Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation

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Since the events of September 11, 2001, against the backdrop of two decades of the ascendance of global religious politics, urgent calls for the reinstatement of secularism have reached a crescendo that cannot be ignored. The most obvious target of these strident calls is Islam, particularly those practices and discourses within Islam that are suspected of fostering fundamentalism and militancy. It has become de rigueur for leftists and liberals alike to link the fate of democracy in the Muslim world with the institutionalization of secularism—both as a political doctrine and as a political ethic. This coupling is now broadly echoed within the discourse emanating from the U.S. State Department, particularly in its programmatic efforts to reshape and transform "Islam from within." In this essay, I will examine both the particular conception of secularism that underlies the current consensus that Islam needs to be reformed—that its secularization is a necessary step in bringing "democracy" to the Muslim world—and the strategic means by which this programmatic vision is being instituted today. Insomuch as secularism is a historically shifting category with a variegated genealogy, my aim is not to secure an authoritative definition of secularism or to trace its historical transformation within the United States or the Muslim world. My goal here is more limited: I want to sketch out the particular understanding of secularism underlying contemporary American discourses on Islam, an understanding that is deeply shaped by U.S. security and foreign policy concerns in the Muslim world.

A number of origin stories can be told about the modern phenomenon of secu-

larism. One that commands considerable weight today is rooted in the doctrine of religious tolerance. In this account, modern secularism emerged in the seventeenth century as a political solution intended to end the European Wars of Religion by establishing a lowest common denominator among the doctrines of conflicting Christian sects and by defining a political ethic altogether independent of religious doctrines.[1] The realization of these goals was dependent, of course, upon the centralization of state authority and a concomitant demarcation of society into political, economic, religious, and familial domains whose contours could then be mapped and subjected to the calculus of state rule. In this narrative, both the ethics of religious tolerance and freedom of conscience are considered to be goods internal to the doctrinal separation that secularism institutes between operations of the state and church, between politics and religion. The assumption is that the state, by virtue of its declared neutrality toward specific religious truth claims, makes religious goals indifferent to the exercise of politics and, in doing so, ensures that religion is practiced without coercion, out of individual choice and personal assent.

Insomuch as liberalism is about the regulation of individual and collective liberties, it is the principle of freedom of conscience that makes secularism central to liberal political philosophy in this account. Note, for example, that even though a number of contemporary totalitarian regimes abide by the doctrinal separation of religion and state, they also routinely intervene to restrict people's ability to practice their faith (for example, China, Syria, or even the former Soviet Union). Such a violation of people's right to religious freedom contradicts a core commitment at the center of liberal democratic governance. This does not, of course, mean that there is a singular model according to which the principle of religious freedom is instituted, practiced, and regulated in liberal democracies. But it does mean that public debate in liberal societies about how the boundary between religion and the state is to be established and managed is counterbalanced with concerns for maintaining the right to practice one's religion freely without coercion and state intervention.[2] This particular linkage between the doctrinal separation of church

1. This is a fairly common historical account. For a recent and eloquent presentation of it, see Charles Taylor, "Modes of Secularism," in *Secularism and Its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 31–53.

2. The legal scholar Noah Feldman's recent analysis of, and solution to, America's "culture wars" centers precisely around these two principles of liberal secularism. He argues that the root of the conflict between "value evangelicals" and "legal secularists" lies in the fact that the former want to use state funding for religious projects, and the latter want to limit the display of religious symbols in public places (usually through legal means). Feldman suggests that the best way to resolve this

and state and the secular principle of freedom of conscience, while foundational to liberal political rule, is also shot through with tensions and generates its own peculiar set of problems. Nonetheless, secularism is upheld these days by American liberals and progressives alike on the assumption that this particular sociopolitical arrangement is the best way to ward off the dangers of religious strife.

Recent scholarship offers some interesting challenges to the idea that liberal secularism primarily consists in securing a form of governance orchestrated around these two principles of freedom and restraint. Some scholars suggest that the so-called firewall separation between church and state does not adequately describe how religion and modern governance are constitutively intertwined. This intertwining prevails not only in non-Western societies, it is argued, but also in those that are upheld as exemplary models of what a secular polity should be, such as the United States, France, and Britain. Apart from the constitutive role religious movements and institutions have played in crafting the political culture of these nations,[3] scholars argue, the ongoing regulation of religious life through juridical and legislative means suggests a far more porous relationship than the doctrine of secularism suggests. In the United States, for example, recent American scholarship points to the phenomenon of both lower and higher courts having to constantly regulate when and how religion is practiced and expressed in public life.[4] Similarly, the recent French law banning the display of religious symbols (particularly the veil) in public schools may be taken as another example of how a self-avowed secular state has come to define what religious and nonreligious attire is in the public domain (something normatively considered a matter of personal choice within liberalism).

