

Syria: Secularity, a potential prospect

Is it possible to secularize Islamic religious discourse?

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Is secularism opposed to religion, or religion opposed to secularism? What is the position of authoritarian regimes towards secularism? And are Syria's minorities truly secular? In this latest article in our series on secularism, writer Rateb Sha'bo explores some of these questions.

Contents

- [Between secularity and secular](#)
- [Strange alignments](#)
- [How is secularity distinct](#)
- [Can Islamic religious discours](#)
- [Worldly secularity versus](#)
- [The secularity of religious](#)

The preoccupation with secularity has never really gone away, even in countries such as France that embraced a radical form of secularity sometimes referred to as “solid” secularity. Discussions regarding secularity, which is constantly confronted with challenges to its ability to absorb new developments and maintain a balance between equality and identity issues, have not settled down either. However, as the sons and daughter of impoverished countries that have not found their own mechanism to convene and produce political legitimacy apart from the logic of victory through violence, our preoccupation with secularity relates to several issues. These are the form of secularity we seek, the manner and extent of separation between religion and politics, and the exploration of secularity's ability (or inability) to help extract the Muslim community—by which I mean the community in which Islam constitutes the religion of most of the inhabitants—from the abyss of futile conflicts that both consume its energy and resources and threaten its existence.

The broad trend we witnessed in recent years in Syria and other Arab countries has been a turn toward religious extremism that seeks to return society to religious rule—with a caliphate, emirates, and *shari'a* courts—while accusing democracy and secularity of blasphemy. This is one of the consequences of our societies' faltering development. Failure is a breeding ground for all sorts of extremism and irrationality, especially in dysfunctional countries, which, at the same time, regard themselves as distinct and destined carriers of a “message,” as is the case with the “Arab nation.” The Islamic extremism witnessed in recent years and the regression toward some bygone past, whether in judgements or symbols and designation, represent a childish protest against the dominant part of the world. However, it is also a protest against the self. By that we mean that the failure of this religious extremism, or this global or local religious jihadism, is inevitable in our modern era. The determination and sacrifices carried out in the name of these ideologies are merely an expression of a deep awareness of their own futility and impossibility. In the modern era, there is no place for the rule of religion that jihadist theorists call for. This conviction is not far from the

minds of Islamic extremists themselves, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan and perhaps the Nusra Front in Syria. They merely seek to elicit recognition, as they have no other way to integrate into the world from a partner or affiliate standpoint. We could also say that this violent jihadism is an unconscious way of seeking revenge against one's own "failed" self.

There may be those who have achieved such a vast separation from reality that they have full conviction in establishing religious rule in the current era. However, the real question today is not related to the position toward the religious state; the real question is not a trade-off between a religious state and a secular state, but rather which secular state we want, and how we should achieve secularity. Is it the separation of religion from the state, or the separation of religious institutions from the state? What remains of religion in a secular state?

One must also take into consideration many Syrians' dislike of the word "secularity" because of its association with the Assad regime on the one hand, and because of Islamic propaganda that has flourished within the current conflict in Syria on the other. Many secular Syrians now prefer to avoid the term altogether, while retaining its same tenor. There are those who suggest replacing it with another word with similar connotations such as "patriotism." However, aside from the word itself, the majority of Syrians, in our view, are "secular" in substance—i.e., they do not lean toward the Sunni Islamic religious rule as called for by the clergy. This is evident in the widespread rejection of the Islamic State (IS) and Nusra Front by civilians in the areas they controlled. The emergence and dominance of these Salafi and jihadist organizations, followed by the exposure of their limitations and purely violent nature, that may be one of the few positive outcomes of the Syrian tragedy.

Between secularity and secularism

To start, a distinction should be made between "secularity" and "secularism." The first concept belongs to the political sphere and presents a vision for a path that seems to its supporters, including ourselves, a just and useful way of organising and managing public affairs because it liberates the management of society from the sacred sphere. It removes the absolute from the world of politics. The second concept belongs to the ideological sphere as it turns "secularity" into some sort of worldly religion. Its supporters transfer "sanctification" from the unseen world to the witnessed world, resulting in the phenomenon of "worldly sanctification," transforming "secularity" into an absolute power.

