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RELIGION AFTER THE STATE: SECULAR SOTERIOLOGIES AT THE BIRTH OF SOUTH SUDAN

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ABSTRACT

This article examines South Sudan's experiment in creating a secular state out of the ashes of the professedly Islamic republic from which it seceded in 2011. South Sudanese political actors presented secularism as a means of redeeming the nation from decades of religious excess in which the government conflated political imperative with theological ambition, claiming to save the nation from its woes through the unifying force of Islam. However, secularism as an alternative soteriology—one that contended that it is only through political nonalignment in regards to religion that the public could be saved from the problems that plagued its predecessor—quickly became an object of contention itself, read by many South Sudanese to be anything but neutral. This article interrogates the secular promise of mediating religious diversity through exploring the tensions that have arisen in its fulfillment at the birth of the world's newest republic.

KEYWORDS: South Sudan, secularism, Islam, politics, Muslim minorities

The partition of Sudan, which occurred on July 9, 2011, is often presented in the international press as the drawing of a border between two irretrievably different peoples: the Muslim north versus the Christian and animist South; Arabs versus Africans; theocrats versus secularists. Ignored in such portrayals are not only the cleavages internal to these two new states, but also the fact that these reigning dichotomies too simply depict the basis on which these two countries are divided: both sides of these juxtapositions are alive and well on both sides of the new border, after partition as before. Muslims continue to reside in the South—and, indeed, if they were from Southern ethnic groups, were forced to *return* to the South—and Christians remain in the North. Students at the University of Juba who have recently returned from Khartoum have protested against the university's policy of Anglicization and for the reinstatement of Arabic as a language of instruction, while a rejection of Arab identities among Northern youth in favor of those of pan-Africanism or globalized hip-hop culture prevails in parts of the North. The Christian evangelical movement to crown South Sudan "Kush" occurred at the same time as a resurgence of secular leftism among the disenfranchised in the North. Despite all of this, widespread acceptance of a dichotomous vision of the two states has resulted in the diversity present in both countries receiving scant attention following partition. Internal struggles that have reignited in both countries since southern independence have made it clear, however, that partition did not solve the "problems" of diversity; it merely reorganized them under new political arrangements.

This article explores the emergence of a modern secular state in South Sudan as it coalesced out of the ashes of civil war and sought to provide an alternative to the professedly Islamic republic from which it seceded in 2011. South Sudanese leaders proposed secularism as the most effective means of governing the religious diversity South Sudan had inherited, the most plausible way to promote religious freedom, and a mechanism for undoing the religious excesses of the past. In the Sudan from which the south was separating, the government had conflated political imperative with theological ambition, claiming to save the nation from its woes through the unifying force of Islam—hence the self-attribution of "the National Salvation Revolution" (*thawrat al-inqadh al-watani*) with which it came to power in 1989. Nonetheless, secularism as an alternative soteriology—one that contends that only through nonalignment of the state in regards to religion can the public be saved from the problems that plagued the former Sudan—quickly became the site of myriad tensions. This article interrogates the secular promise of mediating religious diversity by exploring the frictions that it has produced at the birth of the world's newest republic. Moreover, through presenting the particular case of the emergence of the secular state in South Sudan, I will offer some broader reflections on the incongruities present in secularism's unique manner of managing religion's relationship to the state, as well as the contradictions that occur in its fulfillment as a means of regulating religious diversity and ensuring religious freedom.

South Sudan's secular project is propelled by a logic that strives for two incommensurable goals. On the one hand, the category of the secular indicates to South Sudanese political actors a state that expresses neutrality in regards to the religious confessions of its citizens. Such neutrality is said to be the ground on which religious freedom can best be cultivated. This professedly universalist definition of the secular draws primarily on the American model (evidence that all secularisms, like "languages," are in fact vernaculars), wherein non-establishment is said to guarantee a public sphere in which freedom of religious expression is the purported goal. On the other hand, political actors also understand the secular as a *historically specific* device through which they can erase a painful and violent past in which the political space was forcibly "Islamized" through the actions of conquerors from the north. In this rendering, the secular becomes a means of cleansing the nation of the mark of Islamization, acquired prior to national partition, when the south was the as-yet-unpacified territory of the Islamic state.

Despite assurances of government officials that it is "Islamism" (that is, an insistence on the political relevance of Islam) and not Islam that is the target of secular purges, the category of the secular is read by many, particularly members of Muslim communities, as far from neutral. One informant, a young Muslim activist, challenging the secular premise of the government that one could be a believer at church on Sunday and a religiously untainted citizen Monday through Friday, or that one could oppose Islamism, but not Islam, put it to me this way: "The [government] announced the secularism of the state, but the president of the south prays in a church. All of those in power pray in churches. They put the churches in power and announce publicly that they are secularists . . . This is not secularism but pure Christianism, masquerading as secularism in order to attack Islam." Statements like these highlight a controversial assumption about religion key not only to South Sudanese secularism but all forms thereof, the concept of differentiation[1]: the idea of religion as a bounded discipline, which secularism requires in order to protect the conceptual distinctness of its domain. My interlocutors asked: are real people able to compartmentalize their lives in the way that the imagined citizens of state secularism do, or do such claims perpetuate a fiction about the lived character of religion that is merely a sly way of allowing for one form of religious politics while denying another?

1 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

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By providing a close ethnographic reading of South Sudan's experiment in secularism in the first years of its formation, I hope to offer insight into the problems inherent in the fulfillment of secular promise as it seeks to mediate religiously plural publics. Such problems represent not a failure of secularism, or a tension inherent to its unfolding, but rather, in this case and others, the very paradox that sustains it, its intractability.[2] By looking at the secular state at the moment of its inception, I hope to isolate what it is that distinguishes secular political praxis from that of non-secular modes of politics (such as those of Sudan-past), as well as to explore the way in which religion and its careful management are important partners in the successful fulfillment of both endeavors. The vernacular secularism of South Sudan, caught as it is between the universal promise of religious freedom, on the one hand, and the intricate labors of the de-Islamization of the public sphere, on the other, is at once particular to the South Sudanese case and raises a larger question: can secularism guarantee both absolute freedom (of the state) from religion and freedom (for the public) of religion at one and the same time?[3]

THE GENEALOGY OF SECULARISM IN SOUTH SUDAN

South Sudan was born out of two very distinct political trends in regards to religion, which have synthesized into the unique instantiation of state secularism put into place with the founding of the new nation. While secularism's history as a European and Christian project[4] and the particular modes of religion that it insists upon as its partner,[5] regardless of its national location, are crucial to

2 Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 71. My thanks to Mayanthi Fernando whose comments on a version of this article presented at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in 2013 inspired me to flesh out the way I might scale-up the case I observed in South Sudan to the broader problem of secular governance. Indeed, while the contours of South Sudan's "local secularism" (see Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, eds., *Secularisms* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2008]) and the problems I saw in its unfolding are crucial, they are but an example of a pervasive logic central to secularism across its temporal and geographic spread, representing not merely a locally produced tension but a paradox at the heart of the secular project writ large; see also Agrama, *Questioning Secularism*, 122. Fernando's comments on my essay also pointed to a gap in my analysis that I am afraid I am unable to fill in the space of this essay, but to which I want to gesture, if simply to open up space for future research. She writes: "while it's necessary to provincialize the secular and think about how the categories and configurations of secularism are not universally translatable, we also need simultaneously to attend to the attempts *to make them so*, and to the way in which traditions are transformed according to the requirements of those universalizing categories and configurations." Mayanthi Fernando, "Producing Secularism in Public Spaces" (panel comments, American Academy of Religion, Baltimore, MD, 2013). Fernando discusses these points at greater length in her forthcoming book, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). For related points see also Saba Mahmood's "Can Secularism be Other-wise," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013) 292–93, and Agrama, *Questioning Secularism*, 255. The way in which the secular is imbedded in a global discourse of religious pluralism and religious freedom to which South Sudan is directly subject through the means of international (and foreign-national) aid and development organizations—assisting in nation-building, democracy, human rights and "good governance"—is a subject worthy of significant study, but about which I do not have sufficient space to elaborate here.

