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Mohammed A. Bamyeh
Macalester College

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Between Activism and Hermeneutics: One Hundred Years of Intellectual Islam in the Public Sphere

Mohammed A. Bamyeh

*A*t the dawn of the “third millennium,” it is still far from certain that religious consciousness will ever be overpowered by secular reason. It is far less clear than just three decades ago that religion as a social force can ever be content with a separation of social spheres—in other words, yield the political space to secular reason and secular forces. Yet it was more than a century and a half ago that such an outcome was predicted, albeit by an unexpected source, in Karl Marx’s early essay *On the Jewish Question*. There, Marx criticized the project of a secular state even as he maintained his view of religion as an expression of social defect.

Marx saw clearly that secularizing the state does not remove religion from the political equation; it only makes the state appear to society as heaven to earth. And this held for both models of secular state: the American separation of church and state and the French *laïcité*. For in either case, the state only does what God had done before, namely, police social imperfection and, like Jesus, mediate between man and his freedom. Secularism does not solve the fundamental problem, *which is the state*. In effect, secularism does just the opposite. “Rights” are granted (or withheld) through the state, and thus the state appears as the only natural venue of rights. The Marxist critique of the secular state recognized a salient feature of religion, namely, that it expresses

what the state wants to express—the essence of civil society. Thus, like religion, the secular state has no interest in human emancipation, only in calculated political licenses. And like religion, such a state has a natural tendency to posit itself, in the place of civil society, as the only viable embodiment of all that is good (*and hence missing*) from earth.

Such a critique aims at a far deeper problem than what we may observe as obvious failures of secularism in a place like the United States. That is to say, it is not simply the fact that in the U.S. we have endless squabbles about purely symbolic issues (the state use of the word “God,” the state display of the Ten Commandments, or prayer in public schools), whereas nothing is mentioned of the *ordinary political fact* that most successful politicians are expected to have a religious affiliation, attend church, express their faith in their speeches, ally themselves with religious groups, and include in their platforms policies that flow directly out of the religious beliefs of some constituency or another. The saturation of U.S. politics with a variety of religious expressions, *both* liberal and fundamentalist, has only become more obvious over the past three decades.¹

Contemporary discussions of the secular state in Europe, largely inflected by the immigrant experience,² reveal different sorts of nuance. Yet again, one can detect a similar pattern of secularism being “defended” largely on the *symbolic* terrain, as we see in endless debates over headscarves and religious symbols in public places, even though there is little disagreement over the *substantive* issues. For example, there is common agreement that all schools should have a good, modern curriculum, that immigrants should be more integrated into host societies, and that religious authorities must take part in such a process. Yet if European political debates appear less influenced by religious rhetoric, it is not because the state is more secular. It is because *society* itself is less religious. Obviously, in a more religious society like the U.S., political debates will invariably be more influenced by religion. The law *alone* cannot change such social facts.

In either case, what appears as a coordinated assault on the secular state on its (supposed) home turf in the West, to say nothing of the Muslim or even Hindu worlds, must be reconceptualized as an *old problem* of the modern state. And this problem has little to do with the substance of either secular or religious consciousness as such. A bias that seems endemic within secularism consists of the assumption that religion will gravitate toward politics if not expressly prohibited from doing so. Yet religion survives in large part as a sanctuary of various

conceptions of social order, and historical experience shows that these conceptions *may or may not* become political, depending on the circumstances of the moment.

When such conceptions become political, no amount of legislation or prohibition is likely to stop their solemn march into the public sphere and eventually governmental policies. That is because the problem expressed in politicized religion lies in the structure of society and not simply in religious ideas *per se*. Religion is not inclined toward politics on an ongoing basis, but it is only natural for it to be employed in political struggles when competing discourses have demonstrated their failure to meaningfully address *concrete* social problems. In what follows, I would like to illustrate the point by highlighting specific junctures in the history of public intellectual Islam in the Middle East over the past century.

Two well-known events from the mid-1920s Middle East illustrate an important dynamic of secular consciousness. The first occurs in Turkey in 1924, when Ataturk abolished the caliphate. The second transpires in Egypt in 1925, when Ali Abd al-Raziq published his intensely controversial book *Islam and the Foundations of Governance*, which argued that Islam never intended to supply a system of government.

These two contemporaneous episodes, expressing epic battle cries of secularism in two largely Muslim societies, were brought forth, of course, by different types of authorities, and they differed as well in their outcome, their prehistory, and their surrounding contexts. Ataturk was a political leader, a national hero soon to assume mythical proportions, whereas Abd al-Raziq was a public intellectual besieged by enemies in the public sphere. Ataturk got his way because he was the state, whereas Abd al-Raziq seemed to have lost the battle when al-Azhar, the most prestigious Islamic institution of higher learning, issued a famous *fatwa* rejecting the conclusions of his book, and asserting that the idea of separation of religion and state was alien to the Islamic tradition.

