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Redefining Secularism and its Problematics in Arab Contexts

Azmi Bishara's Theoretical and Methodological Contributions[**]

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إعادة فهم العلمانية وإشكالاتها في السياقات العربية

المساهمات النظرية والمنهجية لعزمي بشارة

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Abstract: This study explores Azmi Bishara's contributions to the study of secularisation in the Arab context. It argues that Bishara's analysis of the processes of secularisation in the West opens new horizons to approaching secularisation in Arab countries. After a close reading of the last five centuries of European history, Bishara concludes that the modern state is the basis of political and social secularisation, differentiating the religious from the mundane, and providing space for new forms of religiosity to emerge. Bishara argues that contemporary Arab and Islamic countries are not an exception to the same processes of secularisation, rejecting the widely held assumption that Islamic religiosity represents an intrinsic religious or civilizational peculiarity in adapting to the differentiation of the mundane from the religious. The specificity of these countries is historical and is related to the conditions of the modern state's emergence and its legitimacy in the Arab context, a point Bishara emphasises in his book *The Arab Question*. This specificity explains the nature of contemporary patterns of Islamic religiosity, including those perpetuated by contemporary Islamic movements, as being one element of modern secularisation in Arab countries. Although ideologically resistant to secularism, these movements ultimately submit to the framework and logic of the modern state, embodying the differentiation of the mundane from the religious. Bishara's theory proposes a re-evaluation of political Islam and sectarianism in contemporary Arab countries, treating them not as indicative of the absence of secularisation, but as two of its possible manifestations. In the end, they are a manifestation of the compound union between religion and the realms differentiated therefrom as part of modern secularisation.

Keywords: Secularism, Azmi Bishara, the Arab Question, the State, Secularisation, Political Islam.

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الملخص: تسلّط هذه الدراسة الضوء على مساهمات عزمي بشارة في فهم العلمنة في السياق العربي، وتُحاجّ بأنّ فهم صيرورات العلمنة الغربية يفتح آفاقًا جديدة لإعادة مقاربة إشكالات العلمنة في الدول العربية. فمن خلال استقراء مسار القرون الخمسة الأخيرة من التاريخ الأوروبي، يستخلص بشارة أنّ الدولة بمفهومها الحديث هي قاعدة العلمنة السياسية والاجتماعية التي تمايزت بموجبها مجالات الدنيا من الدين، والتي نشأت بموجبها كذلك أنماطٌ جديدة من التديّن. وانطلاقًا من رصد مختلف تجلّيات صيرورات العلمنة الحديثة، يظهر كيف أنّ البلدان العربية والإسلامية المعاصرة لا تمثل استثناءً من هذه الصيرورات، كما لا يمثّل التديّن الإسلامي خصوصية دينية أو حضارية جوهرانية في التكيّف مع وقائع التمايز الدنيوي من الديني في العالم الحديث كما يُعتقد. فخصوصية هذه البلدان هي خصوصية تاريخية تتعلق بشروط نشأة الدولة الحديثة واهتزاز شرعيتها في السياق العربي، وهو ما يكثّفه بشارة في مفهوم المسألة العربية. وتفسّر هذه الخصوصية طبيعةَ أنماط التديّن الإسلامي المعاصرة، بما في ذلك الأنماط التي تكرّسها الحركات الإسلامية المعاصرة بمختلف تلويناتها، وهي جزء من ظواهر العلمنة الحديثة في البلدان العربية. فرغم أنها تتبنى أيديولوجيا مقاومة العلمانية، فإنها تخضع في المطاف الأخير لإطار الدولة الحديثة ومنطقها، وتستبطن بأشكال مختلفة حقيقة تمايز مجالات الدنيا من مجالات الدين. تقترح نظرية بشارة إعادة فهم ظواهر الإسلام السياسي والطائفية في البلدان العربية المعاصرة لا بوصفها ظواهر دالّة على انتفاء العلمنة، بل باعتبارها صورة من صورها الممكنة. فهي، في نهاية المطاف، صورة من الصور التي تندرج ضمن مقولة الوحدة المركّبة بين الديني والمجالات المتمايزة منه في العلمنة الحديثة.

كلمات مفتاحية: العلمانية، عزمي بشارة، المسألة العربية، الدولة، العلمنة، الإسلام السياسي.

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Introduction

It is perfectly legitimate for any researcher or thinker, of any national or cultural background, to attempt a new understanding of the processes of secularisation in modern western societies, and to formulate a new epistemic paradigm to account for its various phenomena. Such phenomena remain permanently open to epistemic reconsideration, and to a review of the ways in which they are understood as well as their conclusions. Nonetheless, when an Arab thinker who has dedicated his intellectual and research career to issues of concern to Arab societies engages in such an endeavour, examining the processes of Western secularisation in order to help readers understand those processes, it raises questions. To ensure that the picture is clear to readers from the start, it should be noted that Azmi Bishara's *Religion and Secularism in Historical Context* is not an ideological work similar to that of Islamists who see secularism as symbolic of absolute human corruption in opposition to Islam (symbolic, in turn, of absolute divine goodness), or as a product of a specifically Western Christian culture. From the very first pages, it is clear that Bishara is writing from a humanist and academic standpoint: that is, from an *anthropological* perspective. Hence, he approaches religion and religiosity as examples of broader human phenomena, assuming that secularism is a set of objective processes that have taken place in all modern human societies.

Bishara's attempt to reconceptualise Western processes of secularisation does not begin with the question of whether secularisation and transformations of religion are universal in Western societies. Instead, he departs from how this universality is commonly represented and understood, how its foundational elements are identified, and how its transforming phenomena are to be read. The prevailing conceptualisation of secularism as the separation of religion from state/politics implies the exclusion of religion from the public sphere and its transition to a private affair. The problem with understanding secularism in this sense is that it reifies the prevalent notion in contemporary ideological and academic literature that Arab-Islamic societies have been exempt from modern processes of secularisation, since it is assumed that the state in this context has never been separate from religion (i.e., Islam), which is strongly present in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres.

