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# How “Islamic” is Secularism? Lessons from Cape Town

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Modernization theory rests on the assumption that to be modern is to be secular, and that state secularism and societal secularization is an inevitable outcome of modernization processes. Developments have long since demonstrated the fallacy of these assumptions. The organizing master narrative for social science analysis of developments in the “Muslim world” since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the re-Islamization “from below” of large parts of the “Muslim world” since then has, if anything, been that of an Islamic resurgence which sweeps away everything that stands in its way. Hence, in a by no means uncharacteristic assertion, Mahmood sweepingly claims that there had been “two decades of the ascendancy of global religious politics” prior to September 11 2001.<sup>1</sup>

Such master narratives provide powerful explanatory paradigms and historical narratives for the organization and structuring of disparate experiences. But much like modernization theory, these particular master narratives tend to start from the inherently flawed epistemological premise that there is but one “royal road” to the understanding of Muslims and the “Muslim world.” More often than not, they miss the fact that the secular and the religious are deeply implicated in one another in any given societal context, and the extent to which resurgent Islam and re-Islamization are in themselves phenomena of secularization—the latter understood as an increasing differentiation of spheres.<sup>2</sup> Nor does it provide a useful framework for distinguishing between secularism as a theory and a practice in particular contexts, or for that matter for distinguishing between nominal and practising Muslims.

Prominent post-structuralist and post-colonial anthropologists like Asad and Mahmood<sup>3</sup> have provided legitimacy for the construction of these master narratives. Asad and Mahmood both tend to posit Muslims as pre-eminently and determinatively religious, and to see Islam as a religious tradition which articulates a radical difference or alterity to secular liberalism. This is apparent from Asad’s statement to the effect that “the Islamic tradition ought to lead us to question many of the liberal categories themselves” and Mahmood’s call for a “critical scrutiny” of liberal notions from the “standpoint of Islamic traditions.”<sup>4</sup> Such statements are premised on a notion of secularism and liberalism as being of “Western” origin and anathema to Islamic traditions—as well as a fundamental “ethnographic refusal” to engage with Muslims’ actual experiences with secularism and liberalism, and to explore non-“Western” genealogies of secularism. Asad argued in his programmatic statement from 1986 that “one should go beyond drawing parallels and attempt a systematic exploration of differences” between Islamic and other traditions. Furthermore, “for the anthropologist of Islam, the proper theoretical beginning is therefore an instituted practice ... into which Muslims are inducted as Muslims.”<sup>5</sup>

Foundational religious texts play a crucial role in Asad’s concept of an Islamic tradition, as they do for Mahmood. The problem here is of course that Asad’s formulation of what a supposed anthropology of Islam ought to be about predetermines the outcome. The anthropology of Islam, it seems, ought primarily to be about practising Muslims and their embodied and discursive engagement with foundational religious texts, period. But surely the question as to whether a Muslim is practicing or not is a question to be determined in the course of the empirical enquiry, and not at the outset? This is perhaps particularly

**Secularism is often seen as anathema to Islamic traditions. The findings from research on the responses of Muslims in Cape Town to state secularism and societal secularization in post-apartheid South Africa indicate the emergence of an ambiguous accommodation between Muslims and the secular state, and thus challenge reductionist assumptions about the relation of Islamic traditions to secularism.**

so in contexts in which Muslims live as minorities in secular and liberal societies, contexts in which the “cognitive contamination” from non-religious normative models can seldom be shut completely out, and in which religious faith as practice ceases to form part of the doxic or “taken-for-granted.”

Perhaps it is time to replace the misnomer of the so-called “anthropology of Islam” with the “anthropology of Muslims.” In my Ph.D. dissertation<sup>6</sup> I problematize master narratives premised on the incompatibility between secularism and Islamic traditions by exploring the responses of Muslims in Cape Town, South Africa to the advent of a post-apartheid society. Post-apartheid South Africa is a society in which dominant sections of the new social and political elites subscribe to the secular and liberal values enshrined in the 1996 Constitution, and it is also a society which has seen a process of a contested secularization since 1994. My findings suggest that there has been an ambiguous accommodation on the part of Cape Muslims and their ulama with the new social and political regime. This ambiguous accommodation is based on an appreciation of the fact that the post-apartheid state is premised on a secular principle of neutrality as between religions and their adherents—which the apartheid state, with its privileging of reformist Protestant Christianity, was not. Muslim ulama have selectively appropriated a discourse of human rights and constitutional values in order to advance the religious rights of Muslims in the realm of family law and in state institutions, at the same time as they have contested the constitutional and human rights values that they see as anathema to Islamic normativities—such as the legalization of same-sex practice and relationships, abortion, and pornography and the abolition of the death penalty. But this ambiguous accommodation is also based on the fact that secularization among Muslims in hybrid and multicultural Cape Town predates the advent of a post-apartheid society, and is implicated in the practical accommodations between Muslims and non-Muslims in underprivileged communities, townships, and informal settlements on the Cape Flats (the vast area outside the City Bowl where most of Cape Town’s population live). Cape Muslims are therefore in profound ways entangled in the secular logic of a secularizing state.