On the surface it appears that we have, in two comparable Muslim societies, one straightforward story of secular success and an equally straightforward story of secular failure. Further, it seems obvious that having the state itself strongly on the side of the secular idea was the determining factor of success or failure, because "tradition" would not

be expected to change an old idea for which it itself was responsible. These two elements of the comparison are most immediately apparent, but the truly interesting story lies elsewhere. A level-headed appraisal of the story helps us comprehend why in *both* societies at the end of the millennium, the secularist forces were caught unawares by the substantial advance of religion *back* into the forefront of the public sphere. This is what is surprising, and this is what needs to be explained.

Shortly before the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire, it was Egypt and not the Turkish center of the empire that had far more success with modernist reforms. By then the educational, political, and economic reforms of the Egyptian enlightenment were already a century old and still had governmental backing, as had been the case more or less since the reign of Muhammad Ali in the early 19th century. Those reforms had begun about three decades before the comparable Ottoman *Tanzimat*, and in Egypt the process of reform in the 19th century was less truncated and met less resistance than it did under the Ottoman Empire.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the triumph of the reformists in Egypt could be compared to the conundrum faced by their kindred spirits in the Ottoman Empire. One indicator was the character of intellectual Islam in the public sphere. In Egypt the clergy, de-privileged but also co-opted since Muhammad Ali, posed far less of a challenge to modern forms of government, education, and law³ than did the entrenched and institutionalized Ottoman clergy, which saw itself as a pillar of the old system and formed a power bloc in its own right. Whereas in Egypt the most important religious office in the country, the *Mufti*, had by the turn of the century come to be occupied by the famous reformer Muhammad Abdo, the highest religious office in Istanbul, the *Sheyhulislam*, continued to be held by impulsively anti-modernist characters fully out of touch with their time. Even after the dissolution of the empire, its very last *Sheyhulislam* simply went on in his exile to write arcane commentaries on medieval Muslim philosophers, with no apparent relevance to contemporary realities, much less to the needs of the high office he had assumed.⁴ While Egypt seemed throughout the 19th century to be the rising force (until the British occupation of 1882), the Ottoman Empire, weighed down by long tradition and vast institutions vested in it, seemed capable of only moving slowly or in uncoordinated steps in the direction of modernization.

By the 1920s, therefore, a state builder in Turkey and a public intellectual in Egypt were confronting different institutional and intellec-

tual histories, even though their problem was the same—what to do with Islam in the modern world. Yet in both societies that problem had actually become *secondary*, even though both events (the dissolution of the caliphate and Abd al-Raziq's book) were intensely debated. In both Turkey and Egypt, the dire issue of the period before and after World War I had become colonialism, *not* Islam. Egypt had already been under direct British domination since 1882, and the massive nationalist revolt against colonial rule in 1919 had no religious trappings of any kind, expressing itself fully in the vernacular of anti-colonial, secular nationalism. In the Turkish center of the Ottoman Empire, the gradual disintegration of the empire, combined with internal revolts and defeat at war, also highlighted the question of the very survival of "Turkey" itself from dismemberment by Western powers.

In both societies, therefore, the debate over religion and secularism in the 1920s was foreshadowed first by the immediate encounter with European colonialism, and second by the differential record of a century of constantly debated modernist reforms—which were themselves directly or indirectly connected to the specter of Western domination.⁵ The former, more immediate problem, finally provided a clear context for adjudicating the question of religion and secularism. This no longer needed to be adjudicated through interminable debates, whose constant theme had been which mode of thought was more proper for modernity and how. Rather, the question could be adjudicated by clear and immediate results: Which provided the more *effective* vehicle of resistance against colonialism?

In Turkey, the failure of religion in that task seemed connected to the defeat at war of the Ottoman Empire itself, with which the most conservative elements of the religious establishment were so intertwined.⁶ And the success of secularism, likewise, is inseparable from the success of the secular part of the old Ottoman/Young Turk elite against Western colonialism. Secularism, therefore, had to defeat colonialism *before* it could move against religion.

In Egypt, however, until Nasser no *single* force could so clearly push colonialism out. Hence, the ideological story of the country continued to unfold as one of ongoing symbiosis and necessary negotiations between various local voices. As such, that story is the more familiar one within the broader spectrum of the history of colonialism worldwide. As in most of the colonial world, the debate in Egypt rarely posited secularism and religion as *mutually exclusive* ideas, as would become the case in Turkey. Abd al-Raziq composed his thesis by rely-

ing on primary Islamic sources rather than simply on secular reason *per se*. Students of Arab nationalism frequently observe that, in its early stages, the founding figures rarely saw a contradiction between the secular idea of nationalism and universalist Islamic identity. In fact, up to very recent times a major modern thinker like Ismail Ragi al-Faruqi could move back and forth between the two frames of identity without feeling an urgent need to smooth out the terrain of the transition.

