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Religion and the state in the Arab world: an overview

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This article provides an overview of the issues addressed in a series of papers on the general theme of 'religion and the state in the Arab world' published in *Contemporary Arab Affairs* over the past 12 months. The papers were initially presented at a conference convened by the Center for Arab Unity Studies and the Swedish Alexandria Institute, held in Hamamaat, Tunisia, in November 2012. Further to his own paper on the topic (published in issue 6(4) in this journal) here Abdelilah Belkeziz identifies the purpose of the whole exercise, namely to explore a range of different perspectives on the theme. He positions these perspectives on a spectrum between two extremes: at one, he contends, the case for separation between religion and state verges on hostility to religion itself; and at the other, an exclusivist version of Islam is accorded primacy over all other considerations in the running of a state and thence political discourse. He discusses the dangers inherent in both extremes and makes the case for a model of secularism that accords space to both religion and politics in the national project.

Keywords: state–religion relations; secularism; Islamism; Arab states; Islamic movements; Caliphate; interpretation; jurisprudence

Introduction

Within the span of our modern history, we have arrived at a relationship between politics and religion that is both commendable and advantageous for the nation and the rights of those it encompasses; a relationship that cannot be denied except by the ungrateful. Disturbingly, however, another form of the relationship between politics and religion has emerged in recent times that cannot be considered commendable – to say the least. This latter version has had very many negative effects on the unity of society, of people and of the nation, as well as on social development. This seeming paradox should be no cause for surprise, given that all social and human phenomena – including the relationship between politics and religion – necessarily changes in accordance with changing circumstances. Consequently, the issue of advantage or disadvantage does not adhere to one or other of the two extremes of the relationship between religion and the state; rather, it derives from the product of interaction between the two basic elements, politics and religion, and the extent to which one subsumes the other. This relationship has different outcomes depending on the particular contextual circumstances within which it functions.

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Religion and the state: the Arab and Islamic traditions

The commendable relationship between politics and religious symbolism was manifest during the battles for Arab national independence against colonial occupation. These took place in most Arab countries, though it has been more evident in the countries of the Arab Maghreb (western Arab countries) for several reasons which will not detain us here. The battles mostly took place between the 1920s and the early 1960s, coinciding with the period of national independence movements worldwide. The commendable linkage between politics and religion was subsequently renewed during the period between the end of the 1980s and early this decade. This renewal was associated with the renewed challenge of occupation, the return of the nationalist issue to the forefront of the political project, and the emergence of resistance movements from the Islamic current, such as Hizbollah, Hamas, Al-Jihad Al-Islami, and some groups and battalions of the Iraqi resistance. The idea of *Jihad* (struggle) against the invading foreign enemy proved an effective force in mobilizing the public, garnering supporters, militarizing the youth, and rallying citizens and combatants on the two fronts of armed and popular political struggle. It also took the notion of national liberation to the level of sacred duty. No one can deny the decisive effect that political mobilization for religion and religious symbols had on achieving many victories, and accomplishing a significant portion of the missions of national struggle.

Yet a different form of linkage between politics and religion, in evidence during the same time period, and the last 30 years especially, has produced very different results, not to say actual strife, with damaging results that have yet to be healed. Let us say simply that this different form of linkage has not been in any way commendable. How can it be commendable that domestic politics employs religion in confronting political rivals from the same religious sect and the same nation, and bring what is by nature uniting and unifying, into the field of disputation over political and worldly interests wherein divisiveness and conflict are natural? The involvement of religion in political action, and in the internal struggle over power, has had a negative impact on contemporary Arab political life. It has also imposed unfamiliar rules upon political disputes, and infused into these a sectarianism that had previously been characteristic in the history of Islam and taken a toll on the unity of the *umma* (nation), and the unity of the state. This political investment in religion was not only negative in the case of groups advocating violence, as it may be believed, but also was thus even in the case of moderate religious political groups. This is because this political investment did not stop at creating a state of political polarization, but added to that an indigenous and cultural polarization that has infused and pressured political life entirely, and generated the phenomenon of extreme and maximalist discourses, and values of mutual repudiation and exclusion, etc!

What makes the link between religion and politics commendable in the case of national liberation, and negative in that of internal political strife? In the first case, the advantage of the link is due to the fact that the struggle takes place *between a whole nation and an occupier*, where religion is a unifying and bonding factor. Thus the call for struggle will have its own nurturing environment, and religion will have a great effect in stimulating determination and in uniting through consensus. In the second case, however, the disadvantage is due to the fact that the struggle takes place *within the nation* itself – between its opposing forces contending for power and sovereignty. Certainly, invoking religion within this divided environment leads to its transformation from an inclusive and unifying force, into a mere political ideology with which one group confronts another.