## A short history of Muslims in Cape Town

Cape Town, with an estimated 3.1 million inhabitants, has had a Muslim presence at least since 1658. It is home to approximately 47% of South Africa’s Muslim population. Muslims made up 1.46% of the national population in 2001. Cape Muslims are predominantly Shaf’i. The largest and most influential Sunni ulama organization in Cape Town is the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC), established in 1945. In Muslim social imaginaries in South Africa, Cape Muslims are, much like the cityscape of Cape Town itself, often thought of as “liberal.” This imagined “liberalness” makes reference to the fact that many Cape Muslim females are employed outside the home (by choice or necessity), that there is often a remarkable absence of strict gender segregation in private and public spheres among Cape Muslims, but also to a more lax and permissive attitude toward morality and sexuality among Cape Muslims of all social strata (but perhaps more so among Muslims in underprivileged and mixed neighbourhoods in Cape Town). Cape Town’s Muslims are fractured by social status, ethnicity, and religious orientation. A view to

the effect that Islam is determinative for the actions and behaviours of Cape Muslims therefore does not bring us very far. Most Cape Muslims are classified as coloureds for the purposes of censuses, followed by South African Indians and black Africans. The latter group has seen the strongest growth in the number of adherents to Islam, as obstacles to proselytization and interaction under apartheid have disappeared, and as Muslims from other parts of the African continent have established a presence in Cape Town.

## Research on Islam in prison

An exploration of the transformation of the religious rights of Muslim inmates in a prison in Cape Town provide vistas to the ways in which post-apartheid secularism has generated new openings for the recognition of what many Cape Muslims regard as "Muslim religious rights" within state institutions. Under apartheid, the prison service had been an instrument in the state-supported empowerment of white Afrikaners: in 1990, 90% of senior prison officers were white, and many of these had a background in Christian churches. In 2005, I found that there were only a handful of prison warders and officials who were Muslims. Christian chaplains still had a privileged position within the prison service. Still, there had been significant achievements as far as the recognition of Muslim inmates rights to religious practice in the course of the 1990s. These were the heydays of "human rights talk" in post-apartheid South Africa. Guarantees for freedom of religion for inmates in South African prisons were provided under Section 14 (1–4) of the Correctional Services Act 111 of 1998. On the basis of tactical alliances with post-apartheid prison managers with a background in the anti-apartheid struggle and as such sympathetic towards the invocation of human rights discourse, and in spite of strong internal opposition to these measures, voluntary Muslim prison imams and the ulama organizations on the outside had managed to ensure the rights of Muslim inmates to regular provisions of halal (ritually clean) food, to being serviced by a Muslim chaplain (from 1998), and to the use of a prison hall for the purpose of weekly *zuhr* (midday) prayer (from 1999). Post-apartheid secularism and the nominal state commitment to neutrality between the adherents of the various religions in South Africa that this entails in this case seems to have provided a grounds from which arguments for greater religious rights for South African Muslims could be made.

## New framework for thinking the secular and religious

Inasmuch as the post-structuralist and post-colonial anthropology of Islam of, for instance, Asad and Mahmood is premised on a fixation with Muslims' radical alterity and difference and is anchored in the view that secularism is "Western" in its origins, it constitutes secularism as anathema to Islamic traditions. It can only do so by neglecting pre-co-

lonial and non-"Western" genealogies of secularism, and the actual experiences with secularism of Muslims in particular contexts (particularly in minority contexts), and in so doing, subscribing to what essentially amounts to an ethno-centric view of secularism.<sup>7</sup> There can be no doubt that a secular state like the South African post-apartheid state is premised on a differentiation between secular and religious spheres, and as such delimits the legitimate expression of religious sentiments in the public and political spheres. But given the fact that 86% of South Africans declare themselves as religious, South African state secularism cannot be seen as determinative on the level of individual consciousnesses, and essentially remains contested. State secularism and societal secularization in post-apartheid South Africa can in a certain sense be seen as having set in motion a process of re-Islamization among Cape Muslims. It finds its most visible articulations among Cape Muslims in the expansion of religious education, the proliferation of Muslim media, in greater identification with a global imagined community of Muslims, the ummah, and an increased emphasis on appropriate dress for female Muslims.

If we venture beyond the ideologization of secularism and of Islamic traditions in the works of some post-structuralist anthropologists of Islam, we might discover that secularism has in some contexts provided a defence of the rights of religious minorities of the kind that Muslims in post-apartheid South Africa constitute. For all their contestations of a particular law sanctioned by the Constitution of 1996 and of the secularization of South African society in general, it seems that it is precisely this that mainstream Muslims in contemporary South Africa have come to discover. Secularism may therefore in practice, if not necessarily in theory, be more "Islamic" than what is commonly assumed.

Sindre Bangstad was Ph.D. Fellow at ISIM from 2003 to 2007 and recently defended his dissertation *Global Flows, Local Appropriations: Facets of Secularisation and Re-Islamization among Contemporary Cape Muslims* (Amsterdam University Press, 2007).  
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## Notes

1. Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 323.
2. Sami Zubaida, "Islam and Secularization," *Journal of Asian Social Science* 33, no. 3 (2005): 445.
3. See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam And Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival And The Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
4. Cf. Nermeen Shaikh, *Asia Source* Interview with Talal Asad, 16 December 2002 at [http://www.asiasource.org/news/special\\_reports/asad.cfm](http://www.asiasource.org/news/special_reports/asad.cfm) and Saba Mahmood's response, "Questioning Liberalism, Too" to Khaled Abou El Fadl's "Islam and The Question of Democracy," *Boston Review*, April/May 2003.
5. Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1986), 4 and 15.
6. Sindre Bangstad, *Global Flows, Local Appropriations: Facets of Re-Islamization and Secularisation Among Contemporary Cape Muslims* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).
7. João Pina-Cabral, "Three points on secularism and anthropology," *Social Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (2003): 329.



**A rally to protest the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Cape Town, 2006**

PHOTO BY O. ESACK, 2006