Students of nationalism are generally aware of the larger dynamics of such fluidity, especially in the context of colonial history. Partha Chatterjee has described the defensive nationalism of the "Third World" as characterized by a separation (in the *same* mind, that is) between the material and spiritual realms. The former was considered the realm of practical sciences and administrative procedures which one could freely borrow in the global marketplace, whereas the latter was viewed as the internal essence of one's culture, more wedded to indigenous history and collective psyche and thus less open to negotiation and borrowing. Chatterjee's point was that subaltern nationalism *unifies* the spiritual and material realms, and it needs to do so in order to accomplish its dual objective of modernization *and* self-determination. This type of nationalism, therefore, has actually little incentive for drawing a hard line between secularism and religion.

Indeed, almost everywhere we look, the fluidity of the secular and the religious proves to be more lasting in social and intellectual practice, and more analytically useful, than their strict separation. Keeping this point firmly in mind helps us appraise present realities and not only past historical events. The religious renaissance of our times, whether we are speaking of present day Turkey, Egypt, the U.S., or France, may suggest that the epic battles of secularism against religion, whether led by state builders with a sense of historical mission or well-intentioned public intellectuals, expressed programs that were never fully workable in the final analysis. We can understand this if we realize where religion goes when it is banished by secularism. The social life of religion in the intervening period of forced separation, indicated by intellectual systems expressed in the public sphere, should now, after almost a century, reveal why "Reason" alone could not banish religion. It is because in its partiality, myopia, and resistance to see what was outside of it, "Reason" proved not to be reasonable enough.

The dissolution of the caliphate had little practical ramifications. In practice, the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the world war and its subsequent dismemberment left little of the material foundations of the institution. Husayn bin Ali, the Sherif of Mecca, laid a short-lived claim to the caliphate soon after its dissolution in Istanbul, but found himself forced to withdraw it after losing his battle over Hijaz with the Saudis. This course of events testified to the fact that the caliphate was by then expected to exercise effective sovereignty if it were to be legitimate. In any case, the Sherif was operating in a marginal part of the former empire, which, unlike the real centers of the Arab heartland in the Levant and Egypt, did not directly confront Western colonialism.

Except in Turkey, which saved itself from colonialism, elsewhere in the Muslim world the primary issue continued to be colonial control, not the fate of the caliphate. In British India, one of the anti-British movements among Muslims was known as the Khilafat movement, but it had little religious pedigree and its slogans were by and large anti-colonial.⁷ The most important intellectual spokesperson of Muslim India, Muhammad Iqbal, in fact praised the Turkish experiment and supported the dissolution of the caliphate. A decade later, when the extremely secular nature of the Kemalist project must have been obvious, Iqbal was still nonchalant: Even if the doctrine of caliphate is mandated in Islam—which is itself debatable⁸—an elected modern parliament, embodying God's trusteeship of the earth to its people, could just as well fulfill that role.⁹

Iqbal was hardly alone among Indian Muslims. It may seem stunning from today's vantage point that most intellectual and political founders of Pakistan thought of their project as a *secular* experiment.¹⁰ For about half a century—from at least the 1920s until Zia ul-Haq's regime in the 1970s—the idea of an "Islamic state" in the subcontinent had certainly meant *not* an Islamic theocracy and not even a state based on Islamic law, but simply a *state for Muslims*, i.e., a sphere in which they would be free from possible discrimination as a minority group.

Of course, political expressions of Islam continued to be provided throughout, but movements that were exclusively Islamic *and* exclusively political always represented a small minority in the political spectrum. Even in the subcontinent, where the entire vocabulary of national identity, state sovereignty, and self-determination was articulated in terms of religious communities, a theocratic state proj-

ect attracted few advocates. Abul Ala Maududi, the most articulate exponent of such a project, in spite of his fame and established circle, remained on the margin of the political spectrum until the late 1970s. Only then did his Jamaat-e-Islami finally begin to acquire some political leverage due to a confluence of favorable circumstances. These included Zia ul-Haq seeking the Jamaat's support to shore up his military regime against critics; a confluence of major regional events, notably the Afghan war and the Islamic revolution in Iran, both of which vastly opened up the space for political Islam everywhere; and finally the outcome of the massive Saudi investments in the most conservative version of Islam, an investment that was worldwide but tilting heavily toward Pakistan and Afghanistan. Yet even with all these helpful factors, Jamaat-e-Islami has failed until today to muster a majority following for its version of state-centered Islam.