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When talking about the relationship between religion and the state, the discourse has to be very clear and this requires scrutinizing terminology, avoiding generalities and mediocre 'postulates', and thence identifying what is required with accurate expression, in order to avoid ambiguity, confusion or error. The need for clarity acquires more importance with the gravity, sensitivity and subtlety of the subject under discussion – as is the case with the one in which we are engaged here – the relationship between religion and the state. Any position in this regard has many significant consequences. Very often, these consequences surpass the realm of opposing opinions to what can be actually dangerous, when the discourse about the issue (religion and the state) becomes dominated by clannishness, extremes of opinion, claims of infallibility of views and portraying opponents as plain wrong – perhaps even defaming and inciting against them – a situation not dissimilar to that we have experienced for the past 30 years!

To be specific, when we ask ourselves about the role of religion in the state, and whether the effects are positive or negative – the answers will not be apparent unless we are clear about what we mean by religion. What is meant here is not *any religion*, but Islam exclusively is the subject of this discourse. Further, our concern is therefore with specific aspects of this religion. Firstly, religion in this case means the Quranic text; second, it means the Prophet's *Sunna* (the Prophet's way) – thus religion basically means Muslims' thought, all of their generations, and all the institutions they have founded as religious institutions. Hence, if we mean by religion the texts of the Holy Quran, we know – unquestionably – that there is no Quranic jurisprudence for the political issue, and that it embodies nothing that forces upon Muslims a specific system of governance. Instead, it has left it up to them to choose their own political system themselves. Alternatively, if by religion we mean the *Sunna* (way) of the Honourable Prophet, then the 'state' that he founded in Medina, he founded according to his own jurisprudence, and not according to a binding text; and, after him, he did not compel Muslims to follow a specific system of governance. Yet if by religion we mean, throughout our history, those amongst the jurisprudential and 'scientific' elites who debased themselves to the position of 'spokespersons of religion', then those were not a unified body. They were dispersed into different sects and groups that beheld each other as erring, and did not share the same opinion on politics and the state.

Therefore, there is no sense in asking ourselves about the role of religion in the state if religion – Quranic text, *Hadith* (sayings of the Prophet) and *Sirah* (biography of the Prophet) – did not specify this role and show it to Muslims in the same way as it specified the duties related to belief and obligated their performance. As for what the role of religion is in the state according to the opinion of Muslim jurisprudents and theologians, this is a matter about which it can rightly be said that theirs is not a binding opinion because it originates from politics and the temporal, not from religion. This is also because such jurisprudence may be right or wrong, and because they are men and we are men who say what is reasonable and commendable, and because their jurisprudence had been associated with historical circumstances of their own and necessities of life suitable for them. This being the case, it is not prudent to view their sayings as applicable to Muslims at all times and places, unless we make a wrong assumption and deem them infallible; an assumption that cannot be held true by a sane mind!

However, asking the question about the role of religion in the state today, and connecting religion with Islamic movements, or considering them a representative of religion, is to commit a double mistake. It is to hand over to these movements a clerical role that they do not have; a role which is even alien to Islam and its teachings. In addition, it

ignores that these movements are political ones with mundane demands even if they use religious terminology for this purpose by way of exploitation. And the problem is that most contemplation on the relationship of religion with the state immediately becomes engaged with the discourse on Islamic movements; this is an intellectual and methodological pitfall that has unfavourable consequences. Though the mere claim by Islamic movements to speak in the name of 'the Islamic reference' calls for reflecting on the problematics of the link of religion with the state – given the outcome of their intrusion in politics in the name of religion – because the issue of the link is nevertheless wider than just reflecting on 'partisan Islam', as limiting this issue to partisan Islam cannot but mean that we are reflecting on the relationship of politics with the state. Thus we notice the extent of confusion over 'the role of religion in the state'.

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There exists an *intermediary* in the relation between any religion and its adherents. I do not mean by intermediary the intermediation that has existed between them through the clerical institutions or the monastic bodies which debased themselves to the position of spokesperson of religion and its conveyer. But rather, I mean that the supposedly direct link – whether in Islam or Protestant Christianity – is not possible because it inevitably passes through an intermediate *knowledge network of interpretation* which itself determines the meaning of religion and religious teaching within the consciousness of all believers who receive the religious message discourse. This hypothesis is based on a contention (in hermeneutics) which says that the religious 'given' is not clear in itself, is not direct, and does not present itself in a clear way and with a sense of generality that produces in the minds of all adherents one definite meaning over which there is no discord. So the recipient – according to the teachings of contemporary hermeneutics – participates in constructing the meaning of the text he receives through the way he understands it, or the way he interprets it. Consequently, there exists no congruence in understanding texts amongst people; otherwise, there would have been no difference and variance among people within Islam or outside it.

Several factors control interpretation, that is, control this intermediary knowledge network between believers and the sacred text: the interpreter's knowledge, intellectual or cognitive standards; conditions of time and space in which interpreting takes place; interests – explicit or implicit – behind the act of interpretation whether conscious or subconscious; the objective needs that lead into giving preponderance to one type of understanding relative to another possible type; and so on.