In the first and second parts of his book, *Religion and Secularism in Historical Context*, Bishara reconceptualises the processes of Western secularisation, re-exploring its most foundational and universal elements – the separation of religion from state and politics and its exclusion from the public sphere – in such a way as to put the problematics of secularisation in contemporary Arab-Islamic societies back on the table. Moreover, he does so not on the assumption that these societies are exempt from processes of secularisation or transformations in the modern world, but rather that the processes of secularisation affecting them have taken place under specific historical conditions.

A Historical Reconceptualization of European Modernity

The Emergence of the State as the Basis of Modern Secularisation

How does Bishara define secularisation? Near the end of the first part of his book, he states that secularisation is a historical process that affects various social fields, as well as human thought. It is an ongoing process of differentiation among sectors redefined by said differentiation, such as science and myth, the sacred and the profane, religion and the state, and others.[1] Bishara employs the term "differentiation" to presuppose the existence of elements that were at one stage combined into one organic unity, but later diverged through a known historical process. Understood in this way, differentiation is the mainstay of Bishara's understanding

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[1]   Azmi Bishara, *al-Dīn wa-l-ʿIlmāniyya fī Siyāq Tārīkhī*, Part 1: *al-Dīn wa-l-Tadayyun* (Doha/ Beirut: ACRPS, 2013), pp. 406-407.

of secularisation. Hence, it may be said that "secularisation everywhere is a process of differentiation in areas or domains in the world".[2]

Differentiation thus understood is "a process through which all societies pass".[3] One of the most important turning points in this process in ancient civilizations was the emergence of monotheistic religions that deemed the Divine to be above the world.

> *monotheism in this sense constitutes the process of God's separation from the world, only for the two to reunite again through revelation (the prophets and apostles), scripture, the religious establishment, and, in the case of Christianity, through incarnation. In every case, relationships exist in areas that were once distinct and separate, but which became more compound units after mediation brought their elements together.*[4]

Bishara believes that if the differentiation of worldly elements from the domain of religion is an objective process that takes place in various historical and civilizational contexts, then the differentiations within Western modernity over the past five centuries constitute the turning point at which the secular idea began taking on all the dimensions that we are currently witnessing. What is the distinction between the differentiations present in modernity, and those in pre-modernity? Bishara states that:

> *much can be said about the difference [between differentiation in modernity and differentiation in pre-modernity]. However, this can all be summed up in two points. The first is the emergence of modern science, which has changed the interpretation of human life and its natural environment in one field after another. The second is the emergence of the modern state, to which we might add changes in culture and the accompanying patterns of consciousness.*[5]

Science and the state in their current senses are the foundations of the processes of secularisation in modernity. The former triggered the emergence and increasing independence of specific patterns to deal with natural and human phenomena by understanding, explaining, and controlling these phenomena through the use of cognitive tools, disregarding religious interpretations and teachings. The latter (the state) constituted the basic factor that led to the independence of the political, social, economic, and cultural spheres from the sphere of religion in modern societies. The state here is "that sovereign political entity which possesses the sole authority to enact laws for society, and to use violence legitimately against a particular people. In the modern state, this sovereignty is tied to a particular people and land".[6] This definition applies to the state as a modern phenomenon, in contrast to the ethnological and Marxist definitions which equate the state with power and authority as a phenomenon deeply rooted in history. Among ethnologists, this phenomenon is associated with the emergence of urban life and, among Marxists, with the emergence of social classes and private property.

Bishara's extensive exploration of European history shows that the establishment of the modern state in European societies "required at least two centuries of internal and external conflicts to impose the concept of the state on the empires' major ruling families, on the feudal class of principalities and dukedoms, and on the papal system".[7] More importantly, his intensive analysis of the intellectual, political

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[2] Azmi Bishara, *al-Dīn wa-l-ʿIlmāniyya fī Siyāq Tārīkhī*, Part 2, Vol. 2: al-ʿIlmāniyya wa-Naẓariyyāt al-ʿAlmana (Doha/ Beirut: ACRPS, 2015), p. 182.

[3] Bishara, *al-Dīn wa-l-ʿIlmāniyya*, Part 1, p. 407.

[4] Ibid., p. 409.

[5] Bishara, *al-Dīn wa-l-ʿIlmāniyya*, Part 2, Vol. 2, p. 223.

[6] Azmi Bishara, *al-Dīn wa-l-ʿIlmāniyya fī Siyāq Tārīkhī*, Part 2, Vol. 1: al-ʿIlmāniyya wa-l-ʿAlmana: al-Ṣayrūra al-Fikriyya (Doha/ Beirut: ACRPS, 2015), p. 305.

[7] Ibid., p. 138.

and social trajectories of European modernity led Bishara to conclude that the process of secularisation/ differentiation in modernity contributed not only to the emergence of the modern state, but also to this state becoming a central factor in the transformation of modern societies. When we speak of the state as a "central factor", we mean it contributed actively and directly to the emergence and development of many basic transformations that characterise modern societies.

On the Relationship of the Modern State to Religion: More Compound than Separate

Bishara devotes large sections of his book to an exploration of the historical development of the relationship between Christianity and Europe's nascent modern states. Bishara pauses to examine particular situations, such as "the rise of the power of the state in absolute monarchies which married temporal authority to the Church"[8] (seventeenth-century England), and "the subjection of the Church to the national state, the latter being viewed as the seat of political and legal authority"[9] (eighteenth-century France). In Bishara's view, these historical conditions reflect stages in the evolution of secularisation, although they still reveal no "trace of secularisation in the modern sense of the separation of religion and state, still less the privatisation of religion—a rather late and, indeed, contemporary concept".[10]

After analysing these models of the state-religion relationship in the early stages of European modernisation, Bishara goes on to examine models from contemporary history. He observes that

the Catholic Church in Spain went from being an official state church to being one with no recognition or official endorsement, and active in a pluralistic civil society within a democratic system [...] Similarly, the Catholic Church in Brazil went from an elitist institution to a grassroots, civil entity, while Catholicism in the United States was transformed from a religious sect that was almost ethnic in nature [...] into one that was concerned with its parishioners' affairs within the framework of a secular system.[11]