In the meantime, secularism generally failed as well in its main objective, which was to confine Islam to the private sphere. It failed for two reasons: first, even as a faith practiced in the private sphere, Islam required public manifestations which were provided by various authorities, venues, and groups; and second, secularism as a guide to the state failed in the very modernist task it had assigned to itself, namely, to bring about a sovereign, prosperous, and participatory society, a society that would remain reliably unified without religious identity. These twin failures may partially be traced back to the myopias and overconfidence of secular consciousness. Still, they do not necessarily signify a great crisis for secularism, only the need for pragmatist adjustments here and there. But in some places, as the Arab World, they were compounded by catastrophic failures in concrete and strategic issues around which there *was* a social consensus. These issues clustered around the galvanizing agony of Palestine, the failure to undo the colonial division of the region, the extreme and unusual uniformity of authoritarianism introduced by postcolonial *secular* governments, and the evident subservience of such governments to powerful foreign patrons.

In the context of these ongoing failures, intellectual Islam in the public sphere embarked on two distinct pathways, which over several decades have now given it a sharp edge over secularism. The first pathway opened up in the late 1920s out of the heritage of the Egyptian enlightenment and spread worldwide. The second began to gather shape after the 1960s in different Muslim countries, forging itself out of a combination of Sufi traditions, Islamic hermeneutics, and modern

science. The degree to which either trajectory has overawed the secular discourse depends, it seems, on the demonstrated record of secularism in modernist and postcolonial tasks around which there existed sufficient social consensus.

The earlier tradition, which is still very much alive, regarded itself as *salafi* in nature. It followed and revived the good and forgotten traditions of early Islam in that it adhered to the rhetoric of 19th-century Muslim reformers who were deeply mindful of the backwardness of Muslim societies compared to Europe. While the term *salafi* today is frequently encountered as a term of abuse, connoting retrograde anti-modernity, a hundred years ago it had meant just the opposite. For pioneers of Islamic modernity, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abdo, being a *salafi* meant being modern. They argued that it was the *forgetfulness* by their contemporaries of the early traditions that had resulted in their disconnection with European modernity, whose spirit had according to this view already been expressed in early Islam.

That form of Islam was highly visible in the public sphere. Afghani was a well-known public persona in his own lifetime in various circles crisscrossing the Muslim world, taking him from Iran to Egypt, Istanbul, and India as well as to Paris, where he engaged Ernest Renan in a famous debate. He was intimately involved in the Ottoman *Tanzimat* in a similar attempt at reform in Iran under Shah Nasir al-Din, and in anti-British agitation in Egypt. His close associate Muhammad Abdo was an equally important public persona, and eventually led an educational and legal reform effort in his capacity as the Grand Mufti of Egypt. Their student Rashid Rida further expanded the public intellectual presence of “revivalist modern” Islam, lecturing constantly and establishing *al-Manar*, the renowned journal of Islamic modernist thought.

That movement finally took a quasi-political organizational form in 1928, when the Muslim Brothers was founded in Egypt by Hasan al-Banna. Al-Banna was influenced by Rida, who by that point had taken the modernist Islamic message into a socially conservative direction. By combining social conservatism, advocacy of an independent modernity, and anti-colonialism, the Brothers have expanded tena-

ciously over the past eight decades. Loose models or “branches” of the organization exist currently in about seventy different countries.

The Brothers emphasized the idea of Islam as a “total way of life.” In that sense, Islam re-entered social space as a program of ethical cultivation of the “free but responsible” individual, whose ethics would diffuse outwardly into society at large. The program fostered a pragmatic and ideological outlook that connected small, daily, individual tasks to large, future-oriented, social goals. Consequently, the Brothers’ program could at any moment result in political action, but without actually requiring it on an ongoing basis. This flexibility accounts for the survival of the Brothers in different social and political contexts and through various periods of repression and toleration.

The fundamental objective of the Brothers is founding a Muslim society. This involves an incremental educational and cultural process that gradually makes Islam pervasive in society, and as such the process is not confined to direct political action. According to its own self-description,¹¹ the movement believes in gradualism rather than violent takeover of government. It does not necessarily strive to rule society directly, but is prepared to accept any good ruler. It advocates the liberation of Muslim lands from foreign control. And it seeks to foster social ties and learning about the faith.

The global spread of the Brothers over the past seven decades has been impressive, as is the fact that it now counts among its members various prominent intellectuals and spiritual leaders who differ in their approaches to social and political life and live in different countries. The resilience of the movement derives from its grass-roots emphasis, but also from a platform that is general enough to make room for both solidaristic action and individual cultivation.

