

Rethinking religion and political legitimacy across the Islam–West divide

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Abstract

The relationship between religion and politics is a bone of political contention and a source of deep confusion across the Islam–West divide. When most western liberals cast their gaze on Muslim societies today, what they see is deeply disconcerting. From their perspective there is simply too much religion in public life in the Arab-Islamic world, which raises serious questions for them about the prospects for democracy in this part of the world. This article critically explores the relationship between religion and political legitimacy with a geographical and cultural focus on the Muslim Middle East. The broad historical question that shapes this inquiry is: Why is religion a source of political legitimacy in Muslim societies today while in the West, broadly speaking, religion is a source of disagreement and illegitimacy?

Keywords

Muslim, religion, secularism, state

This article examines the relationship between religion and political legitimacy in the context of the contemporary Muslim Middle East. Specifically, it seeks to provide a broad historical answer to the question: Why at the start of the 21st century is religion a powerful source of political legitimacy in Muslim societies while in the West, by and large, it is a source of disagreement and hence illegitimacy?

This topic is important because the role of religion in politics is a bone of political contention and a source of deep confusion across the Islam–West divide. When most Western liberals cast their gaze on Muslim societies today, what they see is deeply disconcerting. From their perspective there is simply too much religion in the Arab-Islamic world, which raises serious questions for them about the future of political development

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in this part of the world. The visible presence of religion in the public sphere, especially of a socially conservative nature, violates a key principle of liberal democracy that requires a form of secularity to sustain the liberal democratic project.

In *Political Liberalism*, John Rawls famously noted that a political conception of justice requires that we ‘take the truths of religion off the political agenda’.¹ In Muslim societies today, however, religion is very much on the political agenda, as we have seen during and after the Arab Spring. Elections in Tunisia and Egypt brought Islamist parties to power while simultaneously revealing the weak electoral appeal of secular and liberal parties. Furthermore, an ultra-conservative Salafist movement emerged as an important element in the politics of the Arab-Islamic world. These trends raise serious questions about the future prospects for liberal democracy in Muslim societies. How can we begin to make sense of this topic?

The great Islam–West divide: Religion and politics

In 2007, the Gallup research firm published the most comprehensive survey of global Muslim opinion. Based on 6 years of polling in 35 countries that represent more than 90% of the world’s Muslim population, it found widespread compatibility of values between Western and Muslim societies in terms of support for human rights, basic freedoms, democracy and yes, even gender equality. Substantial majorities, including the most conservative Muslim societies (73% of Saudis, 89% of Iranians, 94% of Egyptians), believe that men and women should have equal rights. ‘[S]ubstantial majorities in nearly all nations surveyed’, Gallup reported, ‘say that if drafting a constitution for a new country, they would guarantee freedom of speech, defined as “allowing all citizens to express their opinion on the political, social, and economic issues of the day”’.² Where the West and the Islamic world differed, however, was on the relationship between religion and politics. Muslims do not believe that greater democracy and self-determination require a Western-like separation of church and state. ‘Poll data show that large majorities of respondents in the countries surveyed cite the equal importance of Islam and democracy as essential to the quality of their lives and the future progress of the Muslim world.’³

A recent comprehensive study from the respected Pew Research Forum entitled ‘The World’s Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society’ confirmed these findings. This survey, based on 38,000 interviews with Muslims in 39 countries across Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East, found that ‘most adherents of the world’s second-largest religion are deeply committed to their faith and want its teachings to shape not only their personal lives but also their societies and politics’. The majority of Muslims polled stated that ‘religious leaders should have at least some influence over political matters. And many express a desire for sharia – traditional Islamic law – to be recognized as the official law of their country.’ In Pakistan, for example, where 84% favored enshrining sharia as official law, 96% of those people also supported freedom of religion.⁴

How can we make sense of these poll data which, from a western liberal perspective, are deeply perplexing? A comprehensive answer is beyond the scope of this article but one approach that can add clarity to this confusion lies in revisiting two key moments in history that set the Islamic world and the West along different development trajectories.

The crisis of religion–state relations in early-modern history

At the origins of most human civilizations, political authority and religious authority were closely intertwined. Mark Lilla has suggested that ‘political theology’ is the default position of all early human communities as they try to make sense of the relationship between religion and politics and the natural order of the world that surrounds them.⁵ We get a hint of this from Plato. In his recounting of the trial of Socrates we learn that one of the charges against Socrates was his dissenting religious views, which were deemed to be heretical by the citizens of Athens. Western philosophy, in other words, begins with this tension.