3 A particularly lucid articulation of this question is found in Winnifred Fallers Sullivan's *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), emerging out of her study of a legal contest concerning religious expression in the United States.

4 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

5 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

Billboard on Airport Road, Juba announcing Hope for a New Nation: A Festival with Franklin Graham. Friday and Saturday, 26 and 27th of October [2012]. John Garang Memorial Park. Juba, South Sudan. (photo credit: Noah Salomon, November 2012)

any understanding of modern secularism, in South Sudan or elsewhere, I will not rehash the findings of this important scholarship here.[6] Rather, I will attempt to answer why this universalizing project came to be seen as the most logical way to address the very particular circumstances of South Sudan's present, especially in the context of radical religious diversity and on the heels of Sudan's experience with the Islamic state.

The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM)—the rebel movement that fought the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005), that negotiated the peace, and on whose administrative and human capital the new state is built (South Sudan remains, in regions still under government control at least, a one-party autocracy)—is sustained by individuals with two very distinct positions on the role of religion in a potential state. First, there is a cadre, many of whom acquired their political chops through training in Cuba and Mengistu's Ethiopia, who advocate state secularism, more in the sense of freedom of the state *from* religion than freedom *of* religion.[7] For these individuals, the Islamic state, under which they lived until 2005, is evidence enough of the danger of

6 For recent essays that theorize and historicize the secular, see, for example, Craig Calhoun, Mark Jurgensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds., *Rethinking Secularism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Linell Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

7 See, for example, SPLM founder John Garang's comments on religion and state in *The Call for Democracy in Sudan*, ed. Mansour Khalid (London: Kegan Paul International, 1992), 249–51. Though Garang speaks passionately here of "freedom of religion," what counts for him as properly religious remains outside of the sphere of politics or social reform ("religious faith is a relationship between the believer and his God") and thus the focus of his comments here are instead on the *limits* that must be imposed on religion in its interactions with the state.

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mixing theology and politics, and they are equally wary of church involvement in the new republic (demographically speaking, South Sudan is overwhelmingly Christian). However, an equally powerful sector exists in the SPLM whose religious politics emerged out of the encounter with activist strains of conservative Catholic and Protestant evangelism, present since the colonial period but intensified during the civil wars, when representatives of mainly Protestant evangelical aid organizations remained on the ground helping Southern Sudanese after the US Agency for International Development, the United Nations, and other international nongovernmental organizations had departed. Such organizations saw a potential South Sudan as a bulwark against the Islamization of the continent (shoring up the so-called tenth parallel), and hoped for a state that was distinctly Christian in character. Moreover, Southern leaders influenced by this encounter embraced a Christian politics as a pan-southern mode of belonging that transcended ethnic identity and as a potential salve to internecine strife.[8]

As the above photo depicts, evangelical groups, particularly those from the United States, continue to play an important unofficial role in imagining the new nation, organizing public events in South Sudan on a scale only matched by state actors and the UN. On my last trip to South Sudan in early November 2012, billboards across the capital advertised an event called "Hope for a New Nation: A Festival with Franklin Graham" with a picture of the preacher speaking in front of a large background of the South Sudanese flag flanked with crowds of South Sudanese waving their own miniature versions of it. The event took place at the symbolically rich John Garang Memorial Park, where the founding father of South Sudan is buried and where independence ceremonies were held. Such faith-based claims to the nation continue to hold considerable sway and are in constant tension with official proclamations of state secularism.

Indeed, many in the public reject a secular identity for the South, as did some government officials I met outside of the capital, the magnetic hold of the idea of the secular getting weaker and weaker the farther I got from the ministries section of Juba. Many Christians, after suffering years of war waged by a government in the North that sought to establish an Islamic state, see no reason why Christian principles should not have an equally prominent role in public policy and public fora. Some Muslims, on the other hand, such as the Sultan ʿAbd al-Baqi in Bahr al-Ghazzal,[9] saw talk of secularism as a veiled form of tyranny of the majority. Because Muslims qua Muslims have not received a place in the new government, as has occurred de jure for women (parliament has a quota of seats allocated to women) and de facto for various ethnic groups (President Salva Kir has been careful to appease some ethnic groups through political appointment), Muslims as a demographic have ended up with little to no access to power. Thus, many Muslims argue that the government's promise of religion-blindness means their marginalization.

The genealogy of secularism in South Sudan also cannot be understood outside of the history of the Second Sudanese Civil War, which pitted the SPLM against successive governments in the North. The war had its origins in the economic marginalization of the peripheries by those at the centers, the same problem that has led to recent violence in Sudan (in Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, and the southern Blue Nile region) and, most recently, in South Sudan. However, during the Second Sudanese Civil War, government-perpetrated violence was often articulated, and deaths made sense of, through the language of Islam, with robust calls for a *jihad* against the

8 Sharon Hutchinson, "Spiritual Fragments of an Unfinished War," in *Religion and African Civil Wars*, ed. Niels Kastfelt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 39–41.

9 The Sultan was engaged in a short-lived armed rebellion around the date of independence demanding thirty percent Muslim representation in the new government.

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south, "martyrs' weddings" for soldiers killed in action, and accusations of a vast international conspiracy to topple the Islamic state through the proxy of the SPLM.[10] The counter-militarization of Christian identities in the South,[11] coupled with the insertion of the conflict into international discourses of global Christian oppression,[12] constructed for many individuals in South Sudan an enemy called "Islam,"[13] in spite of the efforts of the late leader of the SPLM, Dr. John Garang, to posit a "New Sudan" in which followers of all religious faiths would have a stake in defining the nation.[14] As a response to a war in which violence was often articulated in religious idioms, secularism was understood, by both Muslims and non-Muslims who embraced it, as a potential way out of decades of conflict.

Given this background, it should be clear why it would be far from correct to argue that the South Sudanese state and its secular project were created ex nihilo, as some have nevertheless suggested given the absence of the state in great parts of the land until recent years, or that it is a mere instantiation of some universal and inescapable historical process. It is, moreover, important to point out that secularism arrived in South Sudan deeply marked not only by the accretions of Sudanese history (of the SPLM, of the civil war, of unified Sudan's various political experiments) but also by the contexts from which international development and governance organizations who promoted secularism hailed.[15] The political pressures of the newly formed South Sudanese state continue to mold it in unique ways.

THE PRACTICE OF SECULARISM IN SOUTH SUDAN

It was due to the very visible marks of the history of religion in South Sudan that the secular project there began with the charge of clearing the ground before building its new edifices. Erasing the marks of past Islamization that dot the South Sudanese landscape became an important charge of the new government. While mosques in the centers of South Sudanese cities remain unmolested, those mosques on government properties, built during an era in which the government was trying actively to convert southerners and lay claim to public space as Islamic, have been repurposed for "secular pursuits." The mosques are on government property recently transferred to the new

10 For examples of the Islamic framing of the war see Alex de Waal, ed., *Islamism and Its Enemies in the Horn of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), particularly chapter 3.

11 Hutchinson, "Spiritual Fragments of an Unfinished War." Hutchinson also discusses in this article how indigenous prophetic traditions were mobilized to offer a religious interpretation of both anti-government and South on South violence, particularly among Reik Machar's SPLM-Nasir faction. For a more recent discussion of the relationship between Nuer prophecy and modern conflict, see the work of Eri Hashimoto, for example, Hashimoto, "Reviving Powers of the Past with Modern Technology: Aspects of Armed Youth and the Prophet in Jonglei State," *The Journal of Sophia Asian Studies* 31 (2013): 161–73.

12 See Melani McAlister, *Our God in the World: The Global Visions of American Evangelicals* (manuscript in preparation), for a discussion of how US evangelical groups framed the Sudanese Civil War as one instance in a larger global trend involving the Muslim oppression of Christians.

13 See Sharon Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 345–48.

14 Garang's "New Sudan" had a unified nation as its ideal, approaching diversity as a resource on which to build that nation rather than a problem to be solved through partition. For an elaboration of Garang's thesis, see the collected articles in *New Sudan in the Making? Essays on a Nation in Painful Search of Itself*, ed. Francis Deng (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2010).