It may also be said that the ancients were alert to this fact at an early stage, and had realized that the religious text varies in the degree to which it reveals its meaning in different instances in the text. They made rules for classifying the Quranic texts – according to the degree of clarity or obscurity of signification. For example, they distinguished between those that had a definitive and those that had a hypothetical significance. No doubt, this is true; yet what jurisprudents have done in the past is a jurisprudence bounded by the conditions of their time. Definitely, they exerted an acknowledged scientific effort in confronting the intricacies of comprehension. Yet we should not insist on adhering to this jurisprudence as if it were a transcendental sacred. We are not, as well, at liberty to disregard the cultural and epistemological contexts within which this jurisprudence has been produced. Moreover, this does not prevent the contemporary Islamic mind from opening up to a new and different reading of the religious text which does not insist on the terms of classical

jurisprudential interpretation, but instead it adds to it what is new in knowledge, concepts and contemporary methodologies.

And perhaps the interpretation of our ancient jurisprudents was dedicated to enabling understanding through tools with which the cognizance of Muslims could differentiate that which is clear from the rest of the religious texts. This is similar to the differentiation of theologians – for the same reasons – between the verses of the Quran which are *muhkamaat* (precise) and the ones that are *mutashaabihaat* (open for interpretation). This means in the first place that they have confined the problem of understanding to the religious text itself: which varies between definite and hypothetical, and which is sometimes easy and often difficult. The state of affairs is that the problem does not lie in the Quranic text, nor does it lie in the discrepancy within it between the two levels of significance, but rather in the reading of its recipients; for those are the ones who vary in cognizance – like all other creatures.

In this respect, our aim is not to get into a theoretical discourse about the meaning of interpretation, or its terms and conditions, nor about jurisprudence and the evolution of the way in which it is perceived. What interests us is to accentuate the complexity of the relationship with the religious text, for Muslims, as well as for others who adhere to other monotheistic religions. Our interest is also to emphasize that it is inadmissible to pronounce in the name of Islam – be it now or in the past – especially when the discourse is about issues that are most controversial in the history of the community and the nation, and on which no religious ruling had been issued and as a result of which there are different interpretations, such as on the issues of the state, power, regime and the relationships of the government with religion. So, as the religious text is void of teachings specific to this public domain, then viewing it as quite easy to talk about such teachings in the name of religion, or from a religious standpoint, is a form of fabrication and creation, whereby he who commits it and gets involved in it is to be held accountable due to the serious consequences ensuing from such action and involvement.

Moreover, if it is true to say – and it is true – that many of the rulings on various dealings, which are still in practice today, were not derived from a religious text, but were inferred by the Islamic intellect through jurisprudence (comparative jurisprudence; and the jurisprudence of objectives), then these are viewed as rules not coming from heaven, but from the opinions of people on Earth. Consequently, these rules are not perceived to be sacred, as the sacred Quran, and it is possible – not to say essential – to amend them when needed and when the requirements of the development of Islamic integration calls for this. In the same vein, it is the general view that political jurisprudence is among those bodies of law requiring definitive amendment, and has to be considered a jurisprudence specific to the circumstances under which it has been issued.

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He who talks about an Islamic state, or 'a civil state whose reference is Islamic', or about applying the rules of Shari'a (religious law) and so on, forgets that he does not talk about a topic that is a matter of consensus in vision and meaning for all Muslims. Here, we are not discussing whether it is possible or legitimate to base a state on religion; instead, we are trying to argue against a discourse – seriously rampant at the moment – that unjustly deems it easy to talk, as if about something intuitive, of issues which are neither intuitive nor axiomatic.

He who talks about an Islamic state, talks about a utopia; whether he imagines it similar to the 'state' of Almedina, or the Caliphate or the Sultanate upon which the

jurisprudents of legitimate politics had theorized and bestowed the cloak of the Caliphate in order to dress it up with religious legitimacy. It is no more possible to talk about a state of this type during the age of the modern state, for this is not the age of prophets, or the Rightly Guided Caliphs, or sultans of the type known by classical Islamic states. Indulging in a claim about the Islamic state is a kind of impossible nostalgia that deceives a schizoid consciousness separated from history and reality. Perhaps the only function of this indulgence is appealing to the emotions of believers through a heaven on Earth to gain their allegiance for a political project attired in religious symbolism.

He who talks about 'a civil state whose reference is Islamic' is the same as the one who talks about a religious state governed by secularism; he associates the non-associable in a mixed and hybrid way. This dexterity in hybrid-naming thrives today, more than ever before, following a silent struggle over the meaning of the civil state: between those who meant by it the non-religious state and the ones who meant the state that is not controlled by military forces. Yet, distinguishing themselves from the military state was not sufficient for both the contenders in front of their public as they confront those who argue for the civil state – that has only one meaning in modern history. Therefore, they sought supplements for the verification of identity, to generate by this the claim of 'the civil state whose reference is Islamic'. This claim resembles many others such as 'The Islamic Economy' and 'The Islamic Nuclear Bomb', etc!