In the modern era, most of the great philosophers in the Western canon were deeply interested in religion. From Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau to Hegel, Mill and Marx, all wrote extensively about the relationship between religion, politics and society. The philosopher Leo Strauss, drawing on a phrase coined by Baruch Spinoza, referred to this as the ‘theologico-political problem’ of modern philosophy which ‘remained *the* theme of my studies’, he wrote, from the very beginning.⁶ The question that is germane for this discussion is a historical one: How did the divine nexus between God, human beings and society gradually erode in the case of Latin Christendom, leading to the gradual separation of religion and state and the rise of political secularism? Furthermore, what are the comparative lessons today for explaining the Islam–West divide with respect to the role of religion as a source of political legitimacy?

In his influential book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the Modern World*, Samuel Huntington argued that Christianity had a built-in secular orientation. This, he claimed, was one reason why western civilization was distinct from non-western civilizations, particularly Islam. ‘Western Christianity . . . is historically the single most important characteristic of Western civilization’, he wrote.⁷ For Huntington, western culture is unique precisely because it has incorporated secularism and liberal values as part of its civilizational ethos from the beginning. ‘God and Caesar, church and state, spiritual and temporal authority, have been a prevailing dualism in Western culture.’⁸ Similarly, he suggested that ‘a sense of individualism and a tradition of rights and liberties’ are unique to Western civilization and thus ‘The West was West long before it was modern’.⁹

The historian Nikki Keddie disagrees with Huntington. She has written that the assumption of very close religion–state relations in Islam, in contrast to the Western experience, is deeply problematic because it ignores the fact that religion and state were closely intertwined for long periods of time in two of the three major branches of Christianity, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. In the latter we find the phenomenon of Caesaro-papism, in which the emperor was the head of both state and Church. Moreover, Keddie suggests that in pre-modern times Christianity and Islam had similar levels of religion–state entwinement, and that a careful and comprehensive scholarly investigation of this topic would likely reveal this. To date, such a comparative scholarly examination of, for example, religion–state relations in King Henry VIII’s England in the 1530s and Sultan Suleiman I of the Ottoman Empire or Shah Ismail I of the Iranian Safavid throne (all of whom ruled at the same time) has not been undertaken. Keddie’s prediction is that such a study would reveal some

surprises and challenge many of our unexamined assumptions about religion-state relations. She writes that the 'differences are not all in the direction of greater political power for Islam than for the Christian Church' and that 'de facto, the medieval relationship between religion and state was a standoff between the Muslim Middle East and the Christian West, with Christian institutions stronger in some ways and more in others than Islamic ones'.¹⁰

Keddie's observation reminds us that the history of secularism in the West is very long, complicated and generally misunderstood in Western intellectual debates (especially when making cross-comparisons with Islam). Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*¹¹ is a good place to start the discussion. His powerful study of secularism has its limitations, however, especially for those interested in the comparative study of secularism at a global level. In a detailed commentary on the analytical and methodological strengths and weaknesses of Taylor's book on secularism, Philip Gorski has noted that 'Taylor has relatively little to say about how historical conjunctures, institutional constellations and path dependencies led to divergent national trajectories in church/state relations, not because he is unaware of such variations, but because secularity 1 [the removal of religion from public spaces] is not his primary object of interest'.¹²

The work of José Casanova on secularism is more useful for this discussion. He argues that four discernible social trends emerged in early-modern Europe and had secularizing consequences for the West: (1) the rise of modern capitalism; (2) the rise of modern nation-states and nationalism; (3) the Scientific Revolution; and, most importantly, (4) the Protestant Reformation and the Wars of Religion during the 16th and 17th centuries.¹³ This last development is central to the rise of political secularism, especially in the Anglo-American tradition, and is particularly helpful in illuminating the question of religion-state relations in Muslim societies.