15 See footnote 2.

Left: The South Sudan Islamic Council, Malakal Office. Right: Former mosque at Malakal Airport, converted into a restaurant. (photo credits: Noah Salomon, July 2012)

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government of South Sudan, and the rationale is that, in order to protect the secular character of the new state and to reverse decades of forced Islamization, the mosques should be closed. With this goal in mind, the mosques at military installations were transformed into army barracks, while the mosque at the Malakal airport was repurposed as a restaurant (this building is depicted in the above picture on the right). Such repurposing of these active sites of worship is read by many South Sudanese Muslims to be nothing short of a desecration of sacred space and a curtailment of their freedom of worship, thereby calling into question for them the state's commitment to religious neutrality. Given that large numbers of Muslims serve in the army and make use of public space like the airport, many Muslims read the closure of mosques not as an attack on past Islamization, but as an attack on Islam.

Yet, as countless studies in the burst of literature on secularism have shown, secularism is not merely the purging of religion from the public sphere (as projects in mosque repurposing might initially suggest), rather it is the constant management of religion in order to fashion it in such a way as to be of use to projects of liberal governance.[16] Such a thesis is well illustrated by the South Sudanese case, as the above images show. On the one hand, the state is clearing marks of past-Islamization from the land—as the picture on the right shows—in order, quite literally, to create secular space. On the other hand, the state is constructing distinctly religious public spaces as a means of managing the diverse religions in its midst. The picture above on the left shows the South Sudan Islamic Council office in Malakal, where the state has established an apparatus in which Muslims are told to organize their affairs and represent themselves: an official forum for Muslims within the apparatus of the state, though a closely managed one.

This Islamic space the state has created, however, is an extremely toxic one,[17] as not only is there much disagreement over whether the Council is a true outlet or merely an attempt to coopt potential Muslim dissent, but the very notion that Muslims could no longer exist in plurality, but were being told to choose a single roster of leadership, which would then report to the state, caused much consternation. Not only did the Council interrupt previous structures of authority within the community, but it forced Muslims to question the nature of their "demographic" in the first place: Are we *a* Muslim community particularly given our diversity? And even if we can be lumped together as Muslims, who has the authority to represent us in our plurality in the first place? Moreover, providing a new structure of authority within the Muslim community is controversial because it challenges the identity of those Muslims who do not seek recognition on the basis of religion, and who instead desire to be politically engaged solely as "South Sudanese." The secular project seemed to rely on official recognition of religion in order to manage it, while seeking to promote its irrelevance in matters of citizenship at one and the same time.

The official discourse on religious minorities in South Sudan is another place where the paradox inherent to the secular project is evident. On the one hand, South Sudanese state officials (and many Muslims) clearly were positioning Muslims in the role of a political minority and setting up representative bodies, such as the Islamic Council, to coordinate the "interests" of this minority within a

16 See, for example, Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Robert A. Yelle, and Mateo Taussig-Rubbo, eds., *After Secular Law* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

17 This toxicity is illustrated by the fact that I was picked up and detained by security agents during my last visit to the branch of the Council in Malakal, seemingly out of fear that I was documenting the tensions I describe here as well as the tensions between Muslims and the state. Moreover, a vicious exchange between its secretary general and some Muslims in Juba over the former's letter to the security services (a copy of which I obtained, though I was unable to verify its authenticity) accusing some members of the Muslim community of planning terrorist activities "with the coordination of Islamic extremist groups from Iran, al-Qaʿida, and the Sudanese Islamic Movement" further exhibits how this Council has become the site of considerable struggle.

political system otherwise dominated by non-Muslims. On the other hand, state officials would insist to me that despite the demographic reality of Muslims' minority status, politically they were only citizens, no different from their Christian brethren. Ironically, perhaps, in order to conjure Muslims whose Islam would be irrelevant to their citizenship, the state felt it needed to get involved in Muslim affairs in an extremely active way—particularly, officials contended, after decades of "brainwashing" under the Islamic state, which emphasized to Muslims that their religious identity was essential to their position as citizens, and that religion was essential to the proper workings of the state. The South Sudan Islamic Council is a means of producing these new sorts of Muslims.[18]

The policy of the government to transform the Muslim community through cooptation into the apparatus of the state was justified through constituting the Muslim community as a danger if left to its devices, a body from whose potential excesses the state needed protection. As the president of the republic, Salva Kir, said at the opening of the new Islamic Council office in Juba:

> *We have given you freedom* (*adaynakum al-hurriyya*), but don't let your freedom be exploited by criminals. Those criminals who exploit with explosions, those who use bombs and blow themselves up, who drive a car laden with explosives to places in which there are people living, or to a market, or whatever, places in which there are just innocent people. A religion that looks like this, we don't want it.[19]

Why, my Muslim interlocutors questioned, does President Kir feel he needs to lecture us on terrorism when there has never been such an act by a South Sudanese Muslim? This, more than anything else, shows how the state truly thinks of us. Moreover, who is he to proclaim he has given us our freedom, have we not earned it as South Sudanese? Are we merely a (conditionally) protected minority, or are we citizens with a stake in the future of the nation? Indeed, the state seems to feel it needs an officially sanctioned Muslim minority in order to protect itself from the threat of political Islam. Yet the very recognition of Muslims as a public with particular interests seems to contradict the egalitarian model of equal citizenship (in which there are no minorities, only South Sudanese) it otherwise promises. An imperative of religious freedom, the Islamic Council created the very community whose interests it is is said to protect, the community's impossibility indexed by its members' mutual accusations of extremism and disloyalty to the state.[20]

The two images I have reproduced above—of the Islam that the state sought to destroy and the Islam it sought to produce—depict very boldly the paradoxical relationship to religion that sustains South Sudan's secular model: at once cleansing the state of its Islamic past through property destruction, while at the same time commencing a whole new kind of religious establishment within the state through the construction of Muslim councils.[21]

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18 See also Saba Mahmood, "Religious Freedom, the Minority Question, and Geopolitics in the Middle East," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15 (2012), where Mahmood argues that the political category of "religious minority" is not an *object for* but rather a *product of* the international discourse of religious freedom, thus upending the logic that sees religious freedom as merely a palliative to already existing religious division. See especially ibid., 419 ("Viewed from this perspective, 'religious minorities' do not just signify a demographic entity that are accorded a space of freedom and immunity by the institutionalization of religious liberty, but are also produced through the process of the legal codification of this principle. One of the key questions that guides this essay is that of how the discourse on religious liberty has participated in the production of 'the minority problem' in international law, and how this 'problem' has unfolded in the history of the modern Middle East.").

19 South Sudan TV broadcast, July 12, 2012 (recording on file with author).

20 See footnote 17.

21 Of course, South Sudan is not alone among states in seeing some version of religious establishment as a means of managing religious diversity and promoting state secularism. See for example: Markus Dressler, "The Religio-Secular Continuum: Reflections on the Religious Dimension of Turkish Secularism," in *After Secular*

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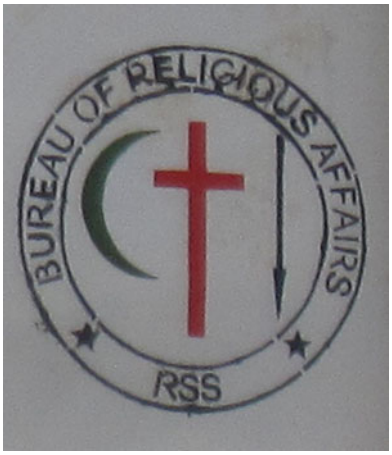

Seal of the Bureau of Religious Affairs, Republic of South Sudan (photo credit: Noah Salomon, July 2012)

THE CODIFICATION OF SECULARISM IN SOUTH SUDAN

Having looked at the genealogy and present-day political practice of secularism in South Sudan, it will be helpful to look at how its bureaucratic apparatus has been legally codified in order to understand how it may proceed in the decades to come. Above is the seal of the new Bureau of Religious Affairs, an office established by the presidency to manage the flourishing religious diversity in South Sudan. Its job is to map the religious landscape, as well as to determine, through the process of registration of faith-based organizations, which groups count as Christian and which as Muslim (inspectors versed in doctrine were hired to complete this task) and, more importantly, which do not. Though no accurate figures exist, South Sudan is generally understood to be made up of a plurality of Christians (who comprise almost the entirety of the elite), a significant number of Muslims, and practitioners of a variety of other more localized faiths.

