, such speaking mirrors the very method of cross-pollination patiently affirmed by the Prophet himself in the aforementioned hadith (*ta’bīr al-nakhl*, “cross-pollination of the palm tree,” is its shorthand), who was remembered to have said, if not in so many words, that within the continuum of spacetime, it is not revelation, which introduces a necessary discontinuity to the mundane existence of life but the *people*, through their knowledge of their immediate experience—which speak to the *realities* thereof, and not the *names* we circulate—who know best.

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