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impasse is for the evangelicals to forego state funding for their religious programs in exchange for greater tolerance on the part of the secularists for "governmental manifestation of religion" in civic spaces. While the former would preserve the formal separation between religion and state, the latter would ensure that everyone feels free to express their religious affiliation openly in public life. See Noah Feldman, *Divided by God: America's Church-State Problem—and What We Should Do About It* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

3. On the United States, see Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), and James Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004). On Britain, see Peter Harrison, *"Religion" and Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001). On France, see Jean Bauberot's "The Two Thresholds of Laicization" in Bhargava, *Secularism and Its Critics*, 94–136.

4. See Winnifred Sullivan's *Paying the Words Extra* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994) and *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

While liberals and progressives often regard state regulation of religious practices with approval because it circumscribes religion to its proper place, this approval often stands in tension with the liberal anxiety that the state, in performing this regulatory function, might come to espouse a particular religious position. This anxiety is apparent in the critiques leveled against the current Bush administration for actively promoting the far-right Christian agenda, thereby threatening to dissolve the state's claim to religious neutrality. Similarly, for many American critics, the French *laïque* state overstepped its boundaries when it legislated the recent ban on the display of religious attire in public schools. In these objections, both instances are interpreted as a threat to the principle of state neutrality and its ability to ensure freedom of conscience for all of its citizens. The fear is that what was often considered to be a marker of "Third World exceptionalism"—the state's interference in the religious domain[5]—is also becoming the norm in liberal democratic societies of the West. Prescriptions aimed at fixing this tendency vary. Some urge self-avowed secular states to follow the central tenets of secularism more assiduously and judiciously by granting religious freedom to all, and not just some, religious groups within liberal societies; others call for the annulment of any judicial or legislative interference within the religious domain; and still others recommend that the state withdraw its financial support for all religious institutions.

However well intentioned these prescriptions are, I want to suggest that they are premised on an understanding of secularism that concedes at once too much and too little to its normative claims. They concede too much in accepting at face value the claim that secularism is about the banishment of religiosity from the public domain, and they concede too little by failing to interrogate secularism's contention that it is the most effective political solution to warding off religious strife. In regard to the former concession, as the above examples suggest, secularism has sought not so much to banish religion from the public domain but to reshape the form it takes, the subjectivities it endorses, and the epistemological claims it can make. The effectiveness of such a totalizing project necessarily depends upon transforming the religious domain through a variety of reforms and state injunctions. This has often meant that nation-states have had to act as de

5. The phrase was coined by Partha Chatterjee, who uses it to describe the top-down model of state secularism adopted in India, in which certain transformations were brought about in the doctrines and practices of Hinduism and Islam so as to facilitate liberal political rule in the colonial and postcolonial period. See Chatterjee, "Secularism and Tolerance," in Bhargava, *Secularism and Its Critics*, 345–79.

facto theologians, rendering certain practices and beliefs indifferent to religious doctrine precisely so that these practices can be brought under the domain of civil law.[6] Talal Asad, in his recent interrogation of French secularism, suggests that the secular liberal state's ongoing regulation of religious life should be understood not so much as an exception to the norm of liberal rule, but rather as an exception in the Schmittian sense: as an exercise of sovereign power.[7] Asad argues that even though secularism presupposes the mutual independence of political power and religious life, nonetheless it is the state that has the power to make certain decisions that affect religious practices and doctrines, but not the obverse. This asymmetry, argues Asad, is a measure of sovereign power, as the state retains the exclusive authority to define the exception.

