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Modern Islamic Thinking and Activism

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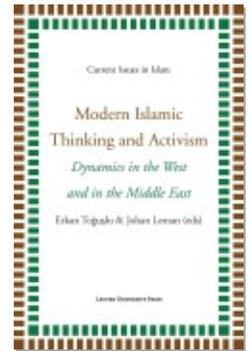
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CHAPTER 5
Post-Secularism, Post-Islamism and
Islam in the Public Sphere

Ihsan Yilmaz

The social-scientific debate on state-religion relations has been unresolved. Some of the former proponents of the secularization theory have declared it *passé*. Religion has increasingly become part (and at certain times a crucial aspect) of domestic politics in many countries and also in international relations (Fox 2001, Hurd 2007, Haynes 2007). It is doubtful whether complete secularization has ever taken place. Religions have not gone anywhere (Casanova 1994 and 2010) but have been socio-politically and also academically (Fox 2001) marginalized, vilified and suppressed. It seems that discussions and debates on state-religion relations and secularism will continue to be part of our academic and political lives in future. Islamic perspectives on this issue will, as ever, continue to be an important part of these debates and discussions.

The academic literature on secularism is full of different competing definitions: inclusive, passive, tolerant, liberal, benevolent, moderate, evolutionary, weak, ameliorative, principled distance; *laïcité plurielle*, *positive*, *de gestion* and *bien entendue* and their opposites: strong, intolerant, statist, exclusive, assertive, aggressive, or malevolent secularism are some examples (Bader 2011; Taylor 1999). In passive secularism, the secular state plays a 'passive' role, and while avoiding the establishment of any religions, it "allows for the public visibility of religion" (Kuru 2007, 571). In assertive secularism, the state tries to exclude religion from the public sphere in addition to playing an 'assertive' role as "the agent of a social engineering project that confines religion to the private domain" (Kuru 2007, 571). Until the late 1970s and early 1980s, a relatively widespread

consensus had existed in the sociology of religion discipline over the privatization of religion thesis (Repstad and Furseth 2006, 97). Since then, it has been realized “that differentiation did not necessarily mean that religion would remain in its assigned place in the private sphere and not enter the public arena” (Repstad and Furseth 2006, 97). Some scholars such as Casanova (1994) have argued that during the course of the last few decades, a process of ‘deprivatization’ of religion has taken place in the world, and even though a historical process of religious differentiation has taken place in the West, institutional differentiation does not necessarily result in the marginalization and privatization of religion. This means that discussions on the definition and types of secularism are crucial as far as political science is concerned. When we refer to Islam when we say religion, the issue becomes much more sensitive. What is more, revival and deprivatization of Islam are more observable phenomena than in the other religions. It is thus important to see if and to what extent Islam and secularism could accommodate each other.

Islamic law recognizes the fundamental principle that people are born free (Turcan 2012, 298). In Islam, there are fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals and they do not depend on constitutions in the sense that they are or are not recognized by the law (Turcan 2012, 299). According to Islam, people should have the freedom to express themselves without being under any pressure (Gülen 2005, 451). As stressed in Shatibi’s *Maqasid al Shari’a* (Major Objectives of Islamic Law), the main objectives of Islamic law are protection of religion, life, family and reproduction, intellect and property. Islamic law aims to protect these basic human rights (Gülen 2000, 134; Gülen 2001, 134-135). Some Islamic scholars have even argued that if human rights are respected by a political system, then there is no need to enter the quest for an alternative system (Gülen 2005, 451):

If a state... gives the opportunity to its citizens to practice their religion and supports them in their thinking, learning, and practice, this system is not considered to be against the teaching of the Qur’an. *In the presence of such a state there is no need to seek an alternative state* (italics mine, I.Y.). The system should be reviewed by the lawmakers and executive institutions if human rights and freedoms are not protected enough (Gülen 2005, 451).

In Islam, people are responsible for their own fate. Thus, they have free will and freedoms. In particular, “religion, life, reproduction, the mind, and property are basic essentials that everyone must protect. In a sense, Islam approaches human

rights from the angle of these basic principles” (Gülen 2000, 134, see also Gülen 2001, 134-135). These Islamic scholars have also argued that “if secularism means that state is not based on any religion, hence it does not interfere with religion or religious life and the state is neutral towards all religions, then there is not a problem” (Armağan and Ünal 1999, 108 quoted in Altinoğlu 1999, 103).