There are two versions of secularism. The first is the Soviet version, which corresponded to atheism. This form of secularism not only liberates politics from the authority of the religious establishment, but also prohibits religions themselves, restricts the freedom of the religious, and imposes a "material" culture on all aspects of society in order to eradicate religion. The Soviet version is based on a certain materialist philosophy that sees religion as an obstacle to the emancipation of society and considers religion as a manifestation of a childish humanity or a passing phase of human development. The Soviet version did not conceal its hostility to religions. It was part of a development project that sought liberation from "imperialism," but ultimately ended up in collapse. This experience showed that 70 years of general atheism could not eradicate religion from society, and that the attempt to link liberation or development with an opposition to religion hostility is narrow-minded and ignores the firm status of religion in the human soul.

The second version of secularism was part of the ideology of tyrannical "progressive" powers that quickly became degenerate powers lacking any developmental or liberal vision, and sought only to consolidate power. They designed all the mechanisms of societal management towards perpetuating their own authority. The "secularity" of the Assad regime, for example, belongs to this version. This

version of secularism, unlike the first one, does not stand against religion or separate religion from state, but rather it morphs into a sort of adjoining worldly religion where the authorities, or the head of the authorities, replace the religious god. The official institutions of the divine collude with this “religion of the authorities” and become its servants from their position as representatives of the divine religion.

The degeneration of this version of secularism stems from the degeneration of the authorities adopting it.

The truth is that the only relevance these authorities have to secularity is limited to the fact that they are not religious authorities.

“They do not impose application of religious laws (although they require that the head of the state be of a particular religion or sect) and so protect certain individual freedoms by not forcing women to wear head coverings or by prohibiting alcohol. Many people regard these “freedoms” as signs of progress. However, they are also accompanied by the domination of an authority imposed on the governed people, along with the spread of repression, corruption, and implicit and explicit forms of discrimination.”

This produced a reaction against these freedoms, which have become part of the authoritarian system in the general public consciousness. In the few years before the outbreak of the revolution in Syria, there emerged a popular tendency to reject these freedoms by returning to religion and religious dress; by renewing commitment to religious rituals, and demands for the separation of the sexes. This return to the “divine” religion has had an explicit presence in the body of the Syrian revolution since its onset: a return to the divine religion in order to reject the “worldly religion” or the “religion of the authority,” which recruited the divine religion to its favor and adapted to this domination from the standpoint of common interest. Therefore, the return to the divine religion was a form of rejection of political authority and its symbols. Attention is drawn to the emphasis on “symbols” in the fixed “cliché” objective, the “overthrow of the regime and all its foundations and symbols,” that was used and reiterated by the Syrian opposition for a long time. The word “symbols” includes the flag, national anthem and patriotic songs often used by the regime, as if, for the rebels, these symbols were rituals for the religion of the supposedly secular authority.

Strange alignments

The Syrian revolution highlighted strange alignments between the elite intellectuals, activists as well as those interested in public affairs.

“The brutal repression meted out by the “secular” regime led people to completely reject it and its “secularity.” At the same time, the religious character that increasingly dominated the demonstrations, and the armed transition that followed, led others to reject the “religious” revolution. The priority given to standing against the regime pushed some secularists to approach non-secular powers, while the priority given to fighting political Islam led long-standing opponents of the regime to cosy up to it in the face of the rise of Islamic non-secular powers (or “Islamic fascism,” as they call it).”

The portrait of the conflict has therefore become complex and strange.

The strangest thing about it was that Islamic religious powers spearheaded what was supposed to be a democratic revolution, and that democratic secularists found themselves alongside powers that accuse democracy and secularity of blasphemy; while at the same time other democratic secularists

found themselves in the ranks of a brutal, tyrannical regime waging a war of extermination against its own people. Regardless of the political logic of both sides, the biggest loser in this strange alignment was the democratic secularists themselves and their neglected cause.

How is secularity distinct from religious rule?

Secularity includes two essential parts. The first is the establishment of a united reference for all people in the country, which is the reference of belonging to the country (the nation), and making this belonging a priority in worldly and political affairs—i.e., giving it precedence above all other forms of belonging in a constitutional or legal sense. The second is a fortification of the political sphere against the dominance of religion, and protecting it from “god’s representatives on earth” who judge people on their spiritual beliefs and sort them accordingly, leaving no place in the country for atheists, for example. The result of these two parts is that the people of the country are equal before the law regardless of what spiritual or religious beliefs they adhere to, and that administration of their country is up to them and whatever they find appropriate for their development, without dependence on anything other than reference other than reason and the will of the majority. This evidently unites the people of the country as citizens rather than separating them as followers of certain sects and religions, as happens under religious rule. This also allows the people in the country to think freely, so that they can find solutions to the problems they face, while benefitting from modern experiences without the need for a “passport” from the scriptures or from “jurisprudential” parties that cling to the constitution on the false pretext of respecting religion and identity.