As we have seen, the fact that the state attempts religious neutrality by no means indicates that it is blind to or uninterested in religion. Quite the contrary, as the state has constructed a large apparatus to manage the diverse religious groups in its midst, from a presidential advisor on religious affairs, to a Bureau of Religious Affairs, to organizations such as the Islamic Council described above. The Bureau of Religious Affairs, for example, in registering faith-based organizations, often rejected applications of Christian organizations "if the constitution of a particular group is not lining up with the biblical chapters or verses," as one inspector employed by the Bureau put it to me during a lengthy visit I made there in 2011. This effort formed part of a program to protect the nation from what he called "cults," though which groups would qualify as Christian and Muslim and which as "cults" was still in flux during the time I was there. The above seal graphically illustrates what the new national ideal seems to have become: a large cross at the center, with a smaller *hilal* (representing Islam) and a spear (representing what government officials call ATRs, "African traditional religions" or, *al-muʿtaqadat al-ifriqiyya*) on either side, indicating, it

Law; Mayanthi Fernando, "The Republic's Second Religion," *Middle East Report* 235 (2005); Malika Zeghal, "The Implicit Sharia: Established Religion and Varieties of Secularism in Tunisia," in *Varieties of Religious Establishment*, eds. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan and Lori G. Beaman (Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2013).

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would appear, a Christian-majority state in which other "religions," safely construed and confined as minorities, will be protected. But what will it mean for models of southern citizenship if the notion of majority and minority religions is embraced? Will this model lead to social peace or will it harden identities that had once been much more fluid?

The new state of South Sudan promised (and in its early days has certainly delivered) a very different approach to the relationship between religion and politics from that of the Sudan southerners had lived under prior to July 9, 2011, a relationship it calls "secularism." However, the variety of secularism to be instantiated in the new state remains uncertain. Not only where Muslims will figure in the conception of this new nation, but also where all of the "African traditional religions" will figure in the national image, is unclear. The party line seems to be that ATRs should be represented within the state and constituted as distinct faith communities (what were referred to in Arabic as *din*s in my interviews with government officials). Yet, given that Dinka and Nuer modes of prophecy are decidedly pre-secular, that is, representative of a comprehensive way of life, not a differentiable church, I was not surprised to hear government officials complain about not being able to find a set of officials who might represent them (if they could be lumped into one category in the first place). Further, to think of such "traditional" practices as distinct confessions did not seem to represent the reality of those South Sudanese who may identify as Christian and at the same time see no contradiction in maintaining these rites and rituals. One wonders, then, what impact the state's attempt to constitute such practices as discrete "religions" (and as distinctly not Christian) will have on those engaged in such practices, and whether it will make this kind of lived hybridity between Christianity and other modes of approaching the divine less sustainable, thus rendering Christianity and ATRs much more polar forms of identity than they are currently. Moreover, the preference for group-based religious liberty, in contradistinction to individual liberties, begs the question of who gets to determine the boundaries of these groups, the terms of their membership, and even their constitution as a "religion" (and thus deserving of protection) and not some other form of social solidarity.

Historian Cherry Leonardi has written that we are witnessing an "unprecedented closer proximity of state to society" in southern/South Sudan in the past decades. I would concur and add that, since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended the Second Sudanese Civil War in 2005 and laid the groundwork for the South Sudanese state, this proximity has grown exponentially. The micromanaging of religion exhibited by the Bureau of Religious Affairs is but one example of the larger case she studies. Leonardi writes:

> When the late leader of the SPLM/A, Dr. John Garang, promised to "take the towns to the people", he meant to extend service delivery to the rural areas. In 2007 one county commissioner claimed to take up this call by inviting visiting GoSS [Government of Southern Sudan] officials "deeper into his village", where he "planted the Southern flag into the ground". But the attempt to plant the state beyond its old urban centres is generating deep tensions between value systems that have historically been kept separate in moral terms.[22]

As this new state extends its tentacles both geographically and bureaucratically, as the "moral economy" of the state seeks further ground on which to plant its flag, we must ask what effects this new mode of governance will have on the possibilities for religious life that take place within its domain.

22 Cherry Leonardi, "Paying 'Buckets of Blood' for the Land: Moral Debates over Economy, War and State in Southern Sudan," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 49, no. 2 (2011): 235.

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Sign held aloft at the national independence ceremonies, Juba, July 9, 2011. (photo credit: Noah Salomon, 2011)

BECOMING SECULAR . . .

How does a nation *become* secular? What are the modes of political practice, the habitus, the forms of religion, which must be inculcated and adopted in order for secularism to take root? Such questions can only be answered through in-depth, lengthy field research, which my brief time in South Sudan cannot replicate.[23] I can offer, however, a few comments on the difficulty of the transition. As in the above sections, I will center my reflections here around an image. The above photo was taken at the independence ceremony in July 2011 and represents at least one strand of the new discourse on identity that was being presented both to and by the general public. After an aggressive campaign of Arabization and Islamization by the North, many South Sudanese were ready to redefine themselves on a new basis. Though the lingua franca remains Arabic (so much so that even the bulk of the independence ceremony was in Arabic), the state, and much of the public,

23 Although I spent nearly three years living in and researching Sudan prior to partition (the results of which are found in my publications on the topic), the research on which this article is based consisted of only three short stays in the new state of South Sudan: a little over three weeks in July of 2011, a little over two weeks in July of 2012, and a one week trip to present my research at the University of Juba in November of 2012. My research took place in Juba and Malakal. My basic knowledge of South Sudanese affairs gathered in my time in Sudan, my connections with South Sudanese made during that time, as well as my proficiency in Arabic, greatly helped to facilitate my research in South Sudan but cannot replace what a longer engagement might have provided. Nevertheless, I managed to meet a wide spectrum of interlocutors in my time in South Sudan. During my research trips I conducted 51 recorded interviews, 21 unrecorded interviews/meetings, as well as countless hours of participant-observation in government offices and among Muslim communities. Of course, only a small part of this research has made it into this article; I hope to find time in the near future to publish more of it.

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aspire to English as the common language, so as to be part of another sort of globalism (*and* regionalism). Many see this linguistic reorientation as one means of improving their international standing after decades in the orbit of the Arab world in which, as I heard it articulated, at the best of times they were a storehouse of natural resources and at the worst a storehouse of slaves. The sign you see above illustrates the tensions inherent in the desire to change overnight: while the English version is not exactly clear ("we are not worst Arabs, but better Africans"), the Arabic, despite one small error, is very much so ("From today our identity is southern and African and not Arab and Islamic. *We are not the worst of Arabs, but rather the best of Africans* [emphasis added])."[24] The discursive historical reality of independence that the words on this sign attempt to express—of sharp bold-lines on the map, of overnight transformations—was matched in intensity by the sociological reality of entanglement, of blurry lines, of the words' inability to perform the act for which they strove. North and South could not be so easily disaggregated, even by the magical ritual of independence. A visit to the Ministry of Justice showed that the problems that arose with rapid Anglicization were mirrored in the process of secularization. South Sudanese judges, most of whom had practiced in the courts of the former unified Sudan, had been trained in the application of *sharīʿa* jurisprudence, the laws of that state, and found it difficult to begin applying the new laws that were being developed for the new republic, leading to an often slow and uneven administration of justice.

It remains unclear what sentiments such as those expressed on the independence-day sign mean for South Sudanese Muslims who, in the process of healing from the wounds of a civil war of which they *also* were very much the victims, feel that they are effectively having their identity written out of the new nation. What would it mean for such individuals if the identity of the nation is definitively *not* Islamic ("from today our identity is southern and African and not Arab and Islamic") while theirs, of course, very much is? Is an identity that is at once southern, African, Arab, and Islamic (the hybrid space many Muslims indeed inhabit) acceptable in the new state, or are Muslims being asked to choose between these alleged polarities?[25] Many southern Muslims expressed to me that they were dually oppressed: despised in the north for being southern (so much so that several recounted stories of northern Muslims who refused to pray behind them), and in the south, despite years of interreligious tolerance, for being Muslim. Few now wanted to wear the *jallabiya*, the traditional Muslim dress, in public anymore. This was an identity that South Sudan was trying to leave behind.

