

The Twilight of Muslim Agency?: A Response to Professor Rushain Abbasi

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Professor Rushain Abbasi's review of *The Islamic Secular* was rich, layered and erudite. While I was intrigued by many of his arguments, I found myself more often asking if I had successfully apprehended his meaning or how what I did understand was relevant to *The Islamic Secular*. Abbasi does not engage with any of *The Islamic Secular*'s substantive arguments (e.g., the *shar'i* / non-*shar'i* divide, *shari'ah* as a bounded metric of assessment, the idea of a "religious secular"). Instead, he maps out a conceptual universe wherein the concepts "secular" and "Islamic" along with the term "Islamic Secular" are called into question. His rhetoric here is thick and at times (at least for me) impenetrable, which puts me at a marked disadvantage in attempting to respond to him. Thankfully, there were oases of transparency. I will limit the bulk of my response to these, leaving the final word on most of the rest to readers.

Abbasi opens by noting that he had already engaged with *The Islamic Secular* elsewhere and would move in this review "in an opposing direction" (A, 337). Here his aim will be to "collaps[e] the duality of this conceptual construct," the "Islamic Secular," into "a singular term as the basis for distinguishing the *matter* underlying these abstract concepts from the *form* that seeks to contain it" (A, 337). In other words, if I understand him correctly, he questions whether "secular" can be authentically harmonized with Islam, whether it is proper to reify "Islam" itself and turn it into a "thing," as a prerequisite for achieving such harmonization, and whether, in light of these investigations, "the Islamic Secular" is the most suitable phrase for capturing this would-be amalgamation between Islam and the secular. This culminates in his introducing, on the very

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last page of his remarks, the term “Islamosecular,” as an alternative to “Islamic Secular.” The point here, again, if I understand him correctly, is that once we abandon the particularly modern tendency to reify “Islam,” whereupon its meaning and parameters can be manipulated by elites and state actors, “Islam” returns to its ur meaning as an “act of submission,” whose reality and parameters remain with “the people” on the ground and their ways and means of pursuing and executing submission, away from the heady, ideological and reactionary abstractions of elites, especially modern elites. “Islamosecular” signals a break with the “Islamic Secular,” which, he seems to imply, is a theory that invests heavily in and relies heavily on the reification of Islam. On this adjustment, again, if I understand him correctly, the Islamosecular, in contradistinction to the Islamic Secular, refers neither to a distinction between the “religious” and the “secular” nor to a *shar’i* / non-*shar’i* divide but simply to the knowledge and experience of “the people” accumulated trans-generationally via their ways and means of “submitting” to God, all of which is nearer (*adnā*) to them and thus more spontaneously and devotionally engaged with than are the abstract, scholarly reifications-cum-dissections of Islam as a “thing” (A, 337).

I shall leave aside the fact that the “nearer” (*al-adnā*) has not always been associated with the folksy spontaneity and goodness of “the people” but originally stood among the Arabs for a “dull, inferior sort of life, devoid of all noble purpose” because it lacked the aspiration to venture into the distance.¹ Nor, as we shall see, should we take for granted the idea that the “reification” of Islam is an entirely modern phenomenon or that it is necessarily bad. More important, Abbasi appears to move not in the opposite direction from his previous engagement with *The Islamic Secular* but in fact in the same direction. There he argued that “the secular” is a Western, Christian invention of which Islam cannot legitimately partake. Here “the secular” comes in for similar treatment with “modernity” and “coloniality,” indeed, a colonial modernity coming more prominently to the fore as an extension of the West’s Christian’s legacy and status as progenitor of the modern secular. All this places the secular beyond Islam’s reach, short of harmful distortions and unauthorized transmutations, which, Abbasi implies, the Islamic Secular carries in its bosom.

In the end, however, there is seemingly something paradoxical about Abbasi’s approach. While the West, or colonial modernity, and its wares are off-limits for Islam and can presumably only contaminate the latter, Abbasi seems comfortable taking the West, modernity and its

1 See M.M. Bravmann, *The Spiritual Background of Early Islam: Studies in Ancient Arab Concepts*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972, 32.

intellectual heritage as a basic point of departure in his critique. It is the meanings the West assigns to “secular” that govern the conversation; it is the views of Western scholars that seem to carry the most authority (A, 337, 339, 341, 341 and esp., his notes); and it is colonial modernity as a “spatiotemporal” context that produces and sustains the presumption that Islam (read: Muslims) is not speaking and cannot speak authentically when it comes to the secular (or perhaps anything modern) but can only express itself as an orphan of modernity seeking recognition from the rest of the modern family, especially its putative head. Meanwhile, it is Abbasi’s status as a modern Westerner himself, or as someone whose location and Western education (both products of colonial modernity) confers upon them the imprimatur of the West, that infuses his critical analyses of pre-modern Muslim understandings of Islam with enough authority to sustain his critique of what modern Muslims are doing in comparison. In short, Abbasi seems to be able and to be authorized to draw upon and benefit from colonial modernity in ways that those he critiques are apparently denied.