This view could be said to be compatible with the Habermasian understanding of religion in post-secularist times. Habermas has revised his secularization since and has embraced the term “post-secular society” to describe the current situation with regards to religion-society issues. “Many scholars would concur that there really is something qualitatively different about the post-1970s era, enough to warrant a new term that differentiates the modern era (roughly defined as the period encompassing 1770–1970) from the postmodern” (Dillon 2012). He “has long construed the West as essentially secular since the Enlightenment” (Dillon 2012). Nevertheless, he now states that “the Enlightenment project has been partially derailed and reason subsumed by strategic market interests and political indifference, it is appropriate for him to rethink the secular... the post-secular provides him with a useful analytical device for acknowledging not so much the persistence of religion as the partial failure (derailing) of the Enlightenment, a failure that by default brings religion back and into the secular... It is not that secularization has not occurred; it is just that there are some complications that the persistence of religion has thrown on its tracks” (Dillon 2012).

It is not certain whether or not secularization has in fact taken place since there is so much differentiated evidence for and against its sociological reality (Dillon 2012). There is some ambiguity in Habermas’s use of the term post-secular. While he talks about “post-secular society,” it seems that he is actually talking “about a post-secular *Zeitgeist*, ‘a change in consciousness’” (Dillon 2012). In this usage, post-secular refers to “the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized environment” (Dillon 2012). In other words, in the Habermasian understanding, “the term ‘post-secular’ can be applied to secularized societies in which religion maintains a public influence and relevance” (Dillon 2012). Put differently, “the ‘post-secular’ recognizes the public relevance of religion and of religious ideas in informing civic discourse” (Dillon 2012). In Dillon’s (2012) view, the term “post-secular” is more theoretically robust if it is used “to help us understand the more general relevance of religion as a public cultural resource in all modern democratic societies regardless of their varying degrees or levels of secularism and secularization” (Dillon 2012).

I think an attempt should be made to link Habermas' understanding of 'religion in the public sphere' with his conceptualization of post-secularism. In his elaboration on John Rawls' (1997) political theory, in particular concepts of the 'public use of reason' and 'translation proviso', Jurgen Habermas (2006) has objected to this restrictive idea of the political role of religion and argued that other than the state level, public visibility of religions could be allowed at civil society and political society levels. Rawls (1997, 777) argues that "reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or non-religious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons – and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines – are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support". In response, (Habermas 2006, 7) underlines that "religious communities and movements provide arguments for public debates on crucial morally-loaded issues and handle tasks of political socialization by informing their members and encouraging them to take part in the political process". However, each time they have to "find an equivalent in a universally accessible language for every religious statement they pronounce" as part of the duty of civility (Habermas 2006, 7). This epistemic burden results in a sort of self-censorship. It is obvious that "many religious citizens would not be able to undertake such an artificial division within their own minds without jeopardizing their existence as pious persons" (Habermas 2006, 8). Habermas (2006, 8-9) concludes that "the liberal state, which expressly protects such forms of life in terms of a basic right, cannot at the same time expect of all citizens that they also justify their political statements independently of their religious convictions or world views. This strict demand can only be laid at the door of politicians, who within state institutions are subject to the obligation to remain neutral in the face of competing world views". Citizens must agree "that only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold that divides the informal public sphere from parliaments, courts, ministries and administrations" (Habermas 2006, 9). Religious citizens too can agree to this 'institutional translation proviso' without splitting their identity into a public and a private part when they participate in public debates and discourses. Thus, they should "be allowed to express and justify their convictions in a religious language if they cannot find secular 'translations' for them" (Habermas 2006, 10).

It seems that a post-Islamist understanding of religion-state-society relations is more compatible with this Habermasian post-secularist condition with regard to religion in the public sphere. Post-Islamism has recently been at the

centre of a major debate especially in French academia regarding the historical evolution of Islamism (Lauzière, 2005: 241). Olivier Roy and some other scholars have argued that Islamism – that is, according to their definition, the holistic, populist, and often revolutionary ideology whose goal is the establishment of an Islamic state and the governance of all aspects of society according to Islamic principles – has reached a dead end and an era of post-Islamism has been dawning (Lauzière, 2005: 241). Roy (1998; 2004) claims that the reorientation of Islamists towards religiosity and away from politics is a sign of the failure of political Islam. In this usage, the term “post-Islamism” is used descriptively to refer to a shift in attitudes and strategies of Islamists after the so-called failure of Islamism (Schulze 1998, Roy 1998, 2005, Kepel 2002). In this conceptualization, post-Islamism is understood “primarily as an historical rather than an analytical category” (Bayat, 2007: 17). It prematurely suggests the end of Islamism. The critics of this conceptualization argued that political Islam is not changing, but rather that its revolutionary, top-down, version has become defunct. Thus, they argued that post-Islamism is only a variety of Islamism (Ismail 2001, Burgat 2003 cited in Bayat, 2007: 18; see also Lauzière 2005 and Sinanovic 2005). Lauzière (2005) argues that Roy’s conceptualization of post-Islamism does not stand up to empirical scrutiny. Lauzière (2005: 257) shows that “[a]lthough post-Islamist theory is an attempt to systematize empirical data from the past thirty-five years into a coherent historical pattern, it relies on a narrow and selective definition of Islamism that cannot account for the particularities of the Moroccan context... It also seems better suited to cases in which the rise and failure of revolutionary Islamism has been overt and pronounced.” The same could be argued in the Turkish context, for which see in detail Yilmaz (2005, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013). Turkish Islamism has given importance, if not sufficiently, to religiosity. Besides, there have always been many observant socially active Muslim scholars such as Fethullah Gülen, individuals, groups, communities and Sufi brotherhoods that have not seen Islam in political terms. They have always been non-Islamist (Yilmaz 2009, Yilmaz 2011). There is no reason to call these people post-Islamist as Roy does, as these people were never Islamists in the first place (Yilmaz 2009). Roy also argues that the Islamists’ abandonment of transnational solidarity and their new centeredness on national politics are yet other indications of failure. Again, despite the rhetoric, this has more or less always been the case in the Turkish context.