Based on his analysis of the manifestations of religion and patterns of religiosity in current Western contexts, Bishara re-establishes the theoretical categories that shape our understanding of the relationship between the sacred and the mundane in the various domains and contexts of secularisation. In this context, Bishara generates all the theoretical possibilities that might arise from the concept of modern secularisation as the process through which the modern state and modern science pass, and the resulting differentiations of numerous areas of life from the scope of religion. Bishara states that

these differentiations are manifested in the process by which non-religious patterns of knowledge and practice become embedded in various areas from which religious awareness and practice are withdrawing. They also lead to the rise of the state's power over the religious establishment, and the logic of the state over religion. [Such differentiations] take certain forms, such as the neutralisation of the state in relation to religious affairs in order to protect religious freedom; state control over religion; or state action to reduce the role of religion in the public sphere, as a result of which tension arises between the sacred and the profane in various spheres of life.[12]

The definition of secularisation as various processes of differentiation diverges from the classical theory of secularisation on a key point, namely, that "differentiation does not mean the privatisation of the

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[8]   Bishara, *al-Dīn wa-l-ʿIlmāniyya,* Part 2, Vol. 2, p. 87.

[9]   Ibid., p. 141.

[10]   Ibid., p. 87.

[11]   Ibid., p. 211.

[12]   Ibid., p. 419.

religious sphere exclusively".[13] In other words, the decline of religiosity, the withdrawal of religion into the private sphere, and the separation of religion and state in constitutional and legal texts represent only specific cases of secularisation: processes in which the state exits from the sphere of religion and becomes an autonomous, worldly entity. According to Bishara, every instance of secularisation in modernity entails the differentiation of the state from religion and the prevalence of its logic over that of religion, with the state being viewed as an autonomous worldly entity. In the name of secularisation itself,

> *just as the boundaries between the public and the private change, so does the nature of the sacred and the mundane and their respective realms in the historical and cultural contexts (even if both are part of the world)... When the possibility of differentiation arose, so did the possibility of delineating new boundaries between the two spheres in the context of civilization, history, and the struggle among conflicting social forces and its representations.[14]*

Within this perspective falls the notion of a compound relationship between the sacred and the mundane, and especially between religion and state, which Bishara proposes as an alternative to the notion of separation. The notion of a compound relationship between the sacred and the mundane is an important theoretical implication of the concept of differentiation and a manifestation of its methodological, analytical, and explanatory richness. This richness is translated theoretically by Bishara in his reference to "approaching secularisation as part of the theory of modernity: that is, as a differentiation and articulation of social functions and institutions, which are then followed by a unity among these functions – not an organic or given unity, but a compound unity".[15] Therefore, the notion of "compound unity"is based logically on that of differentiation. Only when we affirm that "differentiation among the various areas of social and intellectual life is the foundation of modern society"do we allow for the possibility of arguing that "differentiation among visible elements that once constituted a single unit, then, produces a new, more compound unit in this world".[16]

In theory, Bishara insists on the distinction between an organic unit that contains no undifferentiated elements and a compound unit embodying the kinds of overlap that may occur among elements or fields that have been differentiated from each other. This is because the "overlap between two fields does not entail their unity, or that there is no separation between them. There is a difference between an original unit of undifferentiated elements, and an intrusion of one realm into the other".[17] The distinction between these two kinds of unity in its abstract and theoretical form may seem to be of no real significance. However, its significance becomes evident once it is embodied in the form of a systematic choice between contexts from the pre-modern secularisation era, and contexts from within modern secularisation. According to this choice,

> *secularisation […] is supposed to be a historical process that includes the unity of religion, politics, society, morality, and knowledge, as well as their perpetual articulation and differentiation, the dialectic of the separated elements and their struggle, followed by their reconstruction into a richer unit (more compound and more developed), and their differentiation anew.[18]*

In practise, this assumption implies a crucial distinction (at least in terms of gaining a historical understanding of the dynamics of religiosity) between "human collectives that preceded society and state"in

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[13]   Ibid., p. 216.
[14]   Ibid.
[15]   Ibid., p. 203.
[16]   Ibid., p. 419.
[17]   Ibid., p. 216.
[18]   Ibid., p. 221.

which religion was not a "self-contained domain",[19] and societies in which the state and its realms (e.g., political, economic, social, and cultural) have differentiated themselves from religion. In the latter situation, religion might deviate from the state and its realms of operation; however, it might also be intertwined with them in the form of compound units as may be observed in secularised countries of the modern West (state control of religion, religious institutions active in civil society, and religious groups that exert political and social pressure, etc.).

In sum, Bishara articulates the notion of a compound unity between the sacred and the mundane which defines the conditions of modern secularisation compared to the conditions that preceded it (i.e., when religion was an organic unit that included the worldly). This unity simultaneously accommodates the possibility of multiple relationships between the sacred and the mundane (particularly the political), as the process of secularisation differs from one historical and cultural context to another. Needless to say, different contexts allow different patterns of religiosity to emerge, each with their respective forms of compound units in response to the differentiation process and the absence of organic unity.

New Horizons for Approaching Issues of Islam, State and Society in Contemporary Arab Contexts

The secularisation paradigm as formulated by Bishara opens up new horizons for understanding many of the transformations of our contemporary world, where religious matters especially overlap with the political and social dimensions, foremost among which are the phenomena known to contemporary and current Arab societies. Bishara's paradigm allows for a rethinking of such phenomena, not as exceptions to the processes of secularisation but as specific expressions of these processes. Bishara makes a distinction between two understandings of specificity. The first is the specificity of cultural identity as indicative of certain quintessential, fixed qualities, which generally form the basis of the argument that Arab and Islamic societies should be excluded from the process of modern secularisation. The second is historical specificity, which relates to dynamic factors that change from one social and historical context to another.