Moreover, secularity distinguishes between a public sphere (the political) where people in the country are equal as citizens who have rights and responsibilities defined by the constitution and laws, and the private spheres where people are different according to their own beliefs and where they freely practice their religious authorities, spiritual activities, rituals, and traditions. This means that secularity is against religion if it seeks to interfere in the public sphere—i.e., if it turns into an ideology of political authority. “Religion is religion within its own limits, and an ideology outside of them,” according to Azmi Bishara in his book, *Religion and Religiosity, a Prolegomena to Volume One of Religion and Secularism in Historical Context*, in which he argues that secularization is a long historical process of distinction between religion and the modern world.

The problem with discussing secularity in the Muslim community is that Islamists do not accept the idea of distinction between religion and the modern world. Islamists insist that Islam is both religion and the modern world, and that in Islam, one cannot separate between worship and *shari’a*, and that secularity assaulted Islam because it excludes *shari’a* (Yusuf al-Qaradawi). This firm statement by Islamists leads to one conclusion that states, borrowing from Labid’s poetry: “Every thing, but (Islamic religious rule), is vain.”

Can Islamic religious discourse be secularized?

A number of intellectuals tried to solve the previous problem by accepting the relevance of religion and the modern world in Islam, and working to expand religion to an extent that makes it capable of assimilating modernity and its increasing demands (including secularity). These intellectuals attempted to “secularize” the Islamic religious discourse, once by relying on linguistics, as Mohammed Shahrour did in his book, *The Book and Qur’an: A Modern Reading*; and in another instance by deriving the meaning of religious discourse by putting it in the context of its formation, its “occasion for revelation.” This meant taking on the lessons and meanings without adhering to the

literal text, as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd did in his book, *The Concept of the Text: A Study of the Qur'anic Sciences*. In yet another instance, Mahmoud Mohammed Taha returned to the Islam of Mecca, rather than the Islam of Medina. These attempts at compromise struggled to compete with the dominance of mainstream Islam over the general public because they sought to fight it in its own arena, with its own weapons.

These attempts involve a profound contradiction: joining holy matters that are not controlled by reason with rational matters. They acknowledge the sacredness and inimitability of the text on the one hand, and advocate for rationality on the other. This is a crippling endeavor, as it seeks to plant rationality in what is irrational, demanding that religion abandon its religious character.

This problem can only be solved by separating the political sphere (relative, common, variable and worldly) from the religious sphere (absolute, fixed, private and spiritual). The boundaries of separation between the two remain the subject of much study and deliberation because they relate to the history and composition of the concerned community. One can even say that each society has its own secularity.

Worldly secularity versus heavenly secularity

What the missionary activity of the Prophet Muhammed accomplished from a political standpoint, and what really constituted the foundation of its success, was the establishment of a sole bond between the members of various Arab tribes that was able to unite everybody before presenting them to the world. Everybody was equal under this bond—Islam—which was a common denominator for everything that did not contradict tribal bonds and affiliations. This was the case before Islam devolved into various doctrines and sects, turning itself into a source of division rather than a source of unity (as was the case in the beginning of the Islamic call).

Therefore, the political act of the binding affiliation brought forth by Muhammed is exactly what we want from secularity—i.e., the neutralization of religious affiliations (tribal affiliation) versus the affiliation to the nation (to Islam), and the equality of all under the constitution and before the law regardless of their religious and sectarian background. Some say that these days Muhammed's "followers," who are advocates of religious rule, are in fact working against what Muhammed did. They are dividing the people of the same country according to their doctrines and religions and dividing them, rather than uniting them. We can compare the search for a common denominator between people that protects them from discrimination, while respecting the common denominators of each individual group, to the political act accomplished by the Prophet. The difference is that the Prophet linked this to the heavens whereas secularity links it to earth.

