

## Secularizing religion and sacralizing politics

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The oppression carried out in the name of Islam in most Muslim countries, especially by the state itself, has convinced many Muslims that the only way to end religious tyranny and to institute a system of governance based in the precepts of liberal democracy, human rights, and civil liberties, is to embrace a secular humanism based in the separation of church and state, as the modern West has done.

One can—and should—learn from the successes of the West in this field. However, this way of framing the argument is problematic. For one, it implies that it is not possible to claim certain rights and liberties through an enlightened practice of Islam. Since this is not the case, Muslims who make this argument are only perpetuating the same repressive model of Islam that they claim to be rejecting. For another, separating church and state (which is what many Muslims reduce secularism to) is not the same as disentangling religion and politics. Further, it is entirely inappropriate to extend the concept of the church to Islam which is not based in an institutionalized or ordained clergy; the mosque, as someone said, is not a church. But, most importantly, if what secular Muslims want is the state's nonintervention in an individual Muslim's religious beliefs and practices, then I'm not sure why they aren't looking to their own history to advance their cause.

As we know, medieval Muslim society was very alive “to the dangers of direct coercion, or state involvement in matters of belief.” Contrary to many stereotypes, the state did not seek to enforce the practice of Islam, even though some Muslim rulers periodically did, but almost always unsuccessfully. Further, the “moral regime” of the medieval Muslim community “was at once firm on principles and distinctly inclined to forgive human weaknesses and diversity. The key note was moderation or balance, the middle way,” as exemplified in the works of al-Ghazzali (Francis Robinson, ed. *Cambridge Illustrated History: Islamic World*, Cambridge University Press, 1996: 173).

One ought not to forget this crucial aspect of Muslim history, nor the fact that the very basis of Islam, as the Qur'an itself defines it, is the absence of compulsion in religion. For submission to God (which is what “islam” means) to carry any moral weight, it has to be voluntary, not enforced. In this context, the Qur'an's designation of believing women and men as each other's *awliya* (guides) who “enjoin the right and forbid the wrong,” is not an invitation to the state (or to religious vigilantes) to enforce Islam on anyone. That so many Muslim states now perform this coercive function in the name of Islam, simply proves the extent to which we've forsaken the lessons of our own scripture and history.

Having said that, one must also recognize the difficulty of untangling religion and politics even in a secular society like the US, which has succeeded in separating the institutions of the church and state. This was illustrated by the recent decision (stayed within 24 hours) by a judge to declare the Pledge of Allegiance unconstitutional on the grounds that it contains the phrase “under God,” added by the Congress in 1954, in the early stages of the Cold war. Among others, Mr. Bush denounced the judge's decision as “ridiculous”

and affirmed that “the Almighty is very important to the life of our nation.” Indeed, he asserted, “we received our rights from God.”

One can dismiss Mr. Bush’s remarks on the grounds that he is—in liberal parlance—a right-wing Christian fundamentalist. But, as the *Detroit Free Press* noted (June 27), “‘In God We Trust’ is the official national motto, appearing on U.S. money. God is mentioned at the opening of federal court sessions, too, and even in the Declaration of Independence—although that was written prior to the Constitution.” (Incidentally, atheists cannot hold public office in Tennessee.) Similarly, the *San Francisco Chronicle* (June 27) pointed out that “Elected leaders from the president on down to a town council member swear on a Bible or with a raised hand to uphold their office ‘so help me God.’ Witnesses in court promise to tell the truth under a similar oath.” Even so, averred the paper, declaring the Pledge unconstitutional was a case of “common sense [being] trumped by . . . doctrinaire thinking” and “allegiance to absolutism.” The court, it said, had exceeded “the bounds of rationality. Its proscription of the pledge because of two words—cast in an amorphous way—makes a mockery of the very serious issue of encroachment of religion on public policy in this nation. Adherents of any faith can project their own beliefs onto the phrase ‘one nation under God’” (or, as some people are saying “gods”).

Even as papers supportive of secularism saw no contradiction in defending the pledge as written, one went so far as to declare that it really wasn’t even necessary to expunge the reference to God, since the “meaning of the word ‘God’ has become more secular” (*Detroit Free Press*). I still can’t quite figure out what this means, but it suggests that, instead of having to effect the complete erasure of religion from public life—which it has failed to do—secularism has found a way to accommodate it by desacralizing it. If God is secularized, on what basis can religion be banished from public life?

Instead of seeking to deal with repression carried out in the name of religion by trying to banish or privatize it, the solution is to interpret it in ever better ways so that it loses its repressive powers. If it is religious coercion that secular Muslims want to end, they would be better served by drawing on the Qur’an and the most exemplary moments of their own history. This might also give them the legitimacy that they will continue to lack so long as they are perceived to be hanging on uncritically to the coattails of the West.