Bishara does not consider secularism—or more precisely, secularisation as a process of differentiation—a civilizational peculiarity, but rather a historical peculiarity. He says, for example, in this regard that,

> just as integration [between religion and worldly domains] has existed in all civilizations, so too are the seeds of separation found in every civilization, and just as there is differentiation, there is also the reality of interrelatedness in every civilization, including that of Christianity. The question has to do with the historical phase under consideration, the nature of the social forces at work, and the prevailing intellectual structure—not a particular cultural essence.[20]

The Arab Question and the Specificity of State Problems in the Contemporary Arab Context

The approach taken to the problematic of secularisation in Arab societies relates to the historical context in which these societies presently find themselves. This context is summed up by Bishara with the term "the Arab question". The essence of the Arab question, as a contemporary political issue, lies in the fact that Arab nationalism has not succeeded in transforming itself from a cultural nationalism into a political nationalism embodied concretely by a unified Arab nation-state. This could have happened in the nineteenth century or the early twentieth century, but it was hindered by internal and external factors. Hence, the

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[19]   Ibid., p. 220.

[20]   Bishara, *al-Dīn wa-l-ʿIlmāniyya,* Part 2, Vol. 1, p. 804.

Arab question today has become multifaceted and more complex, considering that the failure to establish a unified state on the basis of a nationalist cultural bond coincided with the failure to establish territorial states that enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of their peoples.

This depiction of the Arab question is, in one sense at least, a description and analysis of the crisis of the modern state in the Arab region. It is a crisis of legitimacy for the territorial Arab states within the framework of the modern international state system. The Arab countries are still understood as having come into existence as part of a colonial scheme to fragment a single Arab nation. Consequently, Arab nationalist thought "has shown no interest in the emerging territorial state and has only known how to relate to it intellectually as a transitional stage towards unity, or as a legacy of colonial fragmentation. The catastrophic result is that Arab nationalist thought has sought to escape the theory of the state".[21]

The legitimacy crisis faced by the modern Arab state is a result of the incongruence between this state and cultural nationalist affiliation, as well as its synchronization and overlap with colonialist enterprises. After the eviction of colonial powers and armies, the legitimacy crisis persisted, and even deepened. Neither a united state congruent with cultural and nationalist affiliations, nor civil citizenship nations identifying with the existing territorial states came into existence. For, as Bishara notes,

> *if the territorial state had succeeded in forming a civil nation founded upon engagement in human rights-based citizenship as the safeguard against despotism rather than the clan or the sect, a praiseworthy separation—no matter how strange it may have seemed to some nationalists—would have occurred between a cultural Arab nationalism to which the majority of citizens in Arab countries belong, and a political nation based on citizenship in the territorial state, thus becoming a civil society inwardly, and a nation outwardly.[22]*

Bishara's primary intellectual project is to examine the Arab question and ways of resolving it. As for his historical analysis of modern secularisation and what becomes of religion and religiosity therein, it is an offshoot of the original project, although it could also be viewed as a self-contained endeavour. In order to understand the structural relationship between the two projects in Bishara's thought, we need to bring to mind the outcomes of his thinking on the Arab question, which are summed up in the following two statements. The first reads that "Arab nationalism can no longer apply itself by disregarding existing states. Therefore, it must meet with the democratic program to succeed and negate itself in democratic citizenship in the civil nation". As for the second, it reads "the Arab question means, among other things, that the elements that prevent the nation's realization inside and outside the territorial state are the same factors that impede democratic transition".[23]

This understanding of the Arab question, which links its solution structurally to democratic transformation in Arab countries, requires that we consider the relationship between religion and democracy given the important place Islam occupies in Arab societies. In the introduction to the first edition of *Fī al-Masʾala al-ʿArabiyya* [On the Arab Question], Bishara notes that his original plan was to write a book in two parts, but he then decided to turn each part into a stand-alone book. The first was *On the Arab Question*, while the second was to be published shortly thereafter (in 2007) under the title *al-Taḥawwul al-Dīmuqrāṭī: al-Dīn wa Anmāṭ al-Tadayyun* [Democratic Transition: Religion and Patterns of Religiosity].[24]

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[21] Azmi Bishara, *Fī al-Masʾala al-ʿArabiyya: Muqaddima li-Bayān Dīmuqrāṭī ʿArabī* (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2007), p. 217.

[22] Ibid., p. 200.

[23] Ibid., p. 246.

[24] See: Ibid., p. 8.

When Bishara published the first part of *Religion and Secularism in Historical Context*, he explained how his research and theoretical plan had changed once again or, rather, had expanded, and why "a radical change occurred in the project". The reason for this is that he quickly realised that the patterns of religiosity in current Arab societies cannot be analyzed outside of their historical contexts. Those are defined, first and foremost, by the process of modernisation, its shape and its circumstances, especially the ongoing process of secularisation.[25]

Religion and Secularism in Historical Context presents readers with several novel theories. They open up new horizons for understanding the phenomena of Islam in contemporary Arab societies as being modern and dynamic patterns of religiosity which, in essence, constitute the other side of the process of Arab secularisation and its historical peculiarities associated with the Arab question.

The Prospects for Understanding Islamic Religiosity vis-à-vis the Nature of the Existing Arab States

The intersection of Bishara's original project on "the Arab question"with his re-examination of religion and secularism within their historical context opens new horizons for construing the problematics of current patterns of Islamic religiosity in Arab countries. These patterns are integral to the difficulties surrounding the legitimacy of modern Arab states and their failure to transform into democratic states. We speak here of "new horizons"because they deviate from prevailing approaches that argue for "an Arab democratic exception"and the Arab countries' insusceptibility to secularism due to Islam's dominance in both state and society.

These new horizons first become evident when contrasted with the basic assumption underlying prevailing approaches, which stereotype Islam as a fixed, non-historical entity when, in reality,

> *from a sociological point of view, as it is embraced and practiced, Islam actually consists of numerous "Islams"which cannot be reduced to a single pattern, that is, an "essential pattern of religious entity"which is coherent, homogeneous, and impervious.*[26]

We cannot talk here about unique theoretical additions in Bishara's perspective, given that the statement that Islam is pluralistic in belief and practice is clear to any fair-minded researcher who gives serious consideration to direct, concrete data on the variables of society, politics, and ideas among Muslims throughout history.