The independence of South Sudan was presented by Sudanese, South Sudanese, and the international community, alike, as the commencement of a new historical epoch. While independence

24 "*min al-yawm huwiyatna janubiyya ifriqiyya wa laysa* [*sic*] *ʿarabiyya islamiyya. lisna aswaʾ al-ʿarab bal afdal al-afariqa.*"

25 This remains very much an open question for South Sudanese Muslims. On the one hand, sentiments such as those of the above-pictured sign are very much widespread among the public and officials alike; on the other hand, the public presence of Islam at official events (Muslims offering benediction alongside Christian leaders, for example) and on state television (*shaykhs* discussing AIDS prevention campaigns or offering Ramadan sermons) indicates that a Muslim identity will continue to have a place in the public sphere. On a visit to the Ministry of Culture, however, which is embarking on an ambitious project to create "a sense of national unity and shared identity among its diverse population" through "celebrat[ing] all of South Sudan's cultural diversity," Jok Madut Jok, "South Sudan: Building a Diverse Nation," in *Sudan after Separation: New Approaches to a New Region*, eds. Heinrich-Boll Foundation and Toni Weis (Berlin: Heinrich-Boll Stiftung, 2012): 58, 62, I was interested to hear that Islamic culture had absolutely no place in the vision of South Sudanese diversity the state was celebrating. The vision was based instead on an ideal of "traditional" cultures and the ethnic groups that held them, with Islam clearly pictured as a foreign accretion.

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certainly did offer a host of new variables in a variety of arenas of governance and in the relationship between religion and state, it is important to note that the moment of independence was marked by continuities as much as change. Despite the insistence of a clean break articulated on billboards across the capital on and around independence ("Congratulations! Free at last! South Sudan"), from the first moments of the independence ceremonies it was clear that while a new line might be drawn on the map, separating the south from the north would not be as easy as it seemed. If any lesson was drawn from Independence Day, it was that the linguistic, cultural, political, and religious ties that link the various regions of Sudan are stronger than the attempts of separatists on both sides to dissolve them. As master of ceremonies and (former) SPLM party chairman Pagan Amum noted during the independence celebrations, the history of the two peoples is forever intertwined. To symbolize this notion, he argued that the flag of Sudan, on being lowered that day and replaced by the new flag of South Sudan, could not simply be given over to the Sudanese president ʿUmar al-Bashir (who was in attendance), as the program had initially called for, but instead would be kept in remembrance of the fact that the two nations share not only history, but people, cultures, and the future. Thus while the achievement of Southern independence cannot be discounted, the blurry lines were as visible that day of July 9, 2011, as the thick black line now drawn on maps of the world.[26]

It is crucial, then, to acknowledge the dangers that reside in too readily accepting the rhetoric of a "clean break" at the moment of southern independence. However, although no one turned into a pumpkin at the stroke of midnight on July 9, something major did change. At all levels of society, individuals and institutions had to shift their discourses from one of oppression by the north to one of independence and to the possibility of making ties that did not have to go up the Nile, but that could go east, west, south, and overseas, with no intermediary in between. These individuals and institutions had to articulate the identity of their newborn state, the identity that they themselves would want to embrace, which was, for many, one severed from the Arabic and Islamic identity that had been imposed upon them at least since Sudanese independence in 1956, if not long before. The secularization of law, of politics, of public life, began in earnest, yet it butted up against

26 This observation was confirmed the night after independence, when, at the Juba Bridge Hotel, the famous northern Sudanese singer Mohammad Wardi (d. 2012) was scheduled to play a concert. That a party celebrating South Sudanese independence *from the north*, and held on the first night of independence *from the north*, was to be headlined by a singer *from the north* was not understood to be surprising by anyone except me is clear evidence that the links that bind north and south could not be severed by national independence and the new forms of national identity that came with it. Though, due to illness, Wardi never actually took the stage, and instead the Ethiopian warm-up band played Wardi's songs while the people joyfully sang along, it was clear that many of South Sudan's cultural references (at least those of the elite, recently returned from Khartoum) are inseparable from those of the north, despite the years of bitterness. Many of the Juba elite who have recently returned to South Sudan are culturally very much part of the North, despite their minority status there (and the returnee-versus-those-who-stayed dynamic is another fault line present in South Sudan). This event at the Juba Bridge Hotel—coupled with a fascinating public debate over the sound system between a South Sudanese man praising Sudanese president ʿUmar al-Bashir for his courage in signing the peace agreement that led to Southern independence and a northern Sudanese opposition member shouting that al-Bashir was a criminal and should receive no credit for Southern independence—further cemented in my mind the difficulty of thinking about my research solely using the historical referent of independence, of north versus south. As John Garang noted when he called not for southern independence, but for a new Sudan ("from Wadi Halfa in the North to Nimule in the South, from Junayna in the West to Port Sudan in the East") that took into account shared history, migrations, and indeterminate social, ethnic, and religious boundaries: South and North Sudan cannot so easily be disaggregated.

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Billboard in central Juba: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. God Said 'Hold firmly together to the rope of God and do not separate.' South Sudan Muslim Forum for Separation/Kuwait Mosque, Juba." The two symbols on the sign are the South Sudanese Flag—upper right—and the raised hand, the January 2011 independence referendum voting symbol that indicated a "yes" for separation—upper left. (photo credit: Noah Salomon, 2011)

concepts of religion—both those proper to the Islamic state and to varieties of liberationist Christianity[27]—that could not be so immediately transcended. It is only through attention to the tension between the sociological reality of entanglement (by choice and by force) and the discursive reality of independence that a study of the process of becoming secular in South Sudan can commence.

. . . BEING MUSLIM

If secularism requires and indeed produces new modes of religion, as myriad scholars have argued,[28] what does it mean to be Muslim in the evolving context of South Sudan? Muslims in South Sudan have gone from being a national majority to a national minority literally overnight, with the stroke of a pen. Moreover, they have gone from being a majority in a state in which religious identity is central to national identity, to being a minority in a state that has tried to

27 For the former, see Noah Salomon, "The Ruse of Law: Legal Equality and the Problem of Citizenship in a Multi-Religious Sudan," in *After Secular Law*. For the latter, see Isaiah Majok Dau, *Free at Last: South Sudan Independence and the Role of the Church* (Nairobi: Kijabe Printing Press, 2011); Andrew Wheeler, ed., *Land of Promise: Church Growth in a Sudan at War* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997).

28 See, for example, footnotes 6 and 16.

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make religious identity immaterial to national identity. My first trip to South Sudan, after several years working in the northern part of the former unified Sudan, took place in the heady days of national independence in 2011. At that time, it seemed that Muslims were embracing the new state, and that the new state would seek ways to integrate their communities into the nation-building project it had initiated. However, during my second trip to South Sudan, in July 2012, I began to see fissures emerging in this façade. While the state puts forward an official policy of secularism and understands freedom of religion to be a founding principle,[29] such commitments are being challenged both descriptively (in the case of Muslims, who often see "secularism" as a veiled form of "Christianism," as discussed above) and prescriptively (in the case of some Christians who seek a greater role for Christianity in the imagining of the new political order).

The position of the state with regards to religious neutrality, the Muslim community, and religious minorities in general is difficult to characterize in a single manner. On the one hand, secular mantras were spoken by government officials at all levels of the state whom I met in the capital; on the other hand, when I left the capital the notion of a "Christian nation" was being proclaimed by officials in state offices of religious affairs and Christian blessings began and ended state radio broadcasts. On the one hand, the state proclaimed a non-interference policy with regards to religions; on the other hand, Ramadan programs were featured on state television and *hajj* travel for Muslim leaders received government support. Indeed, South Sudanese secularism is not only caught between the promise of religious neutrality and the project of the de-Islamization of the public sphere, but also between freedom of religion and the establishment thereof, as the state fears that if the former is not balanced by the latter, things could get dangerously out of hand. When I presented a version of this article at the University of Juba in November 2012, framing its argument around the tensions inherent in the construction of a Muslim minority, a prominent Christian leader in the audience objected, contending that I should be concerned about religious *majorities* in South Sudan instead, not religious minorities. He maintained that Christian leaders felt marginalized from public life in a state that claimed a decidedly secular stance and in which church buildings had been seized under eminent domain. Muslims, on the other hand, whom the state envisioned as a potential threat, were in the process of being molded into an established (and thus easier to manage) church by the state, a process that required state support of some Muslim activities, and thus drew the envy of the religious majority.