As for the call for the implementation of the provisions of the Islamic Shari'a, this ignores two interrelated issues. First, the provisions of Shari'a are open to interpretation and Muslims have interpreted them since the time of the companions of the Prophet – and their opinions differed on their implementation (note the position of Omar Ibn El Khattab regarding the prescribed penalties in the year of Alramadh, and his position regarding the division of the booty in Surat Al-Anfal, i.e. not to divide the two lands among the combatants). Interpretation is jurisprudence and could be proved right or wrong. Thus, the implementation of the jurisprudence, in fact, becomes an implementation of an interpretation of the Sharia interpretations; that is, it finally becomes a human jurisprudence that is not infallible and cannot conform with the text. Second, Muslims follow different doctrines in politics and general jurisdiction. Muslim Sunna differ from Muslim Shiites in their conception of the ruling system, in deciding to whom the rule will be handed, and what the origin of legitimacy in this rule is, what and who is the source of power, and what the type of the relationship between the religious and the temporal in this rule is. There are other sects that have different stances on the issue of the ruling system such as Zaydism, Ibadism and the branches of Ismailism. Therefore, it is impossible for anyone to talk about the implementation of the Shari'a provisions with utmost confidence as if it were something that necessarily conforms to the text and gives the same meaning for all Muslim groups.

Anyone who talks today, about the relationship between religion and the state in an attempt to insist on the 'Islamism of the state' or its Islamization, or basing its workings on the provisions of religion, is claiming for himself a prophetic role that he does not have, the heavens have not entrusted to him and he has not inherited from the Prophet. Thus, this talk is merely an opinion of his own, and a political view which he has assumed for himself and decided to confer with the apparel of transcendental legitimacy by weaving the sacred and religious into the construction of political discourse. And if the one who talks about the issue has the right, in politics, to be inspired by the history of Islam – as no one is entitled to deny him this right – he does not have the right to present it to people *as* religion or the position of religion (i.e. Islam) on politics,

authority, and the state, as many claim. Instead, it should be presented as an attempt to draw inspiration by borrowing and making use of the experience of Arabs and Muslims throughout history. Moreover, it is not binding for anyone except those who are convinced by it, as it is neither a Quranic revelation, nor one of the religious obligations. Persisting with the identification between religion and the political project will only lead to antagonism between Muslims who follow different doctrines, and transform the lives of citizens into a testing ground for new political utopias!

The state and religion: perspectives on secularism

We are confident that the best relationships between religion and the state are those which maintain *their distinctness* from each other. Thus it leaves no chance for an intertwinement between the temporal and the religious whereby either one of them may impose tutelage on the other. This idea that we are trying to defend here is the quintessence of a prolonged humanistic and intellectual observation of the exorbitant prices paid by both the state and religion for instituting interpenetration and identification between them during certain well-known moments of political history. The intervention of clerics in politics and the state, or the intervention of politicians therein in the name of religion, have brought disasters for the societies concerned, their stability, and civil peace amongst societal members and communities. Similarly, the intervention of the state in religion has brought about the same catastrophes: be it in the name of controlling it or in the name of casting it away or eliminating it. Our Arab societies today do not need to live through such catastrophes and suffer their destructive effects within both religion and the state.

It is true what Sheikh Rashed El-Ghannouchi (2013) says: that the realm of the state is what is public, and the realm of religion is what is private. The realm of the state is that of public interests that are worldly and variable, and which are subject to deliberation and agreement after a series of struggles over them, and mutual concessions and compromises. Whereas the realm of religion is belief that does not change under the effect of interests because it is related to the world of what is absolute – not to the world of what is relative. In the public realm (i.e. politics, the state), the principle of accountability is general, and goes back to the people and their representatives. Whereas in the private realm of belief, God alone is the one who may hold us responsible or answerable, because the relationship of the believers with Him is direct wherein no monastic mediation intervenes. He who mixes up between the two realms treats unjustly both religion and the state – the particularity of each of them – thereby elevating what is relative to the rank of the absolute, and lowering what is absolute to the level of the relative! It is only the distinction between the two realms that preserves for each its stature in the life of the individual and the community. It preserves for belief its spiritual purity, and its function in relation to ethics and creed. It even makes possible founding politics as a public realm, and a space for competition over programmes of social change.

When identification and exact matching between the religious sphere and the political and state spheres happened during the Middle Ages, with grievous costs ensuing, this was before the establishment of the modern state. By modern state, is meant the national state wherein authority abides by a *social contract* and a main statute for the state (constitution), which checks the power of the ruler and subjects him to the rule of law. The constitution as well distributes power among institutions that have separate authority, subjects executive power to legislative control and legal accountability, consolidates the autonomy of the judiciary system and its authority,

and expresses the general will of the people as the source of sovereignty and power. Historically, this form of (modern) state was established during the period when inter-penetration existed between religion and the state: totally in the case of a theocratic state, and partially in a Sultanate. It is believed that the modern state is no more a European or Western particularity, but rather it has become a universal fact. And we are a part of modern humanity, and of modern nations from which we do not differ except by the stage of development. And we have realized, two centuries ago, that our only way to develop is through founding this modern state. This has requirements from which no one turns away except the doomed, or the one caught in a schism, whose body lives in one age, while his brain exists in a different age!