However, the new horizons opened by Bishara's perspective are reflected, first of all, in the possibility of analysing and understanding pluralism in Islam as a phenomenon that reflects or translates historical dynamics constantly at play in the social, political, and intellectual structures of Muslim societies. More importantly, Bishara's perspective allows for an explanation of one particular aspect of these dynamics—one peculiar to modern and contemporary times: that these dynamics are inseparable from the global processes of the modern world, including those of secularisation. This aspect includes contemporary manifestations of Islamic religiosity that are usually viewed as emblematic of the stagnation and rigidity of Islamic thought throughout history, as well as evidence of resistance to secularisation and its impossibility in Islamic countries and societies. Such evidence includes the most problematic phenomena such as Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi and jihadi political movements, and sectarian groups.

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[25]   Bishara, *al-Dīn wa-l-ʿIlmāniyya,* Part 1, p. 8.

[26]   Azmi Bishara, *Tanẓīm al-Dawla al-Mukannā "Dāʿish",* Part 1: *Iṭār ʿĀm wa Musāhama Naqdiyya fī Fahm al-Ẓāhira* (Doha/ Beirut: ACRPS, 2018), p. 50.

Bishara's new perspective on secularisation links the origin of these modern groups to the specific context in which the Arab question, as Bishara describes it, emerges in its various contemporary manifestations. In order to identify the horizons which Bishara's perspective opens up in understanding contemporary patterns of Islamic religiosity, we need to link the theoretical outcomes of Bishara's two works, *On the Arab Question* and *Religion and Secularism in Historical Context*. If the description and analysis of the Arab question reveal the nature of the modern state and its crisis in Arab countries, then the historical understanding of European modernisation proves that the moment we begin speaking of a modern state in Arab countries, said state will inevitably be affected by the processes of modern secularisation, regardless of the specificities of its inception, or Islam's political, social and cultural position within it.

In this context, Bishara clearly states that contemporary Islamic movements of all stripes are part of the phenomena of modern secularisation in Arab countries. Although they adopt an ideology of resistance to secularism, they ultimately submit to the framework and logic of the modern state. Bishara says:

> an Islamist movement that emerges in the context of modernization and the nation-state is not simply following a fundamentalist script that has been playing itself out again and again ever since ibn Hanbal, ibn Taymiyya, or ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Even if fundamentalisms or calls for a return to the fundamentals recur in times of crisis, thus forming a pattern, they are still movements and currents that are part of a given historical and socio-political context. They emerge within the framework of a modern nation-state—with its army, flag, symbols, mass society, public sphere, media, political platforms, and power structure—which they hope to influence or even remove and replace.[27]

Bishara's theory thus proposes a new understanding of political Islam's various manifestations in Arab countries, not as indications of the negation of secularisation or the desire to reverse it, but rather as some of its possible forms. In the end, these manifestations fall within a compound union between religion and the realms differentiated therefrom as part of modern secularisation. As conceptualised by Bishara, modern secularisation is more inclusive than classical secularisation (separation of religion from state, the decline of religiosity, and the privatisation and "individualisation"of religion); hence, it serves as a useful means of analysing, explaining, and understanding the variables involved in the evolution of religion and religiosity, their status, and their functions in present-day contexts.

Proceeding from the notion of a compound relationship between the sacred and the mundane in modern secularisation, the dynamics of Islamic religiosity in its contemporary manifestations can be viewed as an integral part of the dynamics of secularisation, including those manifestations which might otherwise seem to provide the clearest evidence of the impossibility of secularisation within an Islamic context. Foremost among these are what have come to be known as "Salafi", "political", and "jihadi"Islam, not to mention the religious, doctrinal, and sectarian conflicts that are ravaging many modern Muslim societies.

The notion of compound unity appears to be a theoretical key provided by Bishara's model for understanding contemporary patterns of Islamic religiosity and their dynamics as modern and essentially secularised phenomena. Bishara states that

> the Islamic city of Yathrib or the first Christian groups on the one hand, and the call for the unity of religion and the state by contemporary Islamic movements and parties, or direct intervention in the affairs of society and the state by Protestant religious awakening movements on the other hand are all [...] expressions (more or less shrill, extreme or moderate) of mediations

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[27] Azmi Bishara, *On Salafism: Concepts and Contexts* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), p. 79.

and dialectical relations among elements that were articulated and differentiated, and are no longer an unmediated, organic unit.[28]

In his proposed theoretical approach to the phenomena of contemporary religiosity, including Islamic religiosity, Bishara insists on the conceptual distinction between the organic unity that religion represented before elements such as the state, society and morals were differentiated from it, and the compound unities in which these distinct elements enter into a relationship with religion. Based on this differentiation, contemporary phenomena of Islamic religiosity become expressions of the dynamics of modern secularisation. This applies even to the most problematic and controversial of these phenomena today (i.e., political Islam, Salafi Islam, and jihadi Islam), the ideological stance of which is anti-secular and adheres to the ideal of the Islamic state. Bishara opens a new horizon for viewing such movements not as evidence of the impossibility of secularisation, but, rather, as specific types of modern secularisation in Muslim societies. These movements embody compound unities between sacred and mundane elements that secularisation claimed from the religious sphere, thus no longer representing the organic unity represented by religion before modern secularisation.

