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Editor

Muslim Societies and the Challenge of Secularization: An Interdisciplinary Approach

 Springer

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Gabriele Marranci

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Introduction

Gabriele Marranci

Since the so-called ‘war on terror’ started with the dramatic events of 9/11, a previously scholarly debate has entered public discussion in the form of a reductionist (Roy 2007) question: is Islam compatible with secularism and hence democracy? The question, today, is widely considered and can be found in many spheres; from within academic work (Casanova 1994; Cesari and McLoughlin 2005; Roy 2007) to Internet forums in various, yet often repetitive, variations. Although from different perspectives, both the academic and the popular debates focus upon Islam in an attempt to find a satisfactory answer to the riddle. In such an effort, Islam, secularism, democracy and the ‘West’ become pillars of a dangerously essentialised discourse. As in the case of the concept of ‘fundamentalism’ (see Marranci 2009), Islam, secularism, laïcité (see ‘Muslim Thinkers and the Debate on Secularism and Laïcité’ by De Poli, this volume) are not, in the mass media as well as in certain academic discourses, discussed as processes but rather as ‘things’, or in anthropological jargon, ‘cultural objects’ (Geertz 1973). In *Muslim Societies and the Challenge of Secularization*, the authors, coming from different academic disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, history, legal studies, political sciences, Islamic studies and religious studies, shall offer a debate that attempts to deconstruct the simplified, and often oxymoronic, discussion about the relationship between Islam and secularism and provide a new way to discuss the topic.

In Europe, and in Turkey, the debate over the Muslim ‘veil’ (see Bowen 2007; Özdalga 1998) has been politically used as *casus belli* to start an unprecedented debate about the role that Islam may play within the west and the challenge, if not the threat, that it may represent to the western democratic and secular system. Of course the European debate of the position of Turkey within the European Union has also increased the general public sensitivity to a complex social-political debate that is too often popularised by the mass media and Machiavellian political needs. As an anthropologist, I am not so surprised that at the centre of this debate are not Muslims, but rather Islam. As I will try to explain in this introduction, the debate has

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left the theological, scholarly and political arena to become what Mamdani (2002) has called ‘Culture Talk’. The main step is to move the debate away from ‘Culture Talk’, which means to recognise that although the Holy Qur’an and the hadiths play a fundamental role in the lives of Muslims, the texts remain mute without a mind to interpret or read them. In other words, Islam does not exist without a mind to conceive of it¹ (Marranci 2008). Interpretations, processes of identities and emotions (Marranci 2006, 2008), local and global contexts are not just variables added to a defined, textualised eschatology but rather the essence of it.

Instead, within the widespread, and ever spreading, ‘Culture Talk’ affecting the representation of Muslims both in the west and in Muslim-majority countries, Islam is understood as a blueprint, so that Muslims are reduced to embodied traditions (Bruce 2000). In the debate about Islam and secularism, which is mirrored in the discussion of the compatibility of ‘Islam’ with ‘democracy’, ‘Culture Talk’ has allowed western politicians, commentators and intellectuals to divide the world between ‘modern’ and ‘premodern’. The increasingly predominant view that ‘real’ Muslims, because of Islam, cannot accept, adapt, or assimilate within democratic systems and consequently that they may represent a danger and threat to them, seems to confirm what Mamdani has highlighted as one of the main characteristics of ‘Culture Talk’: the idea that Muslims ‘made’ culture at the beginning of history, but in the contemporary world they are only able to conform to culture,

According to some, our [Muslim] culture seems to have no history, no politics, and no debates, so that all Muslims are just plain bad. According to others, there is a history, a politics, even debates, and there are good Muslims and bad Muslims. In both versions, history seems to have petrified into a lifeless custom of an antique people who inhabit antique lands. Or could it be that culture here stands for habit, for some kind of instinctive activity with rules that are inscribed in early founding texts, usually religious, and mummified in early artefacts? (2004: 18)

He has rightly noticed that it is this reasoning that helps to provide the argument for a ‘clash’ between modern and pre-modern, which has been often used to justify colonialism. Modern and pre-modern can also be understood as ‘civilised’ and ‘uncivilised’, an opposition which opens the idea of ‘civilizing’ and ‘civilizable’. Here secularism and democracy are presented as the result and product of a secular Enlightenment. Asad has suggested that we can recognise in it an inverted mimicry of Christian theology:

From early modern Europe – through what is retrospectively called the secular Enlightenment, and into the long nineteenth century, within Christian Europe and in its overseas possessions – the things, words, and practices distinguished or set apart by ‘Nature Folk’ were constituted by Europeans as ‘fetish’ and ‘taboo’. What had been regarded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the theological terms as ‘idolatry’ and ‘devil-worship’ (devotion to false gods) became the secular concept of ‘superstition’ (a meaningless survival) in the framework of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evolutionary thought. (Asad 2003: 35)

There is an increasingly widespread belief that Muslims, of different extractions and backgrounds, because of a requirement of Islam, claim and advocate the supremacy of the divine law over human law and thus de facto reject both the ideas of secularism and *laïcité*. As Oliver Roy (2007) has highlighted, since 9/11,

the critique of Islam is today a rallying point for two intellectual families that have been opposed to each other so far: those who think that the West is first and foremost Christian (and who, not that long ago, considered that the Jews could hardly be assimilated) and those who think that the West is primarily secular and democratic. In other words, the Christian Right and the secular Left are today united in their criticism of Islam. (2007: ix)

Such a reality is also increasingly visible in the academic debate where some analyses show an etic struggle between representation and condemnation; between science, as a quest, and politics, as a plan for action; between endorsement and rejection; between essentialism and relativism; between accusation and absolution; between ideology and utopia.

As I have explained elsewhere (Marranci 2009), the study of Muslim political expressions, particularly in the west, has been affected by two methodological flaws that I have called cultural comparative reductionism and Eurocentric historical evolutionism. In the case of cultural comparative reductionism, analyses are essentially based on an objectification of cultures, historical events, theologies and eschatology that can be reduced to milestones of a particular group. This is so much the case that the comparative reduction leaves the domain of analysis and turns into a map of 'civilisation'. In the most drastic forms of reductionism, processes, often open-ended and developed over time, become 'things'. In the case of the 'West', one of the 'things' from which modernism and secularism also derive is certainly the European, French-born, Enlightenment.

Hence, the Enlightenment becomes a focal point of historical development. History here is manifestly or latently presented as unilinear and progressive, rooted in European historical events and their consequences. Enlightenment becomes essentialised into a sort of civilizational 'Big Bang'. Yet history is not a label; history is a process and dynamic and what we call Enlightenment, secularism or even modernism are labels used to summarise philosophical and political ideas and ideologies which were built through many passages and have never been unitary. Enlightenment in Spain and Italy or Greece had a very different development and is still understood in different ways than in the French, English or American contexts. This is similar to the case of secularism and *laïcité*, which are expressed, understood and even lived in many different ways, not just between nations but also at both the community and individual level.

We cannot other than agree with Asad when he has urged us to recognise that 'the secular is neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity' (2003: 25), and should not be thought of as,

the space in which real human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of 'religion' and thus achieves the latter's relocation. It is this assumption that allows us to think of religion as 'infecting' the secular domain or as replicating within it the structure of theological concepts. The concept of the secular today is part of a doctrine called secularism. Secularism doesn't simply insist that religious practice and belief be confined to a space where they cannot threaten political stability or the liberties of the 'free-thinking' citizens. Secularism builds on a particular conception of the world ('natural' and 'social') and of the problems generated by that world. (Asad 2003: 181)

Secularism, according to Asad, is what we can call a *modus vivendi* of which Muslims living in the west cannot avoid and have to face. Indeed, during all my research as an anthropologist, I have found some Muslims who have argued against secularism and secularization, but inevitably, in everyday life, they had to socially interact and adapt to the surrounding environment. This means that, as scholars, we can only study the dynamics existing in the interactions between Muslims and the idea of the secular or secularism as a *modus vivendi*. This is also true in the case of the theological debates among Muslim scholars such as Tariq Ramadan or Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Indeed, the debate is not purely theoretical, but rather aimed to be practical (see Masud 2005; Chapter 4 by Larsson, this volume; Chapter 3 by De Poli, this volume).

These different Islamic theological approaches to secularism have at least produced, as Olivier Roy (2007: 43–48) has noticed, different solutions that go from a total reformation of Islam to a passive accommodation of the social norms within an Islamic framework. However, we should be careful not to end in generalisations that then become models of ‘Culture Talk’, within which Muslims can be labelled ‘good’ and ‘bad’ according to the necessity of a given political ideology. Indeed, I have clearly stated (2008) the necessity for scholars to, particularly within the social sciences, rediscover the ‘human’ aspect of social interaction. I have advocated that we need, today more than ever, a paradigm through which we can effectively study Muslims as human beings rather than living symbols of a religion. Indeed, Rapport has rightly argued about ‘the universality of the individual as the fount of agency, consciousness, interpretation and creativity in social and cultural life’ (1997: 6). To reintroduce the individual or ‘human’ aspect, we need to observe the dynamics of Muslim lives within societies. This means taking into consideration the relationship that exists between Muslims and their environment.