Perhaps the Islamic movements exaggerated, some 50 or so years ago, when they identified religion with politics (the state) throughout their political discourse, and in the writings of their sheikhs and advocates, for historical or political reasons which imposed on them such excess in tightening the relationship between religion and politics. And perhaps among these reasons was the ongoing presence of colonial authorities ruling in some states where these movements originated, or the rise of ruling regimes fanatically against religious thought and religious groups, and strongly biased toward secularism of the Jacobin and Kemalist types. Yet such excessiveness is no longer justified today, given the retreat of the negative attitude towards religious culture amongst modern political and cultural elites, and at a time when all or most of these elites have acknowledged the right of these Islamic movements to legal political activity in their capacity as political parties. The right policy today vis-à-vis this 'calamity' of excessiveness or in extreme differentiation is to adopt a middle course. Adoption of the extremes will breed nothing but a slide of Arab political life into the unknown, wherein the relationship between the different forces is based on mutual estrangement and exclusion.

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In Arab societies today, the argument about the question of religion and the state takes two deviant forms. The first is raising the political and the state realm to the status of the transcendental, and perceiving them through religious standards – this is the position of fundamentalist Islamism. The second is transforming secularism from political neutrality towards religion into a position hostile to religion, that is, to a new doctrine! This is the position of the (Arab) Jacobin fundamentalist Secularists. These two deviations, intellectual ones, establish grounds for a prolonged political dispute with unknown consequences.

Let us consider the first intellectual deviation. Bringing politics and the state out from the civil realm into the religious realm represents a new basis for the meaning of the state that has no basis in Islam, even if it takes place in the name of Islam! This transforms the state into some new creature that owns a guidance message on Earth. It becomes a watchman of people's beliefs, taking charge of performing the role of 'Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice', and directing people's lives according to a religious standard in which only rulers and those who serve as their spokesmen have the right to define and impose on society as God's law, or as the only correct interpretation of God's law. In this case, the state is no more a tool commissioned by society to manage public affairs; instead, it is rendered one of the tools of religion, which assumes performing the job of advocacy!

There is no need for us to emphasize two issues in the history of Islam which are known to those who are familiar with this history, they are even known to the majority

of Muslims – at least those who are in the circle of the Sunnah (orthodox sect of Islam). The first is that prophecy was sealed by the prophecy of Muhammad bin Abd Allah (ﷺ), and that after him no one has the right to resume advocacy, otherwise he will be claiming for himself a role too big and noble for him. The second issue is that politics and the state are not part of the fundamentals (i.e. dogma), but they belong to the branches of endeavour that fall within the realm of jurisprudence; the faith of the believer and his being a Muslim does not depend on his position on these branches, or on their position vis-à-vis him.

Within the first issue, we are faced by extremely serious problems, because those who hold the message of religion as if it were politics, in the name of a religious duty which they claim for themselves, commit two mistakes that reinforce one another. They claim for themselves roles that were not allotted by the divine messages except to prophets and messengers, which are advocacy, proclamation and urging people to be guided by the teachings of religion. The only explanation for assuming these roles is that there exist those who assign themselves as delegates to reopen what falls exclusively within the prerogatives of Prophethood! Then they call upon non-religious tools (i.e. the party, the state, etc.) to perform what they consider religious advocacy, thus they stain religion with the transgressions of politics and the evils of its contentions and disputes, and they design their understanding of religion to fit their political interests! And while committing each of these two mistakes, they bring about damage for religion, the biggest – and worst – of which is producing a church that allots to itself roles that the Christian Church used to allot to itself during the Middle Ages. This was rejected by the scholars of Islam who were steadfast to the independence of theology from politics from the time of Imam Malek to that of Sheikh Muhammad Abduh. That is, throughout the history of Islam, it has been decided that the function of scholars – scholars of religion and not the partisan Islamists – is good advice; this does not fall under the rubric of 'advocacy' and forcing people to adopt a certain opinion under the pretext of being the opinion of *Shar'* (religious law). Hence, in his refutation to the claim of religious power, the reputable scholar Muhammad Abduh went to the extent that he considered the jobs of the Mufti and Sheikh in Islam as civil jobs.