Thus, when Islamist movements and groups adopt an ideology of open hostility to secularism, this does not mean that they have not been secularised. By turning religion into an ideology and a tool of mass political action, these movements are, in practice, "secularising"religion by including within it some products of political modernity associated with the modern state. Thus,

> *when religion goes back to playing a role in politics and society after the emergence of distinct spheres that have differentiated from it, it can no longer influence modern society and the modern state unless it is influenced by them. Therefore, it adopts vocabulary, game rules, and values from outside of itself, having adapted to the fact that it does not, in itself, constitute a source of legitimacy.*[29]

When groups that transform religion into an ideology and a tool of political action within the framework of the modern state present themselves as a return to the days prior to modern secularisation, they are delusional about the past. They are rebuilding the link between religion and "secular"spheres (e.g., state, politics, society, morals) within the framework of a compound unity that takes shape against the backdrop of these spheres' differentiation from religion. It is no longer possible to go back to the old situation in which religion was an organic unity that encompassed areas of life that are today counted among secular affairs. It is no longer possible to reproduce such an organic unity because the processes of differentiation in these spheres have already taken place, and the processes of returning them to the "fold"of religion can only take place in the form of compound unities. On this basis,

> *we can imagine that if religion as a dynamic political ideology governs the state in our day and age, it will be a governance completely different from the "religious state"that we know from history, which was not actually a state in the modern sense of the word. For not only has the understanding of religion changed in response to changes in its functions and boundaries, but the state too has undergone radical change.*[30]

The works Bishara has published on Salafism, the Daesh experiment, and sectarianism in Arab countries may be viewed as practical samples of his theory of secularisation. In these works, he analyses the rhetoric of Salafi, jihadi, Brotherhood-linked, and sectarian groups and seeks to trace the "fundamentals"that these

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[28] Bishara, *al-Dīn wa-l-ʿIlmāniyya,* Part 2, Vol. 2, p. 216.

[29] Ibid., p. 217.

[30] Ibid., p. 411.

groups claim to be returning to or reclaiming from their original, traditional sources. Further, like all social movements, they claim to root themselves in the historical past, considering themselves "authentic". In this context he observes that

> tracing Daesh's genealogy and intellectual origins does not mean that it is necessarily the product of those origins and influences. Daesh [and other such groups] are not just an idea or a text. They are a social phenomenon that is the product of historical circumstances, both social and political.[31]

However, Bishara is not confined to a general discourse in which he links these groups to the historical, social, and political conditions that Arab societies are going through. Such discourse, though easy to make, offers little towards an understanding of the phenomenon. Hence, Bishara scrutinizes the nature of the conditions under whose influence these groups came into being.

One important aspect, if not the most important, of this analytical approach has to do with what it reveals about the Salafi discourse which some groups adopt, as it suggests that they are basing their practices on authentic old religious teachings untainted by modern secular ideas foreign to the Islamic tradition. An analysis of these groups' discourse shows that

> the term Salafism, as [these groups] use it, does not mean an actual return to the Salaf [the righteous early Muslims] or the Islamic heritage in more than a highly selective, imaginative sense which is mingled with modern concepts, reactions to modernity, and modern interpretations of what the Salaf had to say, as for instance in the use of such statements to rebut contemporary opponents.[32]

In this context, one of the most important methodological horizons opened up by Bishara's contributions to the theory of secularisation is the use of comparative discourse analysis, contrasting the content of terms and concepts as employed by Muslim scholars in earlier Arab and Islamic history with their content as reflected in contemporary Islamic discourse, especially that of groups claiming to adhere to an understanding of Islam consistent with that of the Salaf. One outcome of such analysis is the discovery of the semantic shifts in old terms and concepts as employed by contemporary preachers. Bishara states:

> there is a difference between commanding [right] and forbidding wrong (al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahī ʿan al-munkar) as spoken of by ibn Ḥanbal and the recorders of Hadith and this same phrase when used as a slogan, or as a partisan political and ideological justification for use of violence against a ruler or against those who hold contrasting opinions. Even as used by ibn Ḥanbal, this adherence to the Qurʾan and the Sunnah against an oppressive ruler did not mean to revolt against him, nor did criticism of the ruler entail a call to carry out violence against him in the name of jihad and the like.[33]

Another element of Bishara's discourse analysis involves comparing the old, traditional concepts adopted in the discourse of modern-day Islamist and Salafi groups with their practices on the ground, in order to show the disparity between the original concepts and the ways they are deployed in a modern context. For example, Daesh claims that its understanding of the state arises from the Islamic tradition and is based on the model of the state as implemented during the days of the Prophet and the Rightly Guided Caliphs. On this basis, it has demanded declarations of loyalty from all Islamic factions. In reality, however, the

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[31] Bishara, *On Salafism*, p. 60.
[32] Ibid., p. 118.
[33] Ibid., pp. 42-43.

state model adopted by Daesh is founded, even theoretically, on the caliphate of the so-called *mulk ʿaḍūḍ* (tyrannical rule) referred to in certain prophetic Hadith, and on *imārat al-taghallub* (authority usurped by force). Indeed, it is neither a rightly guided caliphate nor a tyrannical rule. It is not a caliphate that establishes its authority through pledges of allegiance by an Islamic council, nor a caliphate that conquers by brute force. Rather, it is nothing more than a violent political organization that exercises an authority outside the bounds of the state over a population living in one or more legitimate states.[34]

Generally speaking, it may be said that Bishara's goal is to employ an ideological discourse analysis, comparing the old and contemporary purports of the same concepts with concrete practices. Not only does he show how the old terms incorporated into the discourse of Salafi and jihadi groups conceal modern contents and practices, but he also shows how these modern contents are variables of secularisation itself. In other words, they are variables of the emergence of the modern state. For Bishara, the slogans employed by Islamist movements reflect a secularised ideological structure; they internalize the differentiation of the worldly (particularly the state) from religion while absorbing the political structure that has resulted from this differentiation. These movements

> *deal with the sharīʿa as if it were a set of man-made laws for application, with the rule of the Prophet and the rightly guided Caliphs as if it were a state, with Shura as if it were a Senate or a House of Representatives, and with the succession of the Prophet after his death as if it were a self-contained Islamic regime.*[35]

In short, the ideological structures of contemporary Islamic groups reflect the types of the compound relations that can occur between religion and the elements differentiated therefrom (especially the modern state) as part of the process of modern secularisation. They do not reflect a return, or even the possibility of a return, to a pre-differentiation era as these groups imagine, since