Post-Reformation Europe saw the emergence of new debates about religious toleration not only between Roman Catholics and Protestants, but, critically, among the various Protestant sects. In an age of gross intolerance, most Christian denominations were interested in enforcing religious uniformity on their societies, each claiming exclusive knowledge of God's will on earth and warning of the dangers of social disorder and chaos if religious toleration were allowed to flourish. In brief, religious toleration and political stability were thought to be negatively correlated. Uniformity of religious practice in the public sphere and the need for an established state religion were widely believed to be a prerequisite for peace, order and prosperity. This was the dominant view up to the late 17th century, supported by almost every major philosopher, politician and commentator.¹⁴

It was left to John Locke to rethink the relationship between toleration and political order. In his famous *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1685), Locke rejected his earlier support for the firm union of Church and state and posited a new solution to the core political problem plaguing Europe. Religious pluralism in the public sphere and political stability were indeed compatible, Locke argued, on the condition that people 'distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion and . . . settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other'.¹⁵ In other words, a soft form of political secularism was required.

The key interpretive point here is that political secularism emerged in England as the direct result of an existential crisis tearing the country apart. This conflict had been raging for many years and without a solution, Locke affirmed, Europe would not know peace, prosperity, or stability. The colossal size of this crisis cannot be overstated. Without a resolution to the religious question, the self-destruction of the West was a very real possibility. The future political stability of the Western world hung in the balance. Political secularism thus emerged in the Anglo-American tradition out of the need to negotiate and resolve an existential threat. It was intimately and indelibly connected to these transformative events in the early-modern period of Europe. As Charles Taylor has noted, ‘the origin point of modern Western secularism was the Wars of Religion; or rather, the search in battle-fatigue and horror for a way out of them’.¹⁶ In short, the idea of a separation between Church and state originated as a political solution to an existential dilemma. A contrast between this picture and the case of the Muslim world, with respect to the relationship between religious toleration and political order, is most illustrative.

Relative Muslim toleration

Historians are in broad agreement that, comparatively speaking, in the pre-modern period Muslim societies were generally more tolerant than Christendom of religious pluralism.¹⁷ The emphasis here is on the pre-modern era. The fact that until the mid-20th century, for example, the city of Baghdad had a population that was one third Jewish, speaks to this point. It is not suggested here that the Muslim world was a bastion of liberal tolerance as we understand it today or that minorities were never persecuted; far from it. Rather, the argument is simply that because of greater religious toleration in the pre-modern era, Muslim societies and empires did not historically face the same all-consuming wars of religion and debates over religious toleration and political order that were so central to early-modern European political history. Comparatively speaking, Sunni–Shia relations and the treatment of religious minorities were far more tolerant in the Muslim world than in Europe over the last millennium, a fact acknowledged by Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy* and by Arnold Toynbee in his *A Study of History*, to cite two authors from the Western canon.¹⁸

The key political point that flows from this fact of relative Muslim tolerance (in contrast to centuries of pre-modern Christian intolerance) is that no burning political questions emerged between state and society where religion was the key, all-consuming and overriding bone of political contention. As a result, no political dynamic emerged within Muslim societies necessitating the development of intellectual or moral arguments favoring religion–state separation as a way out of an existential political dilemma in the same way these arguments developed and were so critical to the rise of secularism in Europe during the 17th century. In contrast to the Western experience, religion was not a source of controversy in political life.

The primary threats to the socio-political order in Muslim societies were the corruption and nepotism of the royal court, natural famines and disasters, and most importantly foreign invasion – first the crusades of the 11th to 13th centuries, followed by the Mongol invasion of 1258 (which ended the Abbasid Caliphate), and the Castilian reconquest

of the Iberian Peninsula in 1492. Such external dangers only increased in the modern period with Russian, French, British and later American penetration, colonialism and imperialism (to varying degrees depending on the country, region and time frame in question). Due to this significantly different historical experience with respect to religious toleration – and this is key to understanding the relationship between Islam and secularism – *Muslim societies never had the need to think about secularism* in the same way the West did, for no pressing existential crisis resulting from debates on religion–state relations existed where a concept like secularism might be posited as the solution to a pressing political dilemma.¹⁹

Moreover, as Noah Feldman has argued in *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State*, religion–state relations in the Muslim world were far more stable and amicable than they were in the West.²⁰ For over a millennium, religion played a constructive role as an agent of socio-political stability and predictability. In contrast to the European experience, where disputes over religion in the post-Reformation period became a source of deep conflict, in the Muslim world religion, and the scholars who interpreted it, managed to place restrictions on the personal whims and ambitions of the caliphs and sultans by forcing them to recognize religious limits to their rule in exchange for conferring legitimacy on the state. In short, the rulers were not above the law, as they later became during the 20th century, but they were often constrained by it, thus limiting autocracy and arbitrary rule. Religion–state relations in the Muslim world have thus bequeathed different historical lessons and memories, where believers view religion (properly understood and interpreted) not as an ally of political tyranny and a cause of conflict, but as a possible constraint on political despotism, a source of social cohesion and stability, and a potential ally in promoting social justice. According to Feldman, this partly explains why demands for a greater role for religion in politics have a sympathetic audience in the Muslim world today (where Islamists are not in power, as they are in Iran and Sudan). This brings us to the modern period.