The problems with which we are confronted in the second issue are no less significant than those confronted in the first one. Digression in (or conflation between) power, the state and the scope of belief is a serious matter in Islam (at least with respect to the Sunnite sect, as long as the Imamate is a cornerstone of Islam according to the Imami Shi'a, except for the Zaidis) and an evident borrowing of the example of the theocratic state in the name of Islam – which denounces monasticism, and demolishes religious authority, as written by Mohammad Abduh. Islam left the issues of Muslims a matter of consultation among them and did not require the establishment of a state as conditional for their faith, nor considered their Imam the Caliph of Allah on Earth: as the Caliphs and their scholars wrongly claimed since the Abbasids rose to power! Exaggerated ideas of foreign (from Al-Kawarij) or clerical European origins have infiltrated our field of discussion for more than half a century, and the 'Indian Islam' was its 'gateway', exemplified in the idea of 'governorship'. These ideas presented themselves, and still do, as the vision of Islam towards the state and the system of governance, and this has nothing to do with Islam. In fact, these ideas have deemed Muslim societies faithless, and Jahilia (pertaining to the pre-Islamic era), and accordingly, it is legitimate to force them into Islam by brutal force! Muslim blood was shed and is still being shed due to the idea of *takfir* (deeming others as infidels) and the 'Rules of Apostasy' applied to enemies who do not share these exaggerated views. Even the political Islamic forces

which joined the 'faithless' democratic game were also subject to being viewed as infidel, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, the extremist fundamentalism has thrown our societies and nations into a dark tunnel due to this serious deviation in understanding the relationship between religion and state.

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In our contemporary political culture and Arab political communities there exists a form of secularism that is no less dangerous than the *takfiri* fundamentalists in terms of the results it brings, even if it is presented differently. This form of exaggerated secularism could be described as the French concept of secularism (*Laïcisme*), which is tantamount to anti-religion. Mohammed Arkoun has described it as akin to the French Jacobin model. This type of secularism has a philosophic positivist or atheist content; thus it seems to be a new philosophy or a new doctrine, similar to religious doctrines, even if it is antagonistic to religion, instead of a political philosophy that insists on the independence of its realm from that of religion and the state. In its exact theoretical conception, as in its historical reality, secularism has meant the neutrality of the state towards religion and non-interference in it, on the basis of the independence of the field of politics and the state (public), on the one hand, and the field of religion (private), on the other. By contrast, the extremist version of *Laïcisme* –means hostility towards religion and beyond that, seeking to exclude and marginalize it, restrict religious freedom, and restrain the practice of faith! If it were crystal clear, for any knowledgeable person, that this meaning disagrees with the original meaning of secularism, as well as contradicts and denounces it, then this person takes the concept of secularism beyond its original significance and renders it similar in its meaning to that of atheism!

Secularism is not a philosophy on religion, doctrine and faith that takes a cognitive position regarding religion: whether positively or negatively, but it is the outcome of the contemporary political philosophy that produced the field of independent politics and equipped it with the modern rules that make it a field of civilized civic competition and – before that – a field of loyal representation, and free expression of demands and objectives. Therefore, secularism does not fight religion or support it, but takes a neutral position towards it when it is attributed to public affairs. Nonetheless, in the scope of private and personal issues in religion, which is its natural scope, there is no contradiction between being secular and religious at the same time, as both descriptions include two different areas of life: the public area and the private area, so that confusing between them is impermissible in the perspective of secularism. We have often heard about Christian secular forces, for example, that seemed – to many amongst us who adhere to the perspective of controversy between religion and secularism – a hybrid incoherent structure between two inconsistent extremes!

Indeed, the alteration of the original meaning of secularism and its replacement with another meaning that implies hostility towards religion, or at a minimum leads to a collision with religion, is an inheritance from the French Revolution and its Jacobin extremist era that witnessed the emergence of both tendencies of positivism and *Laïcisme* in the 19th century and their negative stance towards religion. The Bolshevik Revolution inherited this oppositionist tendency, among other things, from Jacobin political values, such as violence. Moreover, an atheist philosophical tendency in 19th-century historical materialism, influenced by the Feuerbach perspective on religion and Christianity, compounded this trend. Yet, secularism in the rest of Europe (outside France and Soviet Russia) and in the American continent was understood differently. Unfortunately,

most of the Arab secularists – who are liberals or leftists – have been influenced by either French Jacobin secularism or Soviet socialist secularism. (Few of them were influenced by Turkish Kemalist secularism, which is not that different from these two in its opposition to religion.) Yet, other Arab secularists, significant in number and influence, did not fall into the trap of the Jacobin and Bolshevik theories regarding religion, and continued to understand its meaning from its theoretical and philosophical basis (as prevailed in the English and German traditions) or from the political history of its implementation in the Protestant communities, mainly in Britain, the United States, Germany, and the Netherlands, and this kept them away from falling into an extremist view of the relation between religion and state.