> *there can be no return to Islam as a religion and a state in keeping with the Brotherhood's conceptualization, firstly because this is not possible in the future, and secondly because Islam was never a religion and a state to begin with. The state envisioned in this phrase is a modern concept. It is by nature a modern, secularised entity which can, nevertheless, exploit religion as an ideology.*[36]

Bishara expends considerable effort on this type of discourse analysis and deconstruction in his quest to understand Islamist, Salafi and jihadi groups as expressions of Islamic religiosity within contexts of modern secularisation in Arab and Islamic countries. At the same time, there appears to be a clear preponderance of historical, social, and political analyses in his treatment of sectarianism and sectarian conflict in the Arab East, as Bishara has a clear inclination to

> *study the conditions under which modern political sectarianism was formed on the basis of existing, long-standing religious affiliations and to distinguish it from old, religious conflicts— conflicts that have taken on a religious or confessional-religious character in the past, or practised discrimination against followers of other religions.*[37]

Bishara aims to show how the sectarian conflict that divides Arab countries at present is not a religious conflict, nor does it represent a continuation of the struggle among Islamic sectarian groups in past eras

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[34]   Bishara, *Dāʿish*, p. 52.
[35]   Bishara, *Mā al-salafiyya,* p. 132.
[36]   Ibid., pp. 132-133.
[37]   Azmi Bishara, *Sectarianism Without Sects* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2021), p. 192.

of Islamic history. "The struggle for power in the modern, postcolonial state takes place either before the process of building a nation on the basis of citizenship is complete, or after it fails".[38]

Bishara attempts to explain the conceptual difference between sects in past Arab-Islamic societies, which were essentially local groups bound by a common religious doctrine or craft, and sects in present-day Arab societies, which represent imagined socio-political entities closely connected to the conditions of the emergence and development of the modern Arab state: that is, to the particularities and complexities of the Arab question. In this modern sense, a sect, as

> *an imagined community, is based on affiliation with a religion or confession, including the production of narratives and consciousness of the self through membership in a community. The modern phenomenon of sectarianism connoted by the term is not determined by theological disputes but by historical, economic, political, and social context, and by the degree of competition and conflict between social forces and the forms of consciousness prevailing in that conflict. These are subject to change and variation.[39]*

The fact that sects in the current Arab context may be based on doctrinal-religious ties does not mean that they are the product of fixed, calcified religious creeds and views. Nor does it mean that these creeds and views base their existence and their "support"on their involvement in movements and conflicts that are frequently violent and bloody by nature. This is because

> *although sectarianism is a problematic social and political phenomenon, amenable to development and activation under specific conditions in multireligious, multi-confessional structures, there is no inherent relationship between the two. If the same factors are present but there is no religious or confessional plurality, other affiliations—tribes, for example, or other regional communities—may play a similar function and be transformed into imagined communities via politics of loyalty or opposition: consider, for example, the civil war in Libya ushered in by a failed post-revolutionary transition. All of this takes place in the context of a struggle over, and within, the state.[40]*

Bishara does not view sectarianism, sectarian conflict, or Islamist, Salafi and jihadi groups as evidence of a stable "religious culture"that renders Arab societies immune to the secularisation processes that continue to sweep the modern world. Rather, he views them as expressions of Islamic religiosity that operate through specific forms of secularisation that have emerged over the course of Arab countries' modern history. Although on the surface they may appear to identify with or reproduce old patterns of religiosity, these phenomena are actually modern, representing new patterns of Islamic religiosity. The mere fact that they take (or aspire to take) the form of active mass political and social movements or entities in the public sphere bears witness to the occurrence of differentiations as a result of which state, society and politics have become independent domains, beyond that of religion. Such movements and entities may at times break into these distinct arenas with religious ideologies and slogans. However, this does not mean that they embody or reproduce the organic unity in accordance with which they were once integral components of religion. Rather, they form compound units consisting of now-differentiated elements. This is because "conscious politicisation of membership of a religious community is a feature of a period in which religion is distinguished from politics".[41]

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[38] Ibid., p. 212.
[39] Ibid., pp. 215-216.
[40] Ibid., p. 200.
[41] Ibid., p. 313.

Although Islamic movements and sectarian groups seem to perpetuate images of indoctrination and politicization specific to the current Arab-Islamic context, this does not preclude their being part of the overall process of secularisation of which identity-based religiosity is a key manifestation.

Identity-Based and Ideological Religiosity: Between the Universality of Secularisation and the Particularity of the Arab Question

Still, how can ideologies such as those espoused by Islamic movements and sectarian groups in Arab countries—ideologies based on the notion of religious governance, the rejection of secularism, and the denial of modern civil identities—be included in the overall process of secularisation and composites of the sacred and the mundane? Furthermore, how can one, if not the sole, component of the secularisation of political life in the modern Arab state be based on an ideology, the essence of which is hostility to the principle of excluding religion from politics and public affairs in general? How do we reconcile two mutually exclusive forms of secularisation: a secularisation in modern European societies which has led to the emergence of secular ideologies that combat the presence of religion in the public sphere, and a secularisation in Muslim societies which has perpetuated religious ideologies that fiercely defend the prerogative of religion to govern politics, society, economics and culture?

It should be noted that we have a perspective which describes these movements and groups as perpetuating specific types of Islamic religiosity, which might be termed "identity-based religiosity"(viz. the transformation of Islam into a collective cultural identity as opposed to other identities) or "political-ideological religiosity"(viz. the transformation of Islam into an ideology and a tool of political action). The issue here is related to religious phenomena and patterns that actually fall within the general realm of secularisation. From Bishara's perspective, the conflation of religion with the functions of embodying collective identity and ideology and lending meaning to political action may occur only in the context of secularisation. The association of religion with such functions marks a new type of religiosity which has emerged as a way of creating a place for religion within newly secularised political, social, and symbolic spheres. This is because, in Bishara's words, "in order for religiosity to entrench itself in secularised fields of this kind, it must penetrate them through a new type of religiosity: that is, a political religiosity that ideologises religion".[42]

Through this historical and evolutionary understanding of the trajectories of secularisation in Europe, Bishara has shown that the presence and effectiveness of religion in public affairs and its transformation into an identity and an ideological lever for political action are integral parts of the secularisation movement. They provide specific forms for secularisation itself to take in specific contexts and at particular stages. At the outset of European modernisation, religious or sectarian affiliation was transformed into a factor that contributed to one's identity, reinforced social unity, and helped construct modern state entities. In this context, then, the function of religious affiliation was to build the modern state, which led in turn to the establishment of the structure of societies, their forms of unity, and their political and social organisations as we now know them.