However, in our era, the adherence to religious affiliations that gives them superiority over other forms of affiliation is equivalent to the adherence (during the time of the Prophet) to tribal affiliation that gave it superiority over the Islamic affiliation, which was a binding factor at the time.

The secularity of religious and sectarian minorities

Syria's minority sects do not have a *shari'a* and do not produce political expressions that speak on behalf of the "nation." They are not capable of this, either in terms of numbers or in terms of sectarian structure. These minorities do not have projects for religious rule. The only project for religious rule in Syria is the Islamic Sunni project. Therefore, members of the minority sects consistently support secularity rather than religious rule, because the latter renders them subjects,

wards, dhimmis or second-class citizens in their own country.

Faced with the Islamists' quest to establish *shari'a* law, minorities tend to accept any other option—even if it means clinging to a regime that tyrannizes them, and even if this regime establishes a “worldly religion” that imposes a tangible and personalized god called “the authority.” They accept equality under a repressive “secular” sword rather than being under the inevitably discriminatory sword of Islamic religious rule that would classify them according to their birth. Minorities feel that the “secular” sword is less brutal on them than on the majority, which they always fear might call for a *shari'a* law. It is not surprising, then, that minorities tend to accept even foreign actors in the face of attempts at *shari'a* rule. This is evident in their position on interventions of Iran and Russia in Syria.

Therefore, when the project for religious rule is in offensive mode and engages in a direct conflict for power, minorities will turn into a conservative power against this project and secularism will become an ideological instrument used by the minorities in their position against Islamists. The minorities' alignment with “secular” political tyranny against the Islamic attempt for change is not the result of a fundamental progressiveness on the part of minorities, as one might think, but rather a defensive position that leads to—in the Syrian case—tyranny strengthened and secularism stifled. Therefore, it is not a question of progressive or retrograde minorities, but rather a question of clear calculations of interest.

In the context of the Syrian revolution, minorities generally were afraid and started to investigate the Islamic nature of the revolution almost from its first day. (This is of course to varying degrees among different minorities, and in particular the Alawites, for reasons that do not require explanation here because they have been dealt with, discussed and understood already). As such, minorities began to align with the regime as the Islamic character of the revolution increasingly emerged. This alignment was definitive: in the sense that minorities, in fear of an advancing Islamic project, totally abandoned their critical position of the regime or, to be more precise, confined it to supporting the regime in the name of supporting the state or supporting the national army or supporting “secularity,” etc. This position proved unchangeable in the face everything—despite the regime's persistent repression, killing and destruction; despite the dependence on foreign countries such as Iran and Russia; and despite mutual complicity between the regime and the official Islamic institutions allied with the regime. Minorities did not dare to seriously revise their position on the regime, even when regime apparatuses meted out oppression against their sons, and even when the regime gave the Ministry of Endowments unprecedented powers to control education and state institutions. Minorities, especially the Alawites, became dependent on the regime as much as the regime was dependent on them.

In reality, the secularity of minorities does not reflect their progressive nature, as they supported a “secular” tyranny and not a democratic secularity. At the same time, the secularity of the Islamists does not reflect a retrograde majority, as they rose up against a tyranny that manipulated secularity and trampled over its principles with implicit and explicit sectarian practices. In both cases, each party rushed to back what it believed would protect its existence and interests. In the sharp division created by the ongoing conflict in Syria, both sides demonstrated contempt for human dignity and the principles of human rights.

Today, the Syrian public is not divided on a secular or non-secular basis but on alignment with or against the regime, or alignment with or against the Islamists. There is no space for discourse on secularity, and there is no influential party in Syria today that truly expresses democratic and secular principles.

If our above characterization is correct, then the task of intellectuals and those interested in Syria's

future is to save secularity from the distortion of the Syrian regime and the counter-mobilization by Islamists, because we believe that secular democracy is the only possible prospect for a united and dignified Syria.

Rateb Sha'bo [Shabo]

P.S.

- Syria Untold, 14 November 2019:

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- Rateb Sha'bo is a Syrian physician, English translator and writer born in 1963. He spent 16 years of his life detained as a political prisoner (1983-1999). Sha'bo has also published a study entitled "The World of Early Islam".

- This new series with Salon Syria and Jadaliyya will pose questions about the prospects for secularism in Syria's future. The full series in Arabic can also be found here:

<https://syriauntold.com/category/الديمقراطية-والسياسة/>