Secularism and its modern discontents

In the past 200 years, the Muslim world's experience with secularism has been largely negative. It is important to appreciate that in Europe secularism was an indigenous and gradual process evolving in conjunction with socio-economic and political developments while supported by intellectual arguments – and, critically, by religious groups – that eventually sank deep roots within its political culture. By contrast, the Muslim experience has been marked by the perception of secularism as an alien ideology imposed from the outside, first by colonial and imperial invaders, then by local elites who came to power during the post-colonial period. In short, secularism in Europe was largely a bottom-up process intimately connected to ongoing debates within civil society, while in Muslim societies secularism was largely a top-down process driven first by the colonial state and then by the post-colonial one.²¹ As a result, secularism in the Muslim world has suffered from weak intellectual roots and, with a few exceptions, has never penetrated the mainstream of Muslim societies.

Furthermore, most states in the Muslim world by the end of the 20th century were political, economic and moral failures. A pattern of state–society relations unfolded in

the post-colonial era that further impugned the reputation of secularism. An autocratic modernizing state – often backed by external powers – suffocated civil society, stymied public debate and crushed political dissent, thereby forcing oppositional activity into the mosque and inadvertently contributing to the rise of political Islam. A set of top-down, forced modernization, secularization and Westernization policies by the state – within a short span of time – generated widespread social and psychological alienation and dislocation. Rapid urbanization, changing cultural and socio-economic relationships coupled with increasing corruption, economic mismanagement, rising poverty, and income inequality undermined the legitimacy of the state. These developments reflected negatively on secularism, because the ruling ideologies of many post-colonial regimes in the Muslim world were openly secular and nationalist.

Thus, for a generation of Muslims growing up in the post-colonial era, despotism, dictatorship and human rights abuses came to be associated with secularism. Muslim political activists who experienced oppression at the hands of secular nationalist governments logically came to regard secularism as an ideology of repression. This observation applies not only to Iran under the Shah but also to Tunisia under Ben Ali, Egypt under Mubarak, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Syria under Assad and many other Muslim-majority countries in the latter half of the 20th century.

The flip side of this development is that religion became a source of refuge and a marker of identity for many Arabs and Muslims. As the legitimacy of the secular state declined, the legitimacy of religion increased as an alternative paradigm that some believed could remedy the problems facing Muslim societies in the modern age. Summarizing this trend Vali Nasr has noted:

Secularism in the Muslim world never overcame its colonial origins and never lost its association with the postcolonial state's continuous struggle to dominate society. Its fortunes became tied to those of the state: the more the state's ideology came into question, and the more its actions alienated social forces, the more secularism was rejected in favor of indigenous worldviews and social institutions – which were for the most part tied to Islam. As such, the decline of secularism was a reflection of the decline of the postcolonial state in the Muslim world.²²

The political implications that flow from these developments are of tremendous significance. The decline of secular politics and the rise of a religious consciousness in Muslim societies at the end of the 20th century have deeply transformed the political culture of Muslim societies. The affirmation of a specific Islamic identity among significant segments of society including the ability of religious-based parties and activists to engage in mass mobilization and to win democratic elections has special implications for democratic theory and the political trajectory that Muslim societies will follow.

Conclusion

Broadly speaking, it is these two developments and political transformations that have deeply shaped the relationship between religion and politics across the Islam–West

divide. They have produced different historical lessons which have been passed down through history and which form the backdrop to an understanding of this topic. But this is not the end of the story.

In the case of Muslim societies, by the end of the 20th century and into the early 21st century, religion has come to be associated with political power. The 1979 Iranian Revolution was the first case, but there are other examples that one can point to: the National Islamic Front in Sudan in 1989, the Taliban in the mid-1990s in Afghanistan, the AK Party in Turkey in 2002 and more recently Ennahda in Tunisia in 2011 and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2012. These political experiences, as diverse and different as they are, will shape how Muslims in these societies perceive and understand the relations between religion and politics in the years to come.

Notes

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