Ironically, it was the South Sudanese state's support of the official Muslim community that indicated its wariness of Muslims at large, a stance that can be explained (though not justified) for the historical reasons mentioned above. However, the results of the state attempt to formalize the Muslim community are still uncertain. In nearly any urban South Sudanese family you can find a Christian, a Muslim, and a follower of a local faith tradition (and these identities are often not mutually exclusive). That is, not only is South Sudan not divided on the basis of religion at the level of region or tribe (as is the case in so many other African contexts), but it is even not divided at the level of individual households. Yet, the state has an insatiable appetite for categorization (Muslim councils, licenses for Christian denominations), which, though it belies the significant grey areas on the ground, threatens to become the new reality as the South Sudanese state comes into being. Such blurry boundaries of affiliation and identification collide with a modern economy

29 Interestingly, while the Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan guarantees the neutrality of the state in regards to religion (Article 8.1), it nowhere mentions the phrase "freedom of religion," despite the statements by government officials I met that the principle of religious freedom (*hurriyat al-adyan*) is a founding principle of the state. Perhaps fearing the Pandora's Box that might be opened by juxtaposing the words freedom and religion (and not just Islam), the constitution instead speaks of carefully delimited "religious rights" (Article 23).

of clearly defined lines, as both the state and Muslim groups make collective claims to the rights and responsibilities of "the Muslim minority community."

The state's support for a new "official Islam" is a result of the apprehension with which Muslims more generally are treated in society, as a ticking time bomb of potentially disruptive forces, as the South Sudanese president's comments that I discussed above clearly reveal. Muslims complain that they are treated as "agents" of the north, laughed at or harassed on the streets if they are wearing identifying dress, and told to "go home" to the north (despite the fact that they are as South Sudanese as the people harassing them). Even more threatening to successful integration, however, is official discrimination. I collected a story of a Muslim who was trying to obtain his new national identity card, but was told that to do so he had to change his name to a "local name" and get rid of his "Arab name." He tried to explain that these were names that indicated a Muslim, not an Arab, identity, and after many attempts he was able to get the card, yet not before it became clear that state officials questioned the authenticity of his identity as South Sudanese.[30] A South Sudanese judge confirmed that this is not an isolated case. Regarding Muslim dress, women have been asked to remove the headscarf in order to take national identity photos, and in public schools the headscarf is banned (though the extent of implementation is unclear). Most troubling to Muslims, however, is the state's closure of many mosques in both cities where I conducted research (Juba and Malakal, though most likely this is taking place elsewhere in the country as well) and their transformation into other uses such as army barracks and a restaurant, as discussed above. A lack of official representation in the upper echelons of government is yet another complaint: as of November 2012 there were no Muslim ministers or state governors in this decidedly undemocratic government,[31] and the presidential advisor on religious affairs has been a Christian both times someone was appointed to this position. This, coupled with ineffectual representation in the lower echelons of government—the state Islamic Council, meant to be organizing the affairs of Muslims, is led by individuals widely condemned as ruling-party stalwarts who are either powerless or simply unwilling to defend the rights of Muslims—has led Muslims to complain that they are condemned to official marginalization.

30 It should be pointed out that this dispute about names was not only about Islam but intertwined with larger tensions about who had rights to lay claim to South Sudanese identity. Returnees versus those who stayed, those who fought in the liberation struggle versus those who collaborated with the occupying forces: these were some of the fault lines along which such claims were fought. Though Muslims were well represented in each one of these categories, and across ethnic groups (not constituting an ethnic group themselves), the perception was often that an Arab name signified either a collaborator, a Khartoum returnee, or an Arabized national and thus someone who could not make authentic claims to the land or the citizenship that emerged from it. For an excellent description of fault lines between various groups who remained in or were returning to Juba as they played out in land disputes see Naseem Baidey, "The Strategic Instrumentalization of Land Tenure in State-Building: The Case of Juba, South Sudan" *Africa* 83, no. 1 (2013): 57–77.

31 ʿAbdallah Deng Nhial (whom I interviewed in July 2011), an important Muslim South Sudanese politician—and once a ranking member of the National Islamic Front ruling party in Sudan, the first minister of spiritual instruction and guidance (*wazir al-irshad wa-l-tawjih*) after the *inqadh* revolution of 1989, governor of White Nile State, and most recently Hasan al-Turabi's nominee for the national presidential elections of 2010 for the Popular Congress Party ticket—was appointed minister of environment for South Sudan in late 2013, after the reshuffle of the government that precipitated the current crisis. However, he served very briefly in this capacity and was dismissed after getting into a fist fight with a parliamentarian, "Salva Kir Dismisses Environment Minister after Fight," *Sudan Tribune*, November 26, 2013, http://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article48962. It is also worth mentioning that the mayor of Juba, Muhammad al-Haj Bab Allah, is Muslim, though he has not been involved in Islamic civic or political organizations.

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Muslim communities have been living in what is now South Sudan since at least the nineteenth century, if not earlier. Many of these Muslims are descendants of decommissioned conscripts in the Turco-Egyptian army who converted during the period of the Turco-Egyptian military and commercial activity in the South (1839–1884).[32] Others converted more recently, either in the South or during displacement in the North. I recorded many "conversion narratives" and found them to be extremely diverse. Moreover, it is important to point out that South Sudan's history includes several important Muslim leaders.[33] Thus, in contradistinction to the fraught religious politics of today, many Muslims have lived peaceably in what is now South Sudan (both those from tribes that identify as South Sudanese and northern traders) for nearly two hundred years, some fighting valiantly on the side of the South during the civil war. Southern Muslims, who are the focus of my research, often see themselves as wholly distinct from the Muslims of the North.[34] The idea of being a "South Sudanese Muslim" is in no sense an oxymoron for these individuals, nor is it for the masses of South Sudanese who converted to Islam in recent years and remained pious and vocal Muslims following South Sudan's independence in spite of the great social cost of this identity.

What is different now is the context of the post-partition nation state in which Muslims live and their role within it. Between July 8 and 9, 2011, Muslims in the South had gone from being a part of the national Sudanese majority to being a South Sudanese minority. Between July 8 and 9, Muslim organizations had gone from having centers of power (and financial support) in Khartoum, to initiating a process of nationalization/nativization, a changing of the guard of leadership at every level, as they were forced to contemplate what it meant to be South Sudanese Muslims independent of the north. Finally, between July 8 and 9, Muslim communities, in order to begin the task of integration, began the work of disentangling themselves from the view of Islam and Muslims held by fellow countrymen and women derived from a war that was often articulated in religious terms (by both north and south) as "Muslim aggression." They endorsed the idea that Islam was not a political identity affiliated with the north (if this were the case, they argued, then the predictions of mass-conversion on July 9 would have been realized, and they had not been),[35] but rather a religious identity that could exist alongside any number of political affiliations: "Muslim" and "southern" did not constitute an either/or choice.

32 For a more in-depth discussion of this history, see Abdalla Keri Wani, *Islam in Southern Sudan: Its Impact: Past, Present and Future* (Khartoum: University of Khartoum Press, 2006), particularly chapters 2, 3, and 4. Wani's comprehensively researched book should be a first stop for anyone who is interested in researching the history and lived texture of Islam in what was then southern Sudan. For a more recent study of Islamic organizations in contemporary South Sudan (researched just prior to independence), see the volume of essays edited by the Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, *islam fi dawlat janub al-sudan: al-judhur, al-waqi', al-mustaqbal* [*Islam in the State of South Sudan: Its Roots, Its Contemporary Instantiation, Its Future*] (Dubai: *markaz al-misbar li-l-dirasat wa-l-buhuth*, 2011).

