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BOOK REVIEWS

Secularism in the Arab World: Contexts, Ideas and Consequences. By Aziz al-Azmeh. Translated by David Bond. Modern Muslim Thinkers in Translation. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. Pp. 529. $85.00 (cloth); $85.00 (digital). ISBN: 9781474447461.

The secular idea and secular intellectuals in the Islamic world have been subjected to a trenchant critique in recent academic writings. Wael Hallaq, Talal Assad, Saba Mahmood, and Joseph Massad, among other scholars, have brought attention to the ways through which secularism reconfigured the idea of religion during the nineteenth century. In their critical writings, these scholars questioned how the secular idea disrupted the Islamic habitus and governing, how the adoption of European constitutions chipped away at the status of Islamic Shari'a, and how the grand reform project (Tanzimat) inflicted many problems on the Islamic world by reducing religion to faith.[1] In light of this scholarship, it comes as little surprise that Aziz al-Azmeh, an ardent secularist and a professor emeritus at the Central European University, would deliver a counterattack with the first English translation of his 1992 critique of political Islam, *Al- ʻIlmānīyah min manẓūr mukhtalif*.[2] In *Secularism in the Arab World: Contexts, Ideas and Consequences*, al-Azmeh argues that these critical writers, steeped in a postcolonial and postmodern sensibility, have contributed to "the promotion and cultivation of sentimentalist nativism" (xxiii).

"This book" writes al-Azmeh, "is a historical, social, and intellectual study of secularism in Eastern and Western Arab lands in the context of the course of modern Arab history and of modern world history" (4). His study spans the one hundred and fifty years since the late Ottomans embarked on statewide reforms in the late 1830s through the twilight of the twentieth century. The main thrust of the work traces the seeds that the modern project of the Tanzimat planted in the Arab soil during the nineteenth century and the many hurdles that the rising forces of political Islam—or, as he terms it throughout, the "religious lobby"—with their powerful sway over media and culture, placed before these reforms.

Organizing his material into two themes, al-Azmeh starts by accounting for the possible horizons, hopes, and optimism ignited by the bold actions taken by Ottoman and Egyptian reformers during the nineteenth century. He then describes how these reforms were aborted. Taken together, these sections are not only about how great ideas lost their momentum, but also about the ways in which the great intellectual heritage of the nineteenth-century reforms were thwarted, abused, and suppressed. The flourishing career of the secular idea, which was derailed and retreated before the emergence of Islamic ideas, is the main axis of this book.

One possible way to capture the arc of this complex work is through the dramatic cultural changes that took place during the twentieth century. Al-Azmeh, like many other secular intellectuals in the Arabic-speaking world, celebrates the intellectual legacy of the nineteenth century, which launched the Arab world into the age of modernity and afforded the emergence of a

1 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Joseph Massad, *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

2 Aziz al-Azmeh, *ʻIlmānīyah min manẓūr mukhtalif* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wahdạh al-ʻArabīyah, 1992).

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framework of reference for their secular, modern agenda. During the nineteenth century, al-Azmeh notices, it was relatively easy for Arab writers and journalists to bring the canonical reading of Islamic history under fire, "by the 1980s, one needed to be especially audacious . . . to propound views that would have appeared normal half a century previously" (397). More importantly, while in the nineteenth century many scholars questioned Islamic orthodoxy and dismissed long-held interpretations of sacred texts, during the twentieth century "the advocates of free interpretation and for historical contextualisation in the religious domain tended to become fewer in number" (396). Al-Azmeh struggles to offer a unique outline of social, cultural, and political history that explains this cultural change—the defeat of the secular sensibility and the rise and triumph of the "religious lobby."

The nineteenth century marked not only the beginning of a secular culture in the Arab world but heralded the establishment of new "modern cognitive premises and [European] points of reference" in the East (352). This cultural capacity was made possible by the rise of a new class of Arab scholars who disseminated different cultural understandings and intellectual tastes. "The origins of this class of cultural actors varied: the children of Muslim city notables, Christian graduates of missionary institutions in Syria, intellectuals of rural origins" (108). What unified them into a class of intellectuals and "differentiated [them] from the rest of society," was their "modern education," and their call to assimilate foreign ways of being, "the adoption of cultural goods and vocabularies for public affairs, buttressed by visible tokens relating to personal and corporate styles: manners of dress, taste, sensibility, table manners, home furnishings, modes of conviviality, and much else that their detractors dubbed *tafarnuj* (Frankism), commonly known as Westernisation" (112).