Al-Banna’s teachings in their basic form continue to define the *modus operandi* of the Brothers. The basic tenet is simply to rebuild a Muslim society. The preferred method envisages the unfolding of such a project in the form of concentric circles, beginning with the individual, then the family, then society, then the state, then a caliphate unifying Muslim states, then the world. Tasks are most defined at the center of that circle, at the individual level, gradually losing clarity further into the perimeters of larger worlds. The Muslim individual, whether male or female, strives to remain healthy, cultivate his manners and thought, become organized, and is eager to learn and strengthen his faith. Such an individual possesses a self-struggling (*jihad*) character, observes the

proper manner of worship, remains conscious of the value of time, and intends to be of benefit to others.¹²

At the next level, the family, the primary tasks include judicious choice of one's life partner, educating the children in the faith, and inviting other families to it. Then follows society, which is conceived as an ensemble of families. At that point, the task is oriented to solving common social problems. Out of that project a Muslim state takes shape, and an ensemble of such states on the world stage provides the realistic basis of some sort of caliphate. Somehow out of that accomplishment the whole world gradually becomes Islamized.

Clearly, Islam as invoked in the doctrines of the Brothers is fundamentally a *social* project, even though the clearest tasks are those connected to individual potentials, proclivities, responsibilities, and rights. As such, we witness in them a sociopolitical organizational condensation of the intellectual heritage of 19th-century Islamic modernity. Much of intellectual Islam in the public sphere remained content with this general form until the present. However, there are (as there always were) obvious weaknesses attendant to this conception of Islam. First, the project does not specify Islam itself as an *object of knowledge*, even though learning the faith and adhering to it are highlighted. That is to say, it is assumed that the meaning of Islam is self-evident (or at least should be), and all one needs to do is simply learn the early traditions of the faith.

The method of knowledge is therefore *ad hoc*, reactive, and partial: One does not begin with the totality of Islam, but with a specific problem at hand, for which a religious answer is then sought out. The deficiency of this mode is that knowledge accrues defensively. The Quran is "scientific," we must argue, because we live in an age of science; Islam recognizes gender equality, we also have to say, when confronted with a modern conception of gender relations; if we identify the essence of Islam as the duty to fight its enemies, it is because colonial and imperial forces seem to have come to Muslim lands from without; and so on.

This basic deficiency is responsible in many ways for the *immediacy* characterizing modern public Islam, precisely as it was inspired by Afghani and Abdo. In that form, modern public Islam is quite analogous to secularism in its *closeness to earth*. Whether advocated as a social or political guide, the public Islam of the Brothers addresses immediate goals and tasks, and in that sense Islam could be offered up as "the solution" to all kinds of concrete questions. The only additive

is that, unlike secularism, activist public Islam invests in cultivating a moral personality, and that *alone*, rather than its theory of knowledge, offers sufficient qualitative distinction from secularism.

While this deficiency did not go unnoticed by many observers (for example the late Fazlur Rahman), the *public* quest for offering an Islamic theory of knowledge with wide social appeal, that is to say a new *public hermeneutics*, does not begin in earnest until roughly the 1960s, does not generate sufficient audience until the 1980s, and has yet to embody itself in stable political and social organizations. The thought systems employed in this emerging trend combine Sufi traditions, Islamic hermeneutics, and an avowed scientific outlook. What is sociologically remarkable about such a movement is that it evolved in different Islamic societies and took form through the work of various public intellectuals independently of each other. Yet in spite of their very different circumstances and reference points, such public intellectuals converge on a few pivotal points.

These points address more coherently and fully than the Brothers' ideology not only how a revived Islam in the public sphere harmonizes itself with global modernity, but also how such an Islam could proceed a few steps *ahead* of such modernity. Whereas the Brothers' program responded to modern models of secular collective identity—such as nationalism—largely reactively and defensively, the new hermeneutic revolution in public Islam moves away from that task to address a framework of collective identity and practice that is postnational and even postmodern. In contrast to the conscious mobilization and activism of the Brothers, the work of the scattered public hermeneuts has converged on a central philosophical core, even though they have been working independently of each other in such distinct environments as Sudan, Turkey, Egypt, and Iran. This apparently unplanned convergence suggests an underlying similarity of fundamental tasks confronting Islamic social philosophy across broad expanses of the Muslim world.

In a sense, whereas the primary tasks identified by the heritage of Islamic modernity since the 19th century were oriented toward *organizing society*, those identified by the new hermeneutics aim primarily at *organizing knowledge*. In the nascent hermeneutic movement, represented by the work and influence of such thinkers as Mahmoud Taha in Sudan, Fethullah Gülen in Turkey, Muhammad Shahrur in Syria, and Abdolkarim Soroush in Iran, social progress in a global, modern world is tied to a proper *method* of knowledge. The primary texts of the

faith cannot be approached selectively and defensively. One first has to develop a *total idea* regarding how such relics from the past *invite* the modern believer to use them. The ancient text does not stand above the modern reader, whose relationship to the text could then only be one of passive assimilation. Rather, the process of understanding begins with the believer himself. The relationship to the text is dialectical rather than unidirectional. Only in that sense does an ancient text live on across vastly different epochs.

