

The politics of secularism

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Today I am going to talk about secularism. Secularism is a language of politics that has become global. Discussions of secularism are global discussions. What it means to be *laiklik* in Turkey differs from what it means to be *laic* in France or secular in the United States. There is no agreement as to the proper translation of the term 'secularism' into Arabic: it is sometimes translated as '*ilmaniyah* (from '*ilm*, science) or as '*alamaniyah* (from '*alam*, world). Others argue that it is more accurately rendered by *dunyawiyah*, or worldly, mundane and temporal. These difficulties in translating suggest a complicated and interesting history.

In the West questions involving "religion" are often pushed aside. The terms of public discussion are such that religion is understood as (at best) irrelevant to politics, or (at worst) a threat to public order. This consensus about religion emerged from European history and experience. For many years to question it was considered nonsensical. The conviction that religion should be privatized was understood to be part of modernity. The privatization of religion is 'mandated by liberal categories of thought which permeate not only political ideologies and constitutional theories but the entire structure of modern Western thought.'

Today many thinkers have reconsidered these assumptions and are talking about the importance of religion, all religions.



We live in a world of diverse commitments both inside and outside the West. It is important to understand how the category of the 'secular' and the ideology of secularism have developed, spread, and been transformed around the world. This is part of globalization. Secularism is not merely the absence of 'religion.' It is more complex than that, as suggested by the contests over the most basic questions, such as how to translate the term across languages and countries. There are many forms of secularism. And its meaning changes in the process of translating it. It refers to different things in different contexts.

One way to think about secularism is to speak of different secularist settlements. To speak of different traditions for managing relations between civil, political, and religious authorities. Secularism is not one thing. And it is not a fixed achievement of European-inspired modernity. Instead it refers to different modes of managing, remaking, and reforming religion.

Along with rethinking secularism, recent years have seen efforts to better understand how we use the term religion, and to be clear that we need to talk about religions, in the plural. This term came out of Europe's religious and political history, and Europe's imperial encounters with other societies. Today a research program is underway that is sensitive to the impact of this history. This research program does not take the categories of the secular and religious as stable or fixed. Instead, they are relational constructs that reflect to specific histories.

In sum, globalization and pluralization have shaken assumptions about the stability and universality of secularism. It has challenged the presumption that religion is or can be simply privatized and is no longer operative in modern politics.



So these categories cannot be taken for granted. Scholars need to look closely at their *meanings in use*. The idea is to account for the power relations they reflect and reproduce and for the histories that they carry into the present. Failing to attend to the politics of secularism imposes a simplistic view of world politics. This makes life easier for social scientists looking for answers in the short run, but it is costly in a world in which it is vital to explore how these categories came to be defined and enforced, at what cost, and by whom.

Let's take two examples. Europe has played a global role in recent centuries. The politics of secularism are part of that story, and part of the story of globalization. I do not think globalization and Europeanization, or Westernization, are the same thing. We should not confuse them. I will look now at the specific legacies of Europe's imperial relations for the politics of secularism in the Middle East and North Africa.

This is a complex story involving interactions between global and local forces, colonial and postcolonial history, and religious politics. Turning to the Middle East and North Africa offers a window onto the complexities that come with using a word—secularism—that emerged from Europe's religious and political history. It is a concept that has circulated—and been reinterpreted—in other contexts.

In other words, the modern secular-religious system of classification, which first emerged in the modern Christian West, has spread around the globe. And it means very different things in different contexts. How these ideas travel, and what effects they have, are important.

For example, in post-independence Tunisia secularization was tied to the attempt by the state to put down local conceptions of



community and authority in support of outside political and economic interests. *Ennahda* presented itself as an alternative, Islamically oriented vision for Tunisia. It stood against what were perceived to be historical injustices perpetrated by the regime against its people under the pressure of outside powers. *Ennahda* secured just over 40% of the Assembly's 217 seats in the recent Tunisian elections on October 23rd. The three parties holding the largest proportion of seats in the Assembly are: *Ennahda* (with 89 seats), the Congress for the Republic headed by Moncef Marzouki (29 seats), and Ettakatol (the Rally, headed by Mustapha Ben Jaafar) (20 seats). Ajmi Lourimi, a member of the Political Bureau of al-Nahdha, described the revolution as "a secular revolution. Not a secularist revolution, but secular in the sense that it was neither Islamist nor secularist."

What can that mean given our study of secularism? We can now ask: what would a democratic politics look like that does not marginalize religious and cultural identity (as in many liberal varieties of secularism)? And what would a politics look like that *also* does not identify the only source of public order in a *one particular* religious or cultural heritage (as in many forms of politicized religion)?

What if there is no basic authority, command or contract, whether secular or religious, that must be placed above questioning for ethical life to proceed? If we want to escape the cycle of violence on both sides of the secularist-religious divide we need to move away from 'both a secularism that seeks to confine faith to the private realm, *and* a vision that seeks to unite people behind one true faith.' Could this be what Lourimi meant when he described the Tunisian revolution as neither Islamist nor secularist?

Let's turn finally to Iran. In Iran under the Shah and his father secularization and modernization repressed Islamic thought and practice. The Shah's modernization sought to push aside Iran's



Islamic heritage in favor of what the government portrayed as Western and pre-Islamic traditions. Secularization became associated with an American attempt, through the proxy rule of the Shah, to *take possession* of Iran, economically, politically, and culturally. This was done in the name of U.S. economic interests, (namely, oil) and political interests (anti-communism and support for Israel).

Opposition to the Shah led to the Iranian revolution. Activists of different political persuasions, we could call them secular, religious, or neither, *all* challenged the Shah's authoritarian secularism. The Iranian revolution was not simply a religious backlash against secular modernity, as we are told in the West. It was a challenge to specific projects of secularization and modernization taken by a *specific* regime. It was a response to economic and cultural problems set in motion by that regime—the so-called White Revolution. The protestors associated the Shah with Western interference in Iran's internal affairs. This US interference dated to the 1953, when the U.S. and Britain orchestrated a coup against the democratically elected nationalist Prime Minister Mossadeq. This was known as 'Operation Ajax' and I have written about its dangerous legacies for relations between Iran and the United States.

The revolution of 1978-79 was not an attempt to return to Islamic governance. Revolutionaries of different political views opposed the shah. The revolution was an attempt to contest the shah's autocratic modernism. It was an attempt to remake the institutions and ways of life that made his regime powerful. As one scholar writes, "the goal of the Islamic Revolution...was not only to free Iranians politically from the shah but also to liberate them conceptually from Western ways of thinking." The revolutionaries fought against the Shah's state-sponsored secularist settlement. His



regime was perceived as connected to culturally distant outside interests.

When the revolution ended, many Iranians favored a non-hegemonic approach to politics. We could call it 'secular.' But it also made reference to Islamic tradition. This was a politics that was neither 'secularist' in the Shah's sense, nor 'theocratic.' We could say that the revolutionaries were in search of a politics that was *nonsecular and nontheocratic*.

From Mahatma Gandhi to Michel Foucault, many have been inspired by something like this idea. There are many possibilities for these forms of politics, as we can see today not only in Iran but also in India, in Venezuela and elsewhere. They are all about an alternative political imaginary.

To get past the secularist-religious divide requires nuanced responses to questions involving religion and politics. This careful thinking is even more needed in a world of multiple religions. The media and official circles, both in the West and outside of it, are often missing this careful thinking. Some of the most interesting politics today takes place outside of familiar oppositions of "traditional" versus "modern," and "religious" versus "secularist." These categories are often by those who seek power over others, both inside states, and between states, internationally. We need new forms of politics and new categories for a globalized world.