"Composed of secular intellectuals," (96) this class emerged in the wake of "the spread of magazines" (107) and other translations that betrayed their fascination with Western literature. New modes of socialization separated them from the rest of society. One avenue that supported them was the creation of Freemasonry societies: "the Masonic lodges in the last third of the nineteenth century were a repository of incipient bourgeois culture with its secular orientation and the marginal place of religion within it" (116). Freemasonry was essential in molding the secular and modern sensibilities of this class, steering them clear of medieval conceptions of Islamic piety. Freemasonry, writes al-Azmeh, "was an environment where early moves were made towards considering religious affiliation a private matter with no necessary implication for public life" (117). If secularism has ever meant anything, it meant the relegation of religion, making it subsidiary to other life concerns.

The subordination of religion to the private sector during the nineteenth century was not complete, however. The attempts to shake free from the shackles of religion and the desire to privatize Islam have paradoxically sped up a process at the end of which another breed of Islamic reformists emerged. Al-Azmeh points to a transitional period at the turn of the twentieth century, when Islamic scholars sought to shore up and preserve Islam. This is the sociopolitical condition that led to the rise of Islamic scholars (ulama) like Muhammad ʿAbduh and Afghani, who "sought to preserve an Islamic character for society while keeping pace with the changes that had overtaken Muslim jurisprudence" (210). Indeed, the nineteenth-century grand reform project of Tanzimat that offered the transient promise to transfer the Arab world from medievalism to modernity, anticipated the rise of "Islamic Reformism," which "was a political and intellectual response to the educational, socio-political, and cultural conditions created by the *Tanzimat* state" (225).

Al-Azmeh presents the early Islamic reformists' attempts to reconcile Islam and modernity quite negatively. He rails at these reformists because "They made Islam . . . the gauge for moral behaviour," and worse, for proclaiming "religious norms and practices as an a priori criterion for rectitude" (254). For al-Azmeh, Islamic reformers engaged in a project that had the effect of "expanding

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the social remit of religion" (254). Long seen as initiating the first chapter of Arab modernity, this movement, al-Azmeh shows, inaugurated the first obstruction to the Tanzimat movement. Yet, al-Azmeh shows that Islamic forces were not the only forces that defied the attempted changes the Tanzimat demanded: "Resistance was not limited to the Muslim religious establishment. The opposition of the Christian religious institutions was fiercer in many cases" (156). These forces conspired to disrupt the secular order—to end the separation between religion and state.

Having demonstrated the potential promises the Tanzimat set out to fulfill during the nineteenth century, al-Azmeh engages the "religious institutions and forces" that helped "curb the global tendential process of advancement in Arab societies" (180). Disenchanted with the political dynamics of the twentieth century, al-Azmeh affirms that "to a large extent . . . these [Islamic] forces succeeded in aborting the modernist globalising enterprise that had brought about the progress of Arab societies in many domains" (180). Al-Azmeh identifies a social relapse or better yet cultural reversion to Islam. As one of his colleagues writes, al-Azmeh endeavors to historicize "the complexity of the causes of the regression experienced by the Arab world."[3] His diagnosis of the cultural trends that materialized during the twentieth century is not unlike that of such other avowed secularists as Jūrj Ṭarābīshī, Lafif Lakhdar, Yāssīn al-Ḥāfiẓ, and Laroui. They all seem to agree on what al-Azmeh calls the "rise of irrationalism as a central conceptual sensibility of the age" (322). The theme of "irrationalism," common after the Arab-Israeli defeat in 1967, is always associated to Islam, Islamic practices and rituals. Al-Azmeh see the beginnings of this irrationalism in the 1920s in Egypt and among the most celebrated writers. "This irrationalism began in belletrist articles about the importance of spirituality for humans, their instinctive inclination to religion, sentiment, and sensibility, and the aridity of life without a measure of spirituality" (308).