The first public salvos of this new Islamic hermeneutics were forged by public intellectuals who eventually became the reference points of calm social movements operating in very different contexts, like Taha in Sudan and Gülen in Turkey. Both emerge out of Sufi traditions and their work essentially represents a modern intellectualization of Sufism. Both composed the bulk of their work in the 1950s and 1960s. Their work corresponds very closely to another trend which finally crystallized in the 1980s and 1990s out of the sciences, best embodied in the work of Shahrur in Syria and Soroush in Iran—the former having been a professor of engineering at Damascus University for most of his career before turning to Islam, the latter having been educated in Germany and England as a philosopher of science.

In all these works, Islam is identified not in terms of identity, that is, not as “our” religion, in the manner of the Brothers and virtually the entire spectrum of political Islam. Instead, Islam is presented as an evolutionary natural religion of humanity, and it transforms as humanity comes to know more of its own truth. In the words of Taha, “[intuitive] Islam as such is the religion of humanity. Its intention is to entertain the human illusion inspired by the will to freedom, until it steadily surpasses it into a firmer wisdom, whose fruit would be the conscious Islam. Islam as the religion of humanity appeared alongside Reason, and kept evolving alongside the development of Reason in its long history, from a weak and naïve genesis into an acquired and wise conclusion.”¹³

Taha begins, typically for Sufis, with a general conception of humanity. Only after lengthy deliberations does he move backwards into specific issues confronting his community. The primary principle behind this approach is that God cannot possibly be more concerned with the petty minutia of earthly squabbles than with large issues of human existence. It is in the nature of God to highlight large principles, even though humans in any epoch can only have a partial understanding of

such principles, bounded as they are by the limited horizons of their specific conditions.

Out of this central idea, Taha highlights a major distinction in the Quran between the earlier chapters revealed to Muhammad in Mecca versus the later ones revealed to him while he was in Medina. In doing so, Taha magnified a distinction *within* the Quran, which for most *ulama* before him had little hermeneutic value. For Taha, however, the distinction was central to his theory: The Meccan Quran, which contains the holy text's most peaceful, reflective, and universal verses, was *the* essential Quran. By contrast, the Medinian Quran, which contains the rules regulating society, conflict, commerce, law, and many aspects of everyday life, was derivative, situational, specific to its time, and therefore less binding on humanity.

Blasphemous as that idea might have been, Taha packaged it with such a coherent logic and surrounded himself with enough social backing to emerge triumphant out of his first court trial on the charge of heresy in 1968—itself a bizarre concoction even in the context of the stormy legal history of modern Sudan. Logically, Taha justified his novel interpretation with the aid of the very Quranic principle of *naskh*, or “abrogation.” The originality of Taha was evident in his use of this principle in the exact opposite way it had been traditionally used, a practice popularized even further by the legal scholar Abdullahi an-Na'im, one of Taha's most notable followers in the West.

Acknowledged in a couple Quranic verses as a possible approach to reading the Quran, the doctrine of *naskh* had traditionally been understood by Muslim jurists to refer to the chronological sequence of Quranic revelation. That is, if a later verse in the Quran contradicted an earlier one, the later was understood to have abrogated the earlier. Taha, however, rejected that interpretation: *Naskh* cannot possibly mean abrogation. After all, God, the all-knowing, obviously has no need to abrogate what He had just said. *Naskh* rather means *postponement* of the *earlier* statement until the right time, and it is the essential statement that had been said *earlier*. A later statement can only be secondary or derivative. That is naturally so because it is the essence of religion that is revealed first. It is also obviously so because the Quran itself changes its tone in Medina, moving away from large cosmic and humanistic concerns and into regulating the everyday issues confronting the community of believers. Thus in Medina the Quran spoke to a specific historical community in a language it could understand and

in a way suitable to those transient conditions, whereas in Mecca the Quran spoke transhistorically to all humanity.

The point does not lead by necessity to the conclusion that the Medinian Quran is less holy than the Meccan Quran. Rather, the point could simply be that God, in revealing both a primary and secondary Quran, had meant by the latter to illustrate to humanity how the timeless message revealed in the Meccan text must be perpetually revived by humanity in every epoch in ways that correspond to that epoch's limits and possibilities.