Bishara has shown how at least some essential aspects of the process by which modern Western states have secularised their societies have come about by employing religion, or elements thereof, to establish the sanctity of the state. Bishara notes the identity-related function which Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, has performed in the formation of the modern European nation-states. For example, he has shown how

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42   Bishara, *al-Dīn wa-l-ʿIlmāniyya,* Part 2, Vol. 2, p. 395.

> *it would not have been possible to form a fundamentally unified British identity without Protestantism as an identity for the popular masses, both those who attended church and those who did not. In other words, Christianity was important as a source of popular identity even when the elites were arguing over doctrine.*[43]

The issue here has to do with a new function being performed by the Christian religion in the context of modern secularisation. However, this function is not peculiar to the Protestantism prevalent in Britain, as evidenced by the fact that in France, "Catholicism coincided with a national identity as a means by which people distinguished themselves from surrounding countries, and against religious minorities within France".[44]

Islamic and sectarian groups in current Arab contexts are simply manifestations of the principle of coupling religiosity with collective identities, ideology, and political action in the secularised public sphere. Why, then, does the rhetoric of these groups take on an antagonistic tone toward the state and all manifestations of modern secularisation? After offering a theoretical response to questions like this in *Religion and Secularism in Historical Context*, Bishara went on in later publications to evaluate his theoretical assumptions in approaching specific topics relating to contemporary Islamic religiosity.

The theoretical answer assumes the possibility of "imagining the tension that results from top-down secularisation by the state in religious societies without any attempt to secularise patterns of consciousness. Might forced secularisation transform religion into a matter of authenticity and identity, a symbolic stockpile that provides strength in the face of oppression? It is also possible to infer other possibilities that could be examined in reality".[45] While formulating this idea theoretically, Bishara was undoubtedly thinking of the specificities of the Arab question, such as the role played by colonial powers in the inception of modern Arab states, and the specific historical conditions following the expulsion of the colonial powers because of which these states still lack legitimacy in the eyes of their peoples, particularly the despotic regimes.

Top-down secularisation, by which modern-day states exercise despotism over a religious society, creates objective conditions for the emergence of ideological structures such as those on which political Islam, Salafi-jihadi Islam, and sectarian groups are based. This is because resistance to manifestations of the failure, corruption, and despotism of the modern state may take the form of

> *resisting secularisation through the emergence of new religious ideologies that are transformed into political currents. Such developments are generally initiated by forces that have been harmed by modernity on the level of material living conditions as well as that of identity. They arise out of the modern reality itself and use its tools; as such, they constitute part of the process of secularisation itself.*[46]

Bishara explains the dominance and evolving dynamism of identity-based and political religiosity in Arab countries as a function of the secularisation process in the Arab context and the nature of the modern state emerging therein. He asks how "the distancing of religion from the state without secularising culture and society, and without an alternative ethical value tradition under conditions in which the masses are simultaneously being manufactured and marginalised, has deepened the role of religion in the public

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43 Ibid., p. 114.
44 Ibid., p. 132.
45 Ibid., p. 421.
46 Ibid., p. 340.

sphere, and in politics in particular". [47] Bishara posits that within a relatively short time span, the process of secularisation in Arab countries has reached a point at which

> *the state itself, and the forces opposing it, use and depend on religion, not as an ethical system that commands justice, fairness, tolerance, and kind treatment of others, nor as the popular religiosity of self-sufficient groups that practise rituals and uphold their customs and traditions, but through various other functions which centre around issues of regulation, control, and dominance. Specifically, religion is treated as: (1) an alternative ideology, (2) a collective identity versus the culture of the ruling and beneficiary classes, (3) a source of individual dignity in contrast with the humiliation carried out by the state, and (4) a tool for mobilisation against the state, which itself went back to using, and contributed to the dominance of, religious discourse. These overlapping processes are embodied in political religiosity, and there are other important cases in which political religiosity has not constituted a popular alternative, especially in multi-confessional states where the sense of social and political dispossession has taken a sectarian form. Here, political sectarianism has emerged in the re-establishment of the religious confession as an identity that brings its members together in an imagined community which constitutes an alternative to the civil community. In these cases, secular and non-religious political forces often bank on sectarianism, whereas in other cases political religiosity itself bets on and intersects with political sectarianism, which negates the theory that religion serves as a bulwark against sectarianism.* [48]

Conclusion

Bishara's model presents an approach to the current issues of Arab countries beyond the claim that they are an exception to the trajectories of modern secularisation. However, this is not an attempt to "dilute"or "circumvent"the concept of secularism as one might imagine. The concept of secularisation, as Bishara uses it, retains its basic meanings as agreed upon in the contemporary Humanities and Social Sciences, whereby it refers to the process by which worldly realms differentiate themselves from and supersede religion. Bishara insists that this "profanation"cannot be reduced to separating religion from the state and privatising it in some absolute manner. Rather, it can also be manifested in the emergence of religious patterns that consecrate this worldliness and the superiority of its logic in the name of religion itself and in the name of defending its status (i.e., by reinterpreting it in new ways). The consecration of secularisation in this way is not peculiar to any one civilization. Indeed, before proposing it as a key to understanding Islamic religiosity in relation to the peculiarities of the Arab question, Bishara extrapolated it from the context of European modernisation.

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47 Ibid., pp. 317-318.

48 Bishara, *al-Ṭāʾifa,* p. 319.

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