It is for this reason that in *Muslim Societies and the Challenge of Secularization: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, I have invited scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds as well as those working on different geographical areas to discuss in an innovative and imaginative way such keywords. It is the intention of this collection to provide a debate, rather than to offer answers as such, starting from ‘Muslims’ instead of Islam and beyond the usual European (Cesari and McLoughlin 2005), and in particular French (Roy 2007), framework. As we shall see, in this volume the term ‘secularism’ is not only explored as a sociological dimension (see in particular the introductory chapter by Turner, this volume), but also as an individual assertion of a secular Muslim identity, one of the many Muslim identities that, as Richard Martin has underlined in his contribution, ‘goes largely unexamined in most works on Islam and Muslim societies. On the other hand, it is in the writings of novelists, such as Nasruddin Farah, Orhan Pamuk and Naguib Mahfouz, that Western readers learn something about the complex and contested relationships Muslims have with the state and with Islamist, liberal, progressive and secular Muslims, as well as with non-Muslims.’

The book is divided into two parts that develop four different thematic discussions. The first part, *Debating Islam, Secularism, Democracy and Muslim Polity*, opens with an introductory chapter by sociologist Bryan Turner. After observing that

secularisation theories have been narrow in their understanding of religion in a globalised context, Turner, by revisiting Jose Casanova's *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994), looks at the interconnections between changes in the public or political domain (deprivatization) and transformations of personal religious behaviour in the everyday or social domain. Turner argues that if we want to bypass some of the weaknesses of the secularization thesis of the 1960s, we need to examine the interaction between private piety and public regulation that is between deprivatization and pietization.

Barbara De Poli, therefore, in [Chapter 3](#), offers at the same time a clear summary of the debate among Muslim scholars, particularly in Europe, in an attempt to observe the 'cultural itineraries' existing within such debate so that we may be able to understand the 'ideological influence on the relationships between Muslims and public institutions in "secularised" Europe'. Göran Larsson in [Chapter 4](#), provides a comparison of the ideas of two influential Sunni Muslim theologians among Muslim minorities in the West: Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Tariq Ramadan.² The broad comparison brings, however, Larsson to a very important conclusion, which we have discussed above, 'An analysis of Muslim views of secularisation [. . .] should not be seen as an attempt to show that all Muslims take the same position on secularisation. On the contrary, this chapter illustrates the complexity and diversity that exists within the Islamic discourse.' He also highlights, as Richard Martin extensively does in [Chapter 9](#), the necessity of including within the academic discussion of Muslims and secularism the study 'of so-called secular or "cultural Muslims"', which has been largely neglected in research focusing on both Muslims in the west and in the Muslim world.

In the chapters above we have observed how the theological debate remains fluid regarding the division of 'Church and State' in Islam and the role of democracy. Indeed, as Haifaa Jawad explains in [Chapter 5](#), little exists in the Qur'an and Sunnah concerning the 'Islamic' structure of the Muslim polity. In other words, there is 'guidance' but no blueprints. It is this lack of a clear form of governance that produces the complex contemporary internal debate existing between those Muslims who support secularization as an inevitable or beneficial element of progress and those Muslims who reject any value, whether social or political, linked to the development of a Muslim idea of secularism. Hence, Arif Jamal, in [Chapter 6](#), provides a strong social political argument which challenges the idea that liberal theories are incompatible with Islam or Muslim beliefs and argues that 'any antimonies constructed between "Islam" on the one hand and liberal theory on the other may be somewhat artificial because both of these constructions betray on-going and fluid developments.'

However, Masood Ashraf Raja, in [Chapter 7](#), starting from a deep post-colonial analysis of history (Chakrabarty 2004), shows that the relationship between Muslim societies and Western political models find strong resistance if imposed, since the imposition does not allow sufficient scrutiny needed to readjust the model to the Islamic requirements of the Muslim societies. Yet Raja's contribution highlights another essential point in the study of Muslims and modernity: the impossibility of grasping Muslim modernity within a specifically Western view of history,

according to which the end of history is achieved in the form of liberal democracies, free market economics, and composite nation-states. To understand Muslim history and Muslim modernity, Raja suggests, the temporal structure of history's movement must be complicated to include multiple histories and multiple historical trajectories.