In Bayat’s (2007) formulation, post-Islamism refers to both a condition and a project, which may be embodied in a master (or multidimensional) movement.

In his understanding, post-Islamism means “a condition where, following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy, symbols and sources of legitimacy of Islamism get exhausted, even among its once-ardent supporters” (Bayat, 1996: 45). Islamists become aware of their paradigm’s anomalies and inadequacies as they try to win votes and to rule. The continuous trial and error make the system susceptible to questions and criticisms. Eventually, pragmatic attempts to maintain the system reinforce the abandoning of certain of its underlying principles. Islamism becomes compelled, both by its own internal contradictions and by societal pressure, to reinvent itself, but does so at the cost of a qualitative shift (Bayat, 2007: 18). As such, post-Islamism is not anti-Islamic, but rather reflects a tendency to resecularize religion. Predominantly, it is marked by a call to limit the political role of religion (Bayat, 1996: 45). It is clear that post-Islamist condition can only be relevant in the contexts where Islamists could participate in the electoral process.

Post-Islamism centres on the “the idea of fusion between Islam (as a personalized faith) and individual freedom and choice; and post-Islamism is associated with the values of democracy and aspects of modernity” (Bayat, 1996: 45). Put differently, post-Islamism represents an endeavour to fuse religiosity with rights, faith and freedoms, Islam and civil liberties and focuses on rights instead of duties, plurality instead of singular authority, historicity rather than fixed and rigid interpretation of scriptures, and the future rather than the past. Post-Islamism is expressed in acknowledging secular exigencies, in freedom from rigidity, in breaking down the monopoly of religious truth. As nothing intrinsic to Islam – or any other religion – makes it inherently democratic or undemocratic, the question is no longer whether Islam is compatible with modernity but rather how Muslims can make these concepts compatible (Bayat, 2007: 10). The terms Islamism and post-Islamism are “primarily as conceptual categories to signify change, difference, and the root of change. In the real world, however, many Muslims may adhere eclectically and simultaneously to aspects of both discourses. On the other hand, the advent of post-Islamism as a real trend, should not be seen necessarily as the historical end of Islamism. What it should be seen as is the birth, out of Islamist experience, of a qualitatively different discourse and politics. In reality we may witness simultaneous processes of both Islamization and post-Islamization” (Bayat, 2007: 20).

In our conceptualization, post-Islamism denotes a departure, albeit in diverse degrees, from an Islamist ideological package that is characterized by universalist claims, monopoly of truth, exclusivism, intolerance, and obligation, towards

acknowledging ambiguity, multiplicity, inclusion and compromise. Post-Islamists want to combine their interpretation of Islam with individual choice, freedoms, liberties and human rights. In short, whereas Islamism is defined by the fusion of religion and responsibility, post-Islamism emphasizes religiosity and human rights.

In post-Islamist understanding, there is no contradiction between Islam and democracy. Passive secularism that guarantees human rights and freedoms including freedom of religion could provide a framework to Muslims to practise their religion comfortably where other religious minorities also benefit from human rights. In this view, the faithful can comfortably live in secular environments if secularism is religion-friendly and hence does not interfere with religion or religious life. This approach to sacred-secular relations is similar to the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” since, as Fethullah Gülen has highlighted, Islam does not need a state to survive and civil society or civilian realm in liberal-democratic settings is sufficient for its individual and social practice. This Muslim understanding of secularism or ‘twin tolerations’ (Stepan 2001) resonates with the Habermasian (2006) ‘religion in the public sphere’ which argues that the faithful can have demands based on religion in the public sphere and it is the legislators’ job to translate these religious demands into a secular language when making laws. This is more advanced than many current liberal secular democratic political settings, and secularism will be more democratic and just if it evolves into this kind of Habermasian religion-in-the-public-sphere-friendly post-secularism. This will also be in tune with the post-Islamist approach on Islam in the public sphere.

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