33 For example, ʿAbd al-Rahman Sule, one of the founders of one of southern Sudan's first political parties. These leaders' history is scattered in works on southern Sudan, the evidence showing that the marginalization of Muslims from political life in South Sudan is likely of recent provenance, a result of political events of the last few decades, rather than long-standing antipathy. (I thank Cherry Leonardi for bringing some of these mid-twentieth-century Muslim leaders to my attention.)

34 My research focused on Muslims from ethnic groups that identify themselves as South Sudanese and thus make claims to Southern citizenship. There is also a large population of Muslims resident in South Sudan who originate from the North (whether the riverian center of the country or Darfur), who are involved in commerce but who make no discernable claims on the identity of the state.

35 Though a common refrain of some non-Muslims during my time in South Sudan is that conversion to Islam was either a political choice or somehow coerced (in other words, that it was somehow insincere), and though it is important to point out that successive post-independence regimes in the north engaged in campaigns to encourage conversion in which religious identity was directly linked to material consequences, the actual stories of conversion

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Organizationally, South Sudanese Muslims are split into several groups. The South Sudan Islamic Council (*al-majlis al-islami li-janub al-sudan*) that I described above is the government-sponsored Muslim representative body, made up of former SPLM commanders and party officials as well as former National Congress Party (NCP, the ruling party in Sudan) or Popular Congress Party (the major offshoot of the NCP) affiliated Muslims who had now joined the SPLM. It is meant to coordinate all Islamic organizations and Muslim individuals in South Sudan (such as the Salafi Ansar al-Sunna organization of varying factions, Sufis, Muslim Brotherhood style Islamists, and the unaffiliated) and act as a representative body. The organization emerged out of the Islamic Council for New Sudan (*al-majlis al-islami li-l-sudan al-jadid*), which the SPLM founded during the civil war alongside the New Sudan Council of Churches. In addition to this, the NCP-affiliated Islamic Organization for South Sudan (*al-hayʾa al-islamiyya li-janub al-sudan*) is a present, but less active, force. This organization was founded by the NCP to support Islamic causes in southern Sudan prior to partition and remains a parallel and alternative representative body for southern Muslims. Further, branches of the Sudan-based international body, the Islamic Call Organization (*munazamat al-daʿwa al-islamiyya*) exist in South Sudan. This organization is primarily involved in proselytization, education, and human services and does not understand itself as primarily political. Finally, organizations that represent one trend within the Muslim community, such as The Islamic Union for South Sudan (*al-rabta al-islamiyya li-janub al-sudan*), which is an Ansar al-Sunna affiliated organization defending Muslim rights in South Sudan, are present. In Malakal the Islamic Union for South Sudan was particularly active in opposing seizures of Muslim property.

Muslims represent an extremely diverse constituency in South Sudan: from converts, to members of Muslim families that go back generations, from returnees to those who had never left during the civil war, from supporters of the SPLM to opposition. Interestingly, however, most Muslim *leaders* (heads of organizations, mosque imams, preachers) I met were converts to Islam. Many of them converted during their time spent displaced in northern Sudan, while others converted in the south or in northern Uganda while enrolled in Islamic primary or secondary schools. The stories they told were idiosyncratic, but almost uniformly expressed the lack of difficulty they faced from their families when they made this change. Religious adherence in the South seems to be understood as an individual journey, and despite the politics of organizational tensions, changes in religious identity did not seem to upset the social fabric. In addition to converts, other Muslims were members of families who could trace their Islamic lineage far back. One informant told me that he had an ancestor among the companions of the Prophet, whose descendants had made an early journey to what is now South Sudan, and that Islam in the South was in fact older than Islam in the North. Although such stories are unverifiable, it is important to note that alongside the large community of converts, there is a long-standing and important "old" Muslim community in the South (that of the Malakiyya neighborhood in Juba is the one I explored) that has played important roles in the independence struggle as well as having important connections to the North. It is the latter fact that makes many non-Muslims suspicious of the loyalties of this community, while the community itself is quick to assert its southern identity.

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that I gathered in my interviews described extremely diverse causes and circumstances. This is a point corroborated in Wani, *Islam in Southern Sudan*, chap. 9, who records stories that discuss conversion contexts such as cultural assimilation in the north, schooling in north or south, state broadcasts of the South African preacher Ahmed Deedat and the Egyptian Muhammad Shaʿarawi (the former's mission was directly aimed at converting Christians), as well as dream visions and miracles.

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The unique position of Muslims in South Sudan was nowhere better depicted than in yet another billboard I came across in my travels around Juba. It is pictured above. The billboard almost caused a car accident when I asked my friend to slam on the breaks so I could photograph what seemed to be a glaring contradiction in its words. The sign represents a group called "The South Sudan Forum for *Separation*," yet at the same time it quotes the oft-cited verse from the Qurʾan (Al ʿimran 103): "Hold firmly together to the rope of God and *do not separate* . . . (*ʿitasamu bi-habl allahi jamiʿan wa la tafarraqu*)." I had heard this verse cited countless times at political events in the north that sought to foster Muslim unity. For example, there was a short-lived, Sufi-initiated, political movement in Sudan, whose opening ceremonies I attended in 2005, called the Movement of National Preservation (*harakat al-ʿitisam al-watani*) who used the verse as its motto. In this case the verse was employed to support Muslim unity against the incursions of secularism threatened by the integration of the SPLM into the national government during the short-lived period of national unity (2005–2011). On this billboard, however, South Sudanese Muslims mobilized the verse to support the exact opposite. Here it was used to draw a dividing line *between* Muslims in the north and south, and to call for solidarity for South Sudanese, rather than for Muslim unity. I find the sign quite incredible, and I imagine it was intentionally meant to be jarring, because it turns the commonly understood meaning of the Qurʾanic verse on its head, thus signaling the level of commitment of southern Muslims to another kind of unity at the very moment that they were working for separation from the north: unity with each other and with the Southern cause, be it a secular state or otherwise. For South Sudanese Muslims, Islam necessitated unity, not with Muslims in the north, but with other southerners if it was to achieve its goals of social justice. Such a position is the result of an exegesis of this verse, of what constitutes the metaphoric "rope of God," very different than that of most Muslim interpreters.

One young Muslim activist with whom I spoke articulated such a sentiment well when he said:

> Even though I am Muslim, I have always been a separatist. I always felt there was something lacking. And I felt the same way [as other southerners, even] as a Muslim. I asked myself: why are we in the South always praying in dilapidated mosques, with no air-conditioning? A mosque like this, look at it! At the same time we as Southern Muslims are of the lowest class in our own society . . . our brothers the Christians see us as the followers of the *inqadh* [i.e. the Islamist regime in the North, referred to in shorthand as "the Salvation," given that this was its self-appellation]. They thought that the Southern Muslims were benefiting [from the government in the North], but we were not benefiting. The people who were most oppressed were the Muslims. So, we really see good tidings [in separation]. After separation, the South will open to the world. This is the first thing. And the second, we as Southern Muslims, and with our faith (*ʿaqida*), we no longer need to ask the Northerners to act on our behalf. Islam is not tied inextricably to Northerners, Islam is the religion of God. And [once we sever this relationship with the North], Islam might be able to spread in a beautiful way [in the south] . . . Because of this, I supported separation warmly so that I can be free in making decisions, free to deal with other southerners (*ahli*) with wisdom.