This is basically the same point reached later and using different concepts by Shahrur and Soroush, independently of each other as well as of Taha. The very same idea had likewise emerged earlier and independently in another very different context, as one of the central themes in *Risale-i Nur* by Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877–1960), the legendary predecessor of the contemporary Gülen in Turkey. Nursi, also combining Sufi reflections with modern science, emphasized how the holy book possessed different faces with which it looked at every epoch in the history of humanity. Today for example, it is possible, with a proper approach to God's text, to see how it speaks to us in our modern language (i.e., the language of science) whereas to earlier generations it had spoken in accordance with the prevailing language of their times. In doing so, God does not change his mind when humanity changes, neither does He obey science because we believe now that He should. Rather, in every epoch He says the same eternal truth, but in a way that can only be understood by people inhabiting those times. The proposition that there is an eternal truth logically dictates that we can understand only one facet of it at any given time—because we ourselves are not eternal.

This observed interpretive convergence in such unrelated locations as Sudan and Turkey is even more striking when we appraise the fact that the thought systems concerned emerged within vastly different sociopolitical systems. Another striking parallel, still, is that both Nursi and Taha got in trouble with the state, indicating that governments did not view their work as harmless philosophical speculation. Nursi was repeatedly imprisoned and his work banned as a threat to the secular order, whereas Taha was repeatedly prosecuted because his work was seen as a threat to the religious order. Taha was eventually executed by the collapsing "Islamic" regime of Numeiry in 1983. Nursi primarily sought to challenge not so much "secularism" as materialism and the erosion of spiritual life in modernity, whereas Taha sought to combat

the obscurantism of the religious establishment and the tendency for religion to be misappropriated for practical political uses.

Both programs, therefore, could be understood as *anti-political* in nature. They did not aim at state power even though the state saw them as threats. Instead, directly or indirectly, they sought to strengthen the spiritual quality of society, and to do so in a way that would logically conform to the knowledge-based character of modernity. At the same time they sought to foster the social capital that was being replaced by such factors as strong modern states, increased social dislocation, and pervasive materialist philosophies of life and society.

The fact that these Islamic tendencies established themselves on the social map in spite of repression indicates a significant modern demand for fresh styles of interpretation that protect spiritual life by *aligning* it with modern styles of thought, while at the same time protect society against a myriad of large new alien forces, *including* the modern state. Nursi's *Risale-i Nur* flouted the Kemalist state's ban on religious publications by circulating as handwritten copies throughout Turkey. By the time it was finally printed in 1956, it is estimated that 600,000 handwritten copies had been made. Building on his work, Gülen's own organization now has an impressive record,¹⁴ with millions of followers, a daily newspaper, a television channel, a radio station, and an abundant circulation of videos and cassettes. His movement has managed to recruit important intellectuals and it runs hundreds of schools in Turkey, in addition to about two hundred more around the world, mostly in the Central Asian republics but also in China and East Africa.

The fact that something like the Gülen movement has now propelled itself into the global public sphere from a strong base in the national public sphere is structurally analogous to the trajectories of virtually all other experiments of the new public hermeneutics of intellectual Islam. Contending, like many do, that Gülen represents a "Turkish" Islam or an Islam that is at peace with a particular nationalism explains little, because virtually all varieties of the hermeneutic revolution are so articulated as to be at peace with *any* particular identity. It may be natural for nationalists to want to know who is with or against their nation, but the new public hermeneutics spell out the contours of a social movement that is not for or against any nation—and as such this movement does not appear as contentious as the other varieties of political Islam. The core idea of the new public hermeneutics is that there are two facets of the faith—a permanent and universal essence,

on the one hand, and a particularistic human capacity for understanding it, on the other. The fact that any human understanding will always be limited and partial means that there can be no authority that could offer a transcendental and transhistorical interpretation of Islam.

This standpoint opens up the faith to pluralism and contestation, as one would expect. However from the point of view of belief, suspending the requirement of understanding *the essence* of the faith cannot possibly remain satisfactory for long. No faith system can remain very meaningful if not accompanied by a persuasive public philosophy spelling out how a spiritual life ought to look in modern society. Thus while it may originally appear lackadaisical in terms of its social outcome, the new public hermeneutics actually activate an intellectual quest for new *social* criteria for spiritual life and spiritual action.

In short, the question then becomes how to regulate the social life of the faith if the human understanding of it can only be partial and particular. This is precisely where the new public hermeneutics become highly inventive, since the rules guiding situational interpretation need to be rigorously defended. The public hermeneutics offer various guidelines, but virtually all advise as a starting point a philosophical reflection on the actual experience of social existence, rather than referring immediately to the holy text. Soroush's method, for example, consists of quasi-Nietzschean¹⁵ prioritization of "life." That is, we begin with basic concepts that we all deem necessary for life, since it is such concepts that we are most likely to accept naturally and intuitively as embodying self-evident virtue (for example, "justice" or "truth"). When we reflect on why we regard such concepts to embody any virtue at all, we recognize that the virtuous is that which serves the very practice of life.