We see this in his breakdown of the Islamic Secular into “secular” and “Islamic” followed by his reconstruction of these terms into “the Islamic secular” (A, 337). One notices here his use of the lower case “secular,” which suggests not only that his point of departure is the modern Western secular but that he also reads this provenance into my thesis. He approaches the Islamic Secular — again, for him, the “Islamic secular” — not as its own construct grounded in and derived from a history and intellectual heritage other than that of the West but as a mere iteration, if not imitation, of the dominant, Western understanding of “secular,” ultimately a naïve and misguided attempt at appropriation. For him, there can be no “secular” that is native to Islam. The concept was brought to (read: imposed upon) Muslims as a by-product of colonial modernity, which wrought other conceptual dislocations and transmutations that prompted Muslims (and non-Muslims) to think about Islam in ways that they had not and could not have thought about it before. In a word, Western, colonial modernity places Muslims in a position of reactionary adjustment, frantic borrowing, failed attempts at appropriation and, ultimately, apology. Everything they produce in this context carries the prima facie presumption of being either imposed *on* them or inauthentically ‘assimilated’ *by* them, the West alone standing out as self-constituting. This ignores, of course, the significant borrowings by the West from Islam.² More important, it ignores the fact

2 See, e.g., G. Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981; G. Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990.

that for over a millennium prior to modernity Muslims demonstrated enormous powers of appropriation from non-Muslim cultures, intellectual traditions, institutions and lexicons. They readily appropriated, if not borrowed, non-Muslim Greek and Persian terms such “*jawhar*,” (essence), ‘*araḍ*’ (accident) and *juzāf*’ (estimation) and such institutions as that of the *atabeg* and *mahmandār* and inducted these into some of their most sensitive and essential deliberations and arrangements.³ Colonial modernity appears on the scene, however, and we are suddenly lodged in a time and place wherein Muslim agency either no longer exists or its exercise is no longer legitimate. Muslims come up against colonial modernity as a Red Sea whose contaminating waters must be pushed to both sides — a miracle only half-heartedly awaited — before Muslims can cross into new, Islamically authentic meanings of their own.

Abbasi depicts the secular as a tool of colonial powers and state forces who employ it as a means of exercising control over religion (A, 341) and even over “land and resources” (A, 342). As he puts it, “secularization is less about the separation of religion and state as it is the active regulation of the former by the latter” (A, 341). This brings the secular into fundamental conflict with Islam, “that great unraveller of the secularization thesis” (A, 342). Again, the point of departure is the Western secular. I have no qualms with the basic argument that “the secular” is routinely deployed in the East as well as the West as an instrument of control. But to assume or imply that the Islamic Secular, inasmuch as it is a ‘secular,’ must also carry this germ simply misrepresents matters. The ‘secular’ in the Islamic Secular is neither non-religious, predatory (i.e., seeking to expand at the expense of religion), nor the preserve of the state. And the “Islamic” in the Islamic Secular derives not from any reification of Islam per se, by the state or Muslim elites, but from the fact that the ubiquitous gaze of the God of Islam covers everything, including the most mundane, worldly thoughts and actions. Viewed from this perspective, any “unravelling” of the secularization thesis by Islam will reside first and foremost not in the extent to which Muslims refuse to grant the state control over religion (a fight hardly uniquely modern for them) but in the degree to which they refuse to exchange the ubiquitous, adjudicative gaze of the God of Islam for that of any other power or entity, including the modern West!

3 Unfortunately, this issue has been badly distorted by the installation early on by scholars in the West of “origins” or “originality” as a standard of measurement, which clearly preyed upon the fact that Judaism and Christianity preceded Islam, as if nothing preceded Judaism and Christianity. This has incentivized in certain circles a reactionary denial of Muslim borrowing or appropriation, as ostensible marks of inferiority. Ultimately, however, and paradoxically, this reactionary denial leaves the standard of “origins” or “originality” itself in place, a standard deposited by the West, whose authority such deniers imagine themselves to oppose.

For his part, however, Abbasi claims that the adjective “Islamic” was basically unknown “[b]efore the rapid colonization of the Dār al-Islām (and its transmutation, gradually, into ‘the Muslim world’” (A, 337). Interestingly, he favors the “path-breaking” work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith (d. 2000) over the archive of pre-modern Muslim writers as proof of how late “Islamic” entered the Muslim lexicon (A, 337). Taking pre-modern Muslim writings as our point of departure however, we find, going back over a millennium, that Muslims of the highest renown deployed this adjective without reservation. The eponymous Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/936?) entitles his famous book on heresiology *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyin wa Ikhtilāf al-Muṣallin*, “Doctrines of Those Associated with Islam and the Disagreements of Those Who Pray the Muslim Prayer.” Later, Ibn Taymiyah (d. 728/1328) speaks of various Muslim thinkers, including those with whom he disagrees, as “*islāmiyyūn*,” or thinkers “associated with Islam” (I.S., 72). And his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyah (d. 751/1350) entitles his polemical theological tract “*Ijtima‘ al-Juyūsh al-Islāmiyyah ‘alā al-Zanādiqah wa al-Jahmiyah*,” “The Convergence of the Islamic Armies upon the Crypto-Infidels and Jahmites.” Clearly, “Islamic” is not simply a modern spin-off from colonial rule nor purely a reaction thereto, even if its meaning and deployment among modern and pre-modern Muslims may have differed. More important, even assuming that Abbasi is correct in his claim, what makes specifically modern neologisms inherently less Islamically authentic than pre-modern ones? Were not “*dār al-Islām*,” “*al-kitāb*” (“The Book”), or “*kalām*” (speculative theology), for example, all ‘modern’ neologisms in their time?