The paradox in the Jacobin and atheist versions of secularism has drawn even non-secularists from the Islamic forces into it; thus, they continue to view it with great apprehension, as an atheistic tendency or idea so that the secularist and atheist became synonymous! The idea that settled in their minds is that secularism is an 'Atheist Philosophy' hostile towards religious faith and that its exclusion of religion from political life means excluding it from society and the nation, etc. These erroneous certainties have prevented them from seeing the substantial system of guarantees granted by secularism to freedom of belief and the practice of religious rites, as well as protecting religion from state interference in its affairs and civil institutions. No doubt, the leakage of this Jacobin perspective of secularism into the ranks of Muslims is part of a general Arab culture that has been indoctrinated by political modernity from its French centre and received from it – though to different extents – its intellectual orientation. However, there is no doubt, as well, that the anti-religious secularism in the Islamic conscience was formed as a result of two factors: the position of extremist Arab secularism in the form of Jacobism and Bolshevism and the position of the Catholic Christian environment in France that opposes the secularism of its state. In this way, the tree of secularism in France has overshadowed the other secularisms in the European forest which did not witness this severe clash between religion and state.

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Is Arab 'partisan Islam' today capable of pursuing the method followed by Christian democratic parties in contemporary European societies, and thus of reconciling with secularism and accepting it as a rule for the state and system of governance and thus discontinue the illegitimate confusion between the state and religion?

Needless to say, we do not mean by this question all Islamic political movements, but only the moderate ones among them that have renounced violence, 'reconciled with the democratic choice' and refrained from considering democracy as 'infidelity' under the pretext of consecrating the 'governorship of people' instead of the 'governorship of Allah', etc. These include parties and forces that came to power recently, or are still partners in governance, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Nahda movement in Tunisia and the Justice and Development Party in Morocco, which have in common their gradual adoption of the principles of a contemporary political system – though in different ways and to different degrees.

We may bring the question closer to our cultural and civilizational environment by re-asking it in the following way: are the Arab Islamic movements capable of pursuing the method of the Turkish Justice and Development Party in its reconciliatory position towards secularism whose governorship of the state and political system in Turkey is indisputable? We pose the question in the Turkish–Islamic context so that there will

be no claim that the model of Christian democratic parties cannot be adopted because it reflects a different social and cultural experience, especially in Western communities. Nonetheless, we can say that the Christian democratic model, which the Justice and Development Party in Turkey is trying to apply, is based on a generalizable equation that is the same equation that the Turkish Islamists are trying to apply. This equation underlies acquiring inspiration from religious values in political action and the political project, and respecting the secularity of the state, and not compromising it in the name of religion. Neither Western Christians nor Muslim Turks find anything wrong in preserving for this equation the equilibrium upon which it is based. They define themselves as politicians who interconnect with the value system of their religion, yet for them it is indisputable that they are secularists who believe that the state should not interfere in religion, and that religion should not interfere in the state. Moreover they find no contradiction in being believers and secularists simultaneously. The Islamists, in Egypt and other Arab countries, were shocked when they heard Recep Tayyip Erdoğan say that he is a Muslim and secularist at the same time, because their dormant consciousness could not be receptive to such ideas!

In the approach to this issue, we tend to believe that the Islamic movements in the Arab world are not ready to go through the same path of development that the Turkish Justice and Development Party pursued, for many reasons, objective and subjective. These reasons are related to the *difference in development* of the political, economic and cultural structures in Turkey and in Arab societies. They are related, as well, to *disparities in the levels of intellectual and cultural preparedness*, and the levels of development of political culture, between the Turkish Islamic movement and Arab Islamic movements.

The values of the modern civil state in Turkey took root, during the last 80 years, and transformed into a kind of general political culture in society. Whatever may be said in relation to the violence of the Kemalist secularism against religious institutions, which undoubtedly existed, its traditions have become familiar in public life, and respected by public opinion, and even by the Islamic movement. That was not the case in the Arab countries where the relationship between the state and religion has continued to be troubled, ranging between identifying them with each other and ideological exploitation, whether by the ruling elites or 'partisan Islam'. Furthermore, the successive Turkish Islamic parties (Welfare Party, Virtue Party, Justice and Development Party) are in fact descendants of a secular state and a modern civil political culture. Therefore, they do not contradict secularism, as stated by their leaders and successive presidents of these parties – Necmettin Erbakan and Erdoğan. The same does not apply to the Arab Islamic movements that developed in political environments unlike the Turkish one, and which have traditional ideas on the relationship between religion and politics, and religion and the state. This is the case, for example, with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Perhaps the chances of the transformation of moderate 'partisan Islam' in the direction of the Turkish example will become even less likely with the rise of hardline 'Salafist Islam', and the 'Jihadi' Islam, whereby moderate 'partisan Islam' will be afraid to lose ground to the more extremist competition of they give up on talking in the name of religion.

We might need a long time before the Islamic movements reconsider their position regarding secularism, and adopt the same path of Western democratic Christianity and Turkish political Islam. The passage of time required may be similar to the decades it took Islamic movements to reconcile with partisanship, on which Hassan Al-Banna expressed utter disapproval; and to reconcile with democracy and the authority of the people, which Sayed Kotob considered as an aggression against the Dominion of

God. However, the evolution of the Islamic Movement in this direction is also subject to the development of the political culture in society, and the reinforcement of the values of political modernity within the state.

