

Tradition and the Critique of Modernity: Secularism, Fundamentalism and Religion from Middle Eastern Perspectives

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“Tradition and the Critique of Modernity: Secularism, Fundamentalism, and Religion from Middle Eastern Perspectives” is conceived as a special forum for intellectual and scholarly debate that will accompany the program and its research groups. It is dedicated most explicitly to the attempt to rethink key concepts of Modernity like secularity, tradition, and religion by confronting them with different interpretations of the political, religious and cultural origins, experiences, and consequences of secular Modernity.

Since there is neither a universally accepted definition of modernity, nor of secularism, religion, or tradition, it is necessary to dissociate the particular theory of European secular Modernity, which is based on the separation and privatization of religion, from general theories of modernization that impose universalized European and Western/Christian forms of secular differentiation as a measure for all societies worldwide. In this process of rethinking key concepts of Modernity, Jewish, Arab, and Muslim perspectives, both from the Christian West and the Middle East, but also from other non-European contexts, especially India, are of crucial importance.

Secular Modernity is seen by its critics as a narrative or as an ideology that obscures its own theological roots and the human sufferings that were caused in its process. It is furthermore interpreted as of limited use in explaining the ongoing significance of religion not only in the Middle East, but also in Europe, the United States, and other parts of the world, as a phenomenon that emerged with the rise of the discourse of Modernity, which in turn is embedded in particular frameworks of the understanding of religion, nation, ethnicity, culture, and race.

In Europe secularism is perceived as a historical notion in the context of particular struggles and polemics during the nineteenth century. As a polemical concept, today it still shapes the debates in and on the Middle East. Secularity as a truly universal principle requires a historicization of its narrative and the inclusion of precisely those perspectives and positions it excluded. This means, for instance, that the theological and Orientalist connotations (not only the European ones) of its construction have to be taken into account, as do the violent consequences of processes of modernization and secularization following, for example, the politics of modernization of the Ottoman Empire and its subsequent break-up into national states, for they were – and often still are – accompanied by ethnic cleansing, separation, sectarianism, and modern (secular) despotism.

Within the framework of the overall proposal “Europe in the Middle East; The Middle East in Europe”, the study of Jewish and Muslim, Arab and Israeli debates and reflections on secularity, secularization, and secularism are of central importance. Jews and Arabs and their religions were as significant in the genesis of the discourse of secular modernity as was the

model of a Western/Christian secular Modernity, for example for Kemalist Turkey, Ba'athist Iraq, or for the separation of Jews and Arabs in Palestine and the Arab world. From a European political as well as theological perspective, the (historical) separation between "the Jew" as the theological enemy and "the Arab" as the political enemy still finds its expression in the maintenance of distinctive discursive spheres. The negation of these historical legacies complicates the situation of Jews and Arabs (Muslim, Christian, and secular) in the Middle East and also disconnects the question of minorities in Europe (Jews and Muslims) and in the Middle East (Christians and Jews) from their past and future.

Two other concepts, "tradition" (not in a nostalgic sense) and "exile", may contribute to further critique. Tradition stands against its negation, as demanded by the discourse of secular Modernity. Thus the inclusion of tradition(s) of the secular often expressed in traditional or religious terms, and of experiences and conceptualizations of conviviality in Arab, Islamic or Jewish culture and thought may lead to different formulations of secularity, which could contribute to overcome existing divisions, not only in terms of concepts. Can a revisiting of Arab/Islamic thought and practice since early medieval times, as such different thinkers like Ebrahim Moosa and Aziz Al-Azmeh suggest, lead to more fruitful interpretations of the relation of the divine and the secular? Exile in its particular Jewish meaning claims a perception of history that opposes modern concepts such as progress and authenticity.

The reformulation of "religion" as a distinctive category played a significant role in the European and in the modern Middle Eastern debates on the integration of "minorities" into the emerging national states. While the formulation of the secular in Europe was somehow linked to the question of whether the Jews constituted a religious group or a nation, (religious) "minority" is a category contested by many scholars and intellectuals in the Middle East who prefer to think in terms of citizenship. From that perspective, Zionist (as well as certain religio-national trends in Arab, Turkish or Islamist) discourses can be seen as exceptional manifestations in the construction of the myth of a modern purified and/or secular nation. In fact, in this context secularization and nationalization meant the formulation of the millenarian myth of the return of the Jews, of the Arabs, and of Islam and Western Christian Modernity in terms of modern nationalism and colonialism.

It is in these dimensions that the various narratives and perceptions of the secular Modernity and their translations in Europe and the Middle East will have to be examined. Secularity has to be linked to the discourse on the secularization of the Jews in the early modern period, to the Arabs' (Muslims, Christian, Jewish, and secular) reflections on and experiences of secularism, to the processes of politicization, and – more recently – to the privatization of revivalist religion, as well as to the question of minorities today.

Modernity and tradition are crucial foci not only of all research fields embedded in this program, but also central and contested concepts in the debate of scholars and intellectuals in Middle Eastern as well as in European/Western countries. The critical and historical scrutiny of these notions allows for linking the assumptions to questions and fields of research addressed to the different parts of the overall program.

Analyzing these notions from the Arab/Muslim and from the Jewish points of view leads to different views on Modernity, like the ones proposed by Aziz al-Azmeh and Shmuel Eisenstadt. Secularization, analyzed in the European and Arab/Muslim context of today, discloses the different historical legacies entangled in this political dispute, historicizing also the use of the concept as part of the "colonialism of concepts".

The discussion of the secular and secularism can therefore serve as a central node for the synthesis of various basic conceptual assumptions and critical positions. The different facets of the overall program recur in this respective theme: text, tradition, politics, or the social construction of identities.