What this means is that we do not live in order to tell the truth; rather, we pursue the truth because it is necessary for life. Concepts like truth, justice, or morality are *immanent in life*. They do not arrive to us out of a transcendental realm from without, because if the capacity to assimilate them does not already lie within us, there is no mechanism by which we can genuinely accept them. Likewise, we certainly do not learn what is proper for life from official pronouncements. Put simply, we do not learn such a central concept as "justice" from religion (or government). Rather, we accept religion (or government) *because* it is just. The same principle applies to morality: We do not live for the sake of morality. Rather, morals make sense to us because they

serve life. Life itself does not serve the cause of morality; it is the other way around.

Is this secular consciousness? The answer is *not yet*, and perhaps not ever. Beginning with “life” indicates a pragmatic inclination—“pragmatic,” of course, in a more philosophically guided sense than has become customary for us to infer when we hear the term. This pragmatism reveals that there is little point in separating religion and state *in a religious society*. In such a society, after all, it is simply natural for all issues to be evaluated and discussed with reference to religion, whether explicitly or implicitly, and this phenomenon is by no means restricted to Islam. Marx’s remarks about the United States remain at least as valid *today and here* as they did in 1843.

What the public hermeneutics of modern Islam are suggesting today is something different, however. The religion that is part of the natural life of society cannot meaningfully be separated from the state, because it cannot be separated from *any* issue of public life. There is, however, a very significant amendment being proposed now: The religion that cannot be so sequestered is *not* the official religion of the establishment or even of the text, frozen in time as it tends to be in the hands of its noisiest (and thus most feared) standard-bearers. On the contrary, it is the *lived* religion of the silent majority, which, *because* living still, evolves naturally alongside humanity’s Reason. And it does so because humanity has never lived by Reason alone. ●

Notes

1. Notably since the presidency of Jimmy Carter, the first “born-again” president in the contemporary period. For an overview, see Sara Diamond, *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right* (New York: Guilford, 2000).
2. The larger issue of Turkey’s accession into the European Union casts a wider net around these debates, as it is a question of integrating an entirely different country rather than resident immigrant communities. For an excellent recent collection on this issue, see Claus Leggewie, ed., *Die Türkei in Europa: Die Positionen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004). The cultural side of the issue in this collection clusters around inherently insoluble issues concerning “the identity of Europe.” When the debate concerns *practical* matters, however, such as specific economic, political, and legal reforms, there is little disagreement as to what a member country within the EU ought to look like. In these areas the debate concerns only Turkey’s ability to follow through on what is required.
3. Except for family law, which evolved much more conservatively than other branches of the law, and continues to be viewed by the religious establishment as its proper domain.
4. See Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

5. The reforms in Egypt were directly motivated by the failure of the old Mamluk system to defend Egypt against occupation by Napoleon's forces in 1798–1801. In the Ottoman Empire, the reforms were also directly related to successive military losses against European powers over a longer period. The military institutions of the Ottomans were modernized at a faster pace than other parts of the system, which may partially explain why Turkish modernity following WWI tended to be led by the military, and, as a consequence, relied on authoritarianism, the notion of the military as a guardian institution, and the personality cult of Atatürk as a foundational national myth.
6. I am using "conservative" here as a term of convenience, mainly to refer to institutional rigidity and reluctance to change patterns of behaviors embedded in institutionalism. Obviously, the term cannot so clearly and invariably refer to "doctrine." For example, the Ottoman Empire officially subscribed to the Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence, that is, the most "liberal" (also a term of convenience) legal school within Sunni Islam.
7. See Hamid Enayet, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1982). For a critique of the Khilafat movement, see Hamza Alavi, "Ironies of History: Contradictions of the Khilafat Movement," in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, vol. XVII, no. 1 (1997): 1–17.
8. See H. A. R. Gibb, "The Evolution of Government in Early Islam," in *Studia Islamica* 4 (1955): 1–17.
9. Muhammad Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).
10. For a short recent review, see Kamran Asdar Ali, "Pakistani Islamists Gamble on the General," *Middle East Report* 231 (Summer 2004): 2–7.
11. As condensed in its semi-official web site <http://www.ummah.net/ikhwan>.
12. See *Five Tracts of Hasan al-Banna*, Charles Wendell, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
13. Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, *Ar-Risalah Athaniya Min Al-Islam (The Second Message of Islam)*, in *Nahwa Mashru' Mustaqbali Lil-Islam* (Beirut: Al-Markiz ath-Thaqafai al-Arabi and Kuwait: Dar Qirtas, 2002), p. 141.
14. For a recent appraisal, see M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito, ed., *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Global Impact of Fethullah Gülen's Nur Movement* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003).
15. Soroush, of course, does not call himself Nietzschean, but the underlying similarities are striking. That being said, his major references include various Islamic philosophical traditions, Western philosophy of science, and Sufi poetry (notably Rumi's *Mathnawi*).