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The work undertaken

The foregoing discussion has examined the underlying theme that links all the articles on the topic of religion and the state published in this and previous issues of *Contemporary Arab Affairs* over the past 12 months. In this one overview it has not been possible to capture all the issues and problematics raised by the individual scholars featured, but the purpose of the collection of papers overall has been to provide an opportunity for collective reflection, and incorporate various voices, on one of the most complex contemporary Arab socio-political issues and a relationship that will determine the shape of Arab life and socio-political experience hereafter. The studies included deal with a complex mix of contemporary and historical political and intellectual currents. The contributors are all specialized researchers and academicians, and because the issue is one of controversy between two weighty intellectual and political currents, it was imperative that the contributions of iconic representatives of both currents be represented, thus securing a diversity of opinions that can be beneficial to understanding.

The first consideration in this collective endeavour has been that thinking about the subject is not new in the Arab intellectual heritage, and the human intellectual heritage in general. There is a wealth of knowledge in this respect that the researcher cannot disregard. It was essential therefore to enable the contributors to have space to explore and explain the intellectual and theoretical heritage upon which they chose to develop their ideas. In addition, there is not just one approach to the issue, but many and diverse ones, in line with the points of view and their diversity (philosophical, historical, socio-political, socio-cultural, and so on). Thus it was required that the participant researchers would belong to these different schools, specialties and methodologies so that the treatment of the issue be as rich and diverse as possible.

The second consideration was that there exists a history of links between religion and the state, in Islamic Arab sociology, and human sociology in general (in the Middle Ages and the modern age), and it is not possible nowadays to talk about such relationships in ignorance of the relevant history. It would simply not be productive. So space has also been made to explore the history of how links between the state and religion have evolved, including in societies of Islam in the past, as well as more recently (especially in the case of Arab ones), and in the societies of the Christian West, and then the secular West. The objective has been to know how these links were lived, and how their negative engagements were undone; that is, for the sake of using the lessons of historical experience as a base for resolving the difficult contemporary ones.

The third consideration was that the problematic link between religion and the state imposes itself today in Arab political life as never before, especially after the Arab revolutions have created a new political scene whereby the Islamic political movements have become a major force. In this political scene, the political programme of the Islamic political movements imposes an acute form of association between religion and the state – between religious law and life. Therein, the secular and civil powers display palpable fear of the devolution of power to those haunted by the referential

position of religion; they also display different ways of confronting political investment in religion and sacredness, the aim of which is the acquisition and monopoly of power! Meanwhile, it was necessary to consider the current relationship between religion and the state in those societies that were transformed during the course of the Arab Spring (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen), and in societies where political regimes arrogate to themselves religious legitimacy (Saudi Arabia, Morocco); this, in order to analyse the contexts of association and connectedness – and the actual relationships forged – between the two extremes.

The fourth consideration has been that the relationship of the political and religious has been experienced since early Islam – just as it is being lived today within the Arab world. Thus we have witnessed, since the end of the 1970s, the ways through which Islamic parties and forces have gained power within the 'Islamic world': whether by military coup (Pakistan, Sudan), or a coup d'état followed by elections (Pakistan, Indonesia), or by a revolution (Iran), or by national liberalization and alliance with the United States and the West (Afghanistan), or by a 'revolution' and 'American Creative Chaos' (Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and especially Libya), or by elections (Turkey, Morocco). Thus, the precedents set in the 'Islamic World' generally merited inclusion here, so that these be included in thinking about the issue within the Arab sphere, given the remarkable overlapping between the two spheres. It was therefore considered necessary to include research and analysis on the experience of the relationship between religion and the state in Turkey and Iran (see this issue) in the hope that this might open up a possibility for the Arabs to draw lessons from these two contradictory experiences.

The fifth consideration is that the relationships between religion and the state are lived by Muslims even outside the lands where they predominate, in diasporas where they constitute religious communities different from their original ones, especially in countries based on secularism (see issue 6(4) of this journal). This experience deserves to be studied from several aspects, perhaps the most important of which are to explore: how can Islam coexist with secularism?; are Muslims in diasporas affected by values inherent to a secular society?; how does their citizenship intersect with their religious affiliation or become estranged from it?; how do they put their religious differences into practice?; and how do they understand these in societies whose systems adopt neutrality towards religions?

All the scholars featured in the series have been encouraged to present their views in a scientific and analytical manner, and to avoid the language of advocacy and ideology; the preference, rather, has been to hold on to the traditions of composed, democratic and rational dialogue, without descending into a tone of hectoring that the subject of discussion may tempt. No doubt the calibre of the contributors to this series and their awareness of the tradition of academic standards at the Center for Arab Unity Studies have ensured a democratic and scientific standard of contributions, with a sedate vocabulary. Overall the collection of papers will serve as a valuable reference source for those seeking a clearer understanding of how the subject of religion and the state in the Arab context is viewed and assessed by some of the most celebrated scholars in the field.

Reference

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