The most glaring example of how irrationalism has prevailed is the tragic fate and career of the two luminaries, Taha Hussain and ʿAli ʿAbd al-Raziq. These two intellectuals were able to dismantle the religious discourse—deconstruct its claim on truth and history—in a couple of books published in 1925 and 1926, respectively. Yet, the controversy that Hussain and ʿAbd al-Raziq stirred "gave the religious lobby another cause célèbre, a precedent used to anathemise the consequent historisation of Muslim political history and, in turn, to claim that the guardians of religion possessed rightfully the exclusive voice in this domain" (307). From the high point of 1920s Egypt, the descent began. "The controversy has become a basic symbolic turning point and a sign of religious opposition to those who call for the separation of religion from politics, until the present day" (307).

The only exception for this bleak picture is the short-lived period of early decolonization, from 1945 into the 1960s, a period that al-Azmeh identifies as a time of secular experimentation. During this postcolonial era, Islam and religious scholars almost disappeared from the public domain. As many local intellectuals were enthralled by the project of postcolonialism that promised to give birth to a New Arab Man, the concern with religion receded to the backstage. "The marginalisation of religion in social, cultural, and intellectual terms was manifested in reduced concern with it in public and literary life" (354). Al-Azmeh goes further to ground this argument by saying that any "scrutiny of periodicals with a wide circulation . . . shows little interest in or engagement with religious issues arising from social and intellectual matters" (354). However, as the postcolonial experiment was defeated and excitement about nationalism subsided, Islamists were capable to reassert their authority in the public space again. "The success of Islamism in imposing on its adversaries, including liberals, the anti-modernist tropes of polemic and of analysis, and the concessions by many secularists to Islamist views of secularism, is a feature of the late twentieth century" (413).

3 Georges Corm, *Arab Political Thought: Past and Present* (London: Hurst, 2020), 236.

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It is striking that the plethora of historical and religious anthropology works on the secular does not seem to dampen al-Azmeh's conviction that Islam is the major force standing in the way of progress and change in the Arab world. Indeed, of all the chapters of this book the almost fifty-page "preface to the English translation" is the most convoluted and least convincing. Al-Azmeh occasionally issues unsubstantiated claims, which leaves the reader with the impression that Islam is a disruptive power. "Religious pressures paralysed independent thought in Egypt," he affirms, "and this tendency spread in various measures to the rest of the Arab world" (320). While it is possible to argue that Islamic forces have managed to expand the remit of religion in the Middle East over the last few decades, and that "religion and the spread of particular types of Islamic discourse became a very lucrative occupation" (395), it is a bit of stretch to claim that Islamists played a major role in the "re-socialisation [of people] into Wahhabi sensibilities" (xvii). One might wonder if al-Azmeh contributes in an implicit way to "expanding the social remit of Islam" when he accuses every movement or free voice that critiques secularism of being Islamist?

With the passing of Jūrj Ṭarābīshī (2016), Ṣādik Jalāl al-ʿAzm (2016), and Mohammad Arkoun (2010), al-Azmeh stands among the major secular scholars alive in the Arabic-speaking world. His work represents a very important class of Arab intellectuals today who have for years framed and articulated the most important questions in Arab culture. Reading al-Azmeh's analysis of the decline of secularism in the Middle East, however, is like reading the history of the decline of his postcolonial generation, which came of age during the 1950s. They dreamed of decolonizing the Arab subject not only from foreign power but primarily from the burden of the past and past traditions. They envisioned a world free of religious prejudices, where secularism prevails. As history unfolded in the Arab world, however, this generation of worldly secularists began to lose its grip on the social imagination and intellectual conversation. The state that was seen as the only guarantee against religion adopted religion in its constitution. This spelled the colossal defeat not only of the secular idea but also of the postcolonial generation that was adamantly opposed to a religious state.

Al-Azmeh's mapping of the Arab intellectual field over the last two centuries, which centralizes the defeat and retreat of the secular idea against the rising power of Islam, makes this book required reading for scholars. Not only do I commend al-Azmeh for sifting through a complex historical process to demonstrate the ways in which "the subordination of liberal and Arab nationalist discourses to Islamic discourse" (420), but I also appreciate the arduous work of translation by David Bond. Mr. Bond smooths the long and often complex sentence structure of al-Azmeh's style, making it relatively easy to read this important contributor to the expanding Arab intellectual scene.

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