Abbasi also argues, relatedly, that “Islam” was rarely if ever “reified,” or used as a proper noun, but only as a verbal noun, depicting not a “religion” as an organized, extramental “thing” in the world but only to denote an action, namely, “submission” to God, that is, until colonial modernity appeared and pushed Muslims to ever more explicit degrees of reification (A, 338). If I understand him correctly, his point here, at least in part, is that the “Islamic” in the “Islamic Secular” is the adjectival extension not of Islam as a process or act of submission but of Islam as a reified thing, which is itself a product of colonial modernity and thus of questionable authenticity as an articulation of Islam. As Abbasi argues, this transformation of “Islam” from a verbal noun to a proper noun had “much to do with the rise of the secular” (A, 338). The underlying assumption here regarding the Islamic Secular (again, if I understand him correctly) is simply not true, at least not entirely: the Islamic Secular is at least as indebted (if not more indebted) to the act of recognizing the divine gaze of the God of Islam as it is to any notion of Islam as a standing, reified entity. But it is also not true, again, in my view that Muslims

never “reified” “Islam” as a noun until modern times. I am alive to what I understand to be Abbasi’s underlying point, here. I too have argued that no one has ever seen “Islam” walking down the street (*I.S.*, 72). Yet, in the aggregate, normative *practice* of Islam, including the question of who is a Muslim, “Islam” becomes subject to definition, as are all nouns (“What is Islam?”). And in this capacity, Islam will ultimately be what Muslims (or those recognized as representing the community) *say* it is, as a standing entity. “Islam” in this sense, even if it remains at bottom tied to the act of submission, simply cannot speak for itself.

Stated differently, even if “Islam” for pre-modern Muslims referred to ‘the act of submitting to God’, would this submission be limited to ‘spiritual’ acts by individuals unattached to collective interests or responsibilities beyond themselves? And would it not be natural for Muslims who saw themselves as bound by God to community as part of the site and context of their “submission” to assess what acts are proper and improper constituents thereof on a communal level beyond their personal, private commitment to “submission,” especially given the divinely imposed *communal* obligation to “command what is good and forbid what is bad” (*al-amr bi al-ma’rūf wa al-nahy ‘an al-munkar*)? Would it then be such a stretch from here to conceive of the resulting consensus (however provisional and evolving) and everything that sustains and enhances it as “Islam” in the sense of an actual thing in the world? Meanwhile, unless Muslims saw themselves as completely alone in the world (a near impossibility given their collective memory of the struggles of their forebears to establish and sustain themselves as a community, going back to the Prophet himself) would it not be reasonable for them to reify this “thing,” “Islam,” even further, as the preferred alternative to other such “things” in the world?

Historically speaking, this is precisely what we find in such articulations as that of the philosopher al-‘Āmirī (d. 381/992) who spoke over a thousand years ago of having written his book, *Kitāb al-I‘lām bi Manāqib al-Islām*, to “inform people of the high achievements that are specific to Islam, so that anyone who looks into Islam can know that it is fitting that it should abrogate all other religions” (*mā ikhtaṣṣa bi al-islām min al-manāqib al-‘aliyah li ya‘lam al-nāzīr fīhi annahu bi al-ḥarīyy an yakūna nāsikhān li al-adyān kullihā*).⁴ Of course, al-‘Āmirī was among that class of elite who were more given to “abstraction” than even the *fuqahā*’ and theologians. But what proof do we have that “the people” on the ground in the pre-modern *dār al-Islām* would have been any less inclined or committed to

4 Abū al-Ḥasan al-‘Āmirī, *Kitāb al-i‘lām bi manāqib al-islām*, ed. A. ‘A. Ghurāb, Riyadh: Dār al-Aṣālah li al-Thaqāfah wa al-Nashr wa al-I‘lām, N.d., 71.

such ‘reification’ as part of their collective identity? And why should modern Muslims, even as they remain ongoingly in conversation with their pre-modern forebears, be seen as less authorized to exercise this kind of agency or as being less authentic for doing so? Finally, is it not possible for “Islam,” or “*al-islām*,” to function as a homonym that refers authentically both to submission to God and to an ontologically instantiated “thing” in the world?

Again, *The Islamic Secular* seemed to play a very indirect if not marginal role in Professor Abbasi’s review. Still, albeit in ways at times remote and cryptic, I read his remarks as suggesting a number of important things about my thesis. I found his analysis to be as rich as it was at times challenging. I thank him for sharing his valuable intellectual capital with me.