Hakki Gurkas, in [Chapter 8](#), offers us one of these multiple trajectories in which Muslims have found themselves, this time in Europe. Minority Muslims in the west are relevant, as we have also seen in the previous chapters, in developing a new debate about their identity as Muslims living in secular democracies. Gurkas explains how Turkish Muslims in Europe are suffering an increase of Islamophobia, in which the idea that Islam is incompatible with Western secularism, and hence democracy, plays a great role. The author provides, however, an example of how the folkloric religious figure of Nasreddin Hodja, also well known in Europe for his humorous tales and particular cultural position in Turkey, has helped the Turkish Muslims in Europe to re-articulate their ethno-religious identities within a secularised environment without, however, compromising their religious identity.

In the last chapter of this first part, Richard Martin discusses the general lack of interest of the academy in secular Muslims in the social fabric of Muslim societies, despite the fact, Martin argues, that critiques of secularism are not rare among some Muslim as well as non-Muslim Western scholars. Martin suggests three ways in which Muslims express secularism, but invites future scholars to revise the model as more cases are considered. In the intention of the author, this chapter is an 'invitation' to correct the current lack of studies and research on the topic. However, Martin also invites the reconsideration of another aspect often perceived as central to the discussion of Muslims and secularism: how theological belief and commitment relates to Muslim identity.

The second part of this book provides readers with a glimpse of the ordinary, cultural, social and political lives of Muslims in which secularization (Asad 2003) becomes a dynamic experience in their everyday lives. Muslims experience the idea of the secular, secularism as well as secularization not in general terms, but rather as part of local processes, contexts and within different economic realities. These factors, however, cannot be disconnected from global processes and events or from, as Marjo Buitelaar ([Chapter 11](#)) and Gail Hickey ([Chapter 13](#)) discuss, dynamics of gender.

Here lies the reason for which Robertson (1995) has used the expression glocalization. Robertson has suggested that what he has called glocalization imposes upon the west a new re-imagination of the idea of locality (i.e. nation and national loyalty). He has therefore observed, 'what is often referred to as the local is essentially included within the global. In this respect globalization [. . .] involves the linking of localities. But it also involves the "invention", of locality, in the same general sense as the idea of the invention of tradition, as well as its "imagination"' (1995: 35). Yet, the political emphasis on loyalty that European (though also US and Australian) governments, particularly during the Afghan conflict, have recently pursued has ended up demonizing the vital transnational character of Muslim communities in

these countries. Indeed, the religious, but also cultural, concept of ummah (the community of believers) was mono-culturally interpreted as a treason trigger while, as rightly observed by Werbner (2002: 307),

British Muslim transnational loyalties have challenged the national polity, I argue, to explore new forms of multiculturalism and to work for new global human rights causes. At the same time such mobilisations have been part of the learning process of becoming a politically effective diaspora. In the long run, then, the Muslim diasporic presence in Britain is a potentially enriching one, and particularly so as the state moves to becoming a post-national, multicultural polity.

It is within this framework of glocalised debates over secularism, democracy and national loyalty that Caraballo-Resto (Chapter 10), Knoblauch and Eden-Fleig (Chapter 12), and Bahfen (Chapter 14) have offered us a discussion, respectively, of Muslims in Scotland, Germany and Australia as far as democracy and secularism are concerned.

Finally, Yildirim (Chapter 15) explains how *laiklik* (secularism) in the legal cases brought in front of the Turkish Constitutional Court have been used to maintain a status quo, for fear of a fundamentalist revival, within, however, an increasingly changing Turkey in which *laiklik* is increasingly challenged as a state doctrine. The legal cases discussed in Yildirim's article, however, start not from theoretical debates, but from the social political interactions among religious and secular Muslims in Turkey, in cases such as the recent dismissal of the headscarf ban in Turkish public spaces.

Notes

1. It is not by chance that even the first words of the revelation to the Prophet was an imperative 'iqra': read, understand, make sense of it.
2. Of course, there are many Islamic scholars who are influential in their own way. It will be important to also refer to other traditions as well, such as the Shi'a Muslims and the relevant case of Iran. However this goes beyond the aim and scope of the present collection.

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