The vision of Islam in South Sudan is a work in progress, as Muslim organizations seek to untangle themselves from decades of dependence on the north.[36] As groups like the Salafi organization Ansar

36 The agenda of establishing a new "South Sudanese Islam" was clear in the writings of Dr. Jaafar Karim Juma, which he generously shared with me. Dr. Jaafar is a professor of statistics and demography at the University of Juba, a South Sudanese Muslim activist, and, at the time I was in South Sudan, the head of the University of Juba's South Sudanese Muslim Staff Association. Dr. Jaafar argues forcefully that South Sudanese Muslims need to untangle the history of Islamic politics in the north and Arabism from the religion of Islam in its spiritual dimensions so that South Sudanese in general do not label South Sudanese Muslims as a foreign import from the

al-Sunna—who are questioning the applicability of key doctrines of their brethren in the North, such as aspects of gender segregation—shows, minority status is not merely a descriptive category but an object of debate, something that must be produced. Thus theories of what is called in the jurisprudential tradition *fiqh al-aqalliyyat al-muslima* (jurisprudence which takes into account Muslim minority status) were plentiful in the time I was in South Sudan, as South Sudanese Muslims tried to come to terms with the new political context they had entered overnight.[37]

CONCLUSION

"Oh God, we praise and glorify you, for your grace on South Sudan," begins the South Sudanese national anthem, echoing the Anglo-American hymns imported to South Sudan in recent decades through the intervention of evangelical groups from the United States and beyond. Though state officials will claim that this anthem reflects religious neutrality ("the God of all South Sudanese"), it, like the South Sudanese state itself, incorporates a deep tension that lies at the heart of South Sudan's relationship to religion, exhibiting the difficulty in escaping the mark of decades of war in which religious identity and political identity became complexly intertwined. Untangling these strands will not be easy. On the one hand, when the state seeks to manage religion by establishing Muslim councils and offices of religious affairs, it cannot help but taint its neutrality, offering state support to some modes of confession and not to others. On the other hand, the state fears that if it allows religion to run rampant (Islam, Christianity, or otherwise) it will risk destroying its secular character whose promise was the banner under which so many in the SPLM fought the civil war. The South Sudanese case prompts us to ask what it means for a people to emerge into nationhood, and what effects the new conceptions of personhood and belonging propounded by the state might have on individuals who live through it.[38] Through observing the secular state at the moment of its foundation (a solar eclipse of sorts for the scholar of religion) we may better be able to ask what kinds of religious freedom can be achieved under these unique political arrangements, and which must necessarily be foreclosed.

EPILOGUE

While the recent violence in South Sudan that began in December of 2013 both post-dates my field research and has not been articulated in the language of religion or secularism, the difficulties in the nation-building process that it represents have important parallels to the case I have presented

north, or their religion as one of intolerance and chauvinism. To do this, he proposes more work on building a distinctly South Sudanese Islam, constructed, for example, by appointing a South Sudanese Muslim Mufti who might develop a *fiqh* that is sensitive to the circumstances of the local Muslim community. Since I do not have explicit permission to quote from his unpublished work in this article, I only paraphrase his ideas here, but I look forward to engaging his writings further in future publications.

37 The topic of the nature of Islamic law in the context of non-Muslim societies has become a major point of debate in contemporary Muslim literatures. See for example Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *fi fiqh al-aqalliyyat al-muslima: hayat al-muslimin wast al-mujtama'at al-ukhra* [*On the Jurisprudence of Muslim Minorities: Muslim Life in the Midst of Other Societies*] (Cairo: dar al-shuruq, 2001). Also see the discussion of the topic in Andrew March, *Islam and Liberal Citizenship: The Search for Overlapping Consensus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), as well as the sources he cites.

38 See Leonardi, "Moral Debates."

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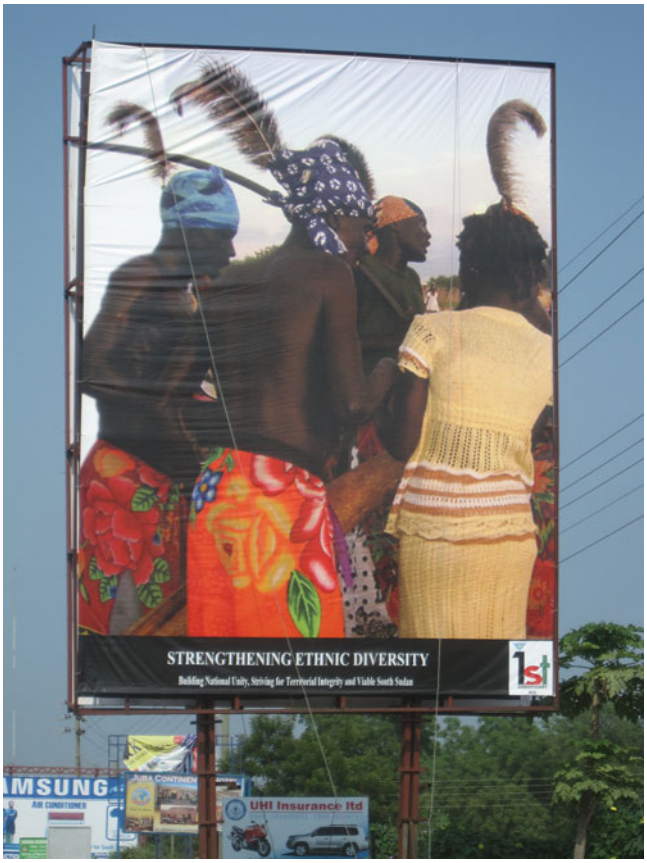

Billboard on Airport Road, Juba: "Strengthening Ethnic Diversity: Building National Unity, Striving for Territorial Integrity and Viable South Sudan." (photo credit: Noah Salomon, July 2012)

above. "Neutral" narratives of belonging (African, South Sudanese, secular) turn out to be particularities masked as universals, and when the state fails to address the concerns of the many while speaking in the language of "all," violence can ensue. Despite the fact that the origins of the present conflict in South Sudan seem to be palace intrigue, rather than ethnic tensions,[39] ethnicity proved to

39 For a critique of the framing of the conflict within an ethnic paradigm, see Peter Greste, "Thinking outside the Ethnic Box in South Sudan," *Africa* (blog), *Al-Jazeera*, December 28, 2013, http://blogs.aljazeera.com/blog/africa/thinking-outside-ethnic-box-s-sudan; Nesrine Malik, "South Sudan's Tangled Crisis," *New York Times*, January 5, 2014. Indeed, the current South Sudanese conflict, like the conflict in Darfur that began in 2003, should be understood not as a war between ethnic groups (an analysis that is both empirically incorrect and misidentifies a symptom of the conflict with its cause), but rather as a result of the Machakos Protocol (2002) logic, whose flowering we see in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 that lay the groundwork for the independence of South Sudan. These agreements sought to solve Sudan's problems by dividing power between two parties rather than devolving power to the people. Thus, although the current crisis began as palace intrigue within the ruling party, the unfulfilled promises of independence—that it would lead to a better life for South Sudanese citizens at large—is what seems to have motivated those who have become active in the rebellion against Salva Kir's government, each side relying on ethnic loyalties to rally fighters despite both sides' public attempts to frame the

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be an effective language of mobilization. This suggests fissures that slogans such as those evident in the above-pictured billboard could not patch over. The magic wand of independence could not erase the tension between strong ethnicities and national unity, not to mention the dilemma encountered by determining what an "ethnicity" was in the first place. The combination of paternalism and suspicion in the president's comments to Muslim notables quoted above parallels some of the problems that led to the current conflict: his words are those of an army chief addressing his subjects, not a leader of a government of citizens speaking to his peers; his are words that represent an inconvenient assemblage of diversity filled with massive distrust, rather than those of nation-building in the process of consolidation. If the independence of South Sudan is to be remembered in the history books as more than the trading of one brutal and authoritarian state for two brutal and authoritarian states, as I truly hope it will be, and if the sacrifice of generations of South Sudanese is to be honored, inherited models for governing diversity (religious, ethnic, political, and otherwise) will need to be rethought.

The failures in state-building that the current conflict exhibits are not unique to South Sudan. Nor do they indicate some sort of atavistic ungovernability, as South Sudan (and Africa more broadly) so often appears in the Western imaginary. Rather they are at the very heart of the process of modern nation building, caught as it is between the twin agendas of suppressing and installing difference. Yet, what other political models might be possible, beyond the secular and religious, beyond the ethnic and oligarchic? South Sudanese independence should be taken as a unique opportunity to think through creative answers to this question, so that the suppressed legacies of violence and inequality that haunt international models of governance so readily exported to Africa do not become South Sudan's legacy as well.

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conflict in universal language. For a nuanced take on how ethnicity has and has not figured into the current conflict, see Andreas Hirblinger and Sara de Simone's, "What is 'Tribalism' and Why Does It Matter in South Sudan," *African Argument*, December 24, 2013, http://africanarguments.org/2013/12/24/what-is-tribalism-and-why-does-is-matter-in-south-sudan-by-andreas-hirblinger-and-sara-de-simone/.