The recent passage of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) by the U.S. Congress illustrates how the exercise of sovereign power tends to subsume the secular principle of religious freedom. The IRFA was signed into law under President Clinton in 1998 and gives unprecedented powers to the U.S. federal government to expand its regulation of religious life on an international scale in the name of enforcing and protecting religious freedoms.[8] If we follow Asad, the passage of this act may be read as not an abrogation of the doctrine of secularism but its reasonable extension—particularly in light of the fact that the United States has emerged as *the* global power, one aspiring to render its definition of "the exception" sovereign over the entirety of the geopolitical landscape.[9]

Similarly, the second claim normative to secularism (namely, that a secular political ethic is neutral to the claims of any particular religious tradition) also needs to be problematized. This is not simply because, as is now customary to argue, any national culture ends up privileging majoritarian religious norms,

6. For this argument, see Kirstie McClure's "Difference, Diversity, and the Limits of Toleration," *Political Theory* 18 (1990): 361–91. On developments in India along these lines, see Partha Chatterjee, "Secularism and Tolerance"; on similar transformations in Egypt, see Talal Asad's "Reconfigurations of Law and Ethics in Colonial Egypt," in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 181–204.

7. Talal Asad, "Trying to Understand French Secularism," in *Political Theologies*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming).

8. U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. *International Religious Freedom Act of 1998* (22 U.S.C 6401 note). See www.uscirf.gov/about/authorizinglegislation.html (accessed August 8, 2005).

9. This does not mean, of course, that the United States' efforts to establish its dominion over the world have not met with resistance. Whether in the form of guerrilla struggles of the kind being waged in Iraq today against U.S. military occupation, or in the form of antiglobalization protests against U.S. corporate hegemony, the American ambition to secure global domination continues to run into unexpected challenges.

thereby compromising the liberal state's claim to religious neutrality.[10] Instead I want to suggest that the political solution offered by the doctrine of secularism resides not so much in the separation of state and religion or in the granting of religious freedoms, but in the kind of subjectivity that a secular culture authorizes, the practices it redeems as truly (versus superficially) spiritual, and the particular relationship to history that it prescribes. These aspects of secular culture, now often noted under the rubric of secularity, are propagated through not only the agency of the state but also a variety of social groups and actors who might even challenge the state's sovereign claim to define the exception. The political solution that secularism proffers, I am suggesting, lies not so much in tolerating difference and diversity but in remaking certain kinds of religious subjectivities (even if this requires the use of violence) so as to render them compliant with liberal political rule.[11] Critics who want to make secularism's claim to tolerance more robust must deal with this normative impetus internal to secularism, an impetus that reorganizes subjectivities in accord with a modality of political rule that is itself retrospectively called "a religiously neutral political ethic."

In what follows, I want to explore these dimensions of secular normativity, though outside of that domain we take to be their natural home, the nation-state. Taking the U.S. government's current project to reshape and reform Islam on a global scale as my focus, I want to think about the place of the secular in relation to the current strategies of domination pursued by the United States. As I will

10. This observation is often accompanied by the demand that the principle of religious freedom be made more robust in practice and that *all* religions (not merely those of the majority) be allowed an equal space and voice in the public domain. See, for example, William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), and Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). This recommendation, however, remains blind to its own normative framing of what constitutes "inclusion" by ignoring the fact that a particular religious group's demand for inclusion or recognition itself requires that such a group is able to recognize itself, and articulate this self-recognition, within the terms of liberal national discourse. Religious sensibilities that do not yield to such protocols of legibility cannot be heard in the public domain. On the limits of intelligibility internal to the discourse of liberal multiculturalism, see Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002). For a general critique of the liberal concept of tolerance, particularly its ascendance and current deployment in the contemporary United States, see Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

11. One might go as far as to say that the political solution secularism offers consists not so much in "avoiding religious strife" but in making sure those religious life-forms that are deemed incompatible with a secular-political ethos are made provisional, if not extinct. Such a strategy may well lead to more, rather than less, religious strife.

show, over the last two years, in addition to its military "war against terror," the United States has embarked upon an ambitious theological campaign aimed at shaping the sensibilities of ordinary Muslims whom the State Department deems to be too dangerously inclined toward fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. As such, it is the ideological arm of an otherwise military campaign to subdue and discipline the vast population of Muslims who, in their religious beliefs and lifestyles, are judged to be the recruiting ground for more extremist and fundamentalist forms of Islamic opposition to U.S. strategic interests and what are now loosely termed "Western values."

In this elaborate undertaking, the U.S. government has found an indigenous ally in the form of moderate or liberal Muslims who, in the opinion of State Department planners, are most open to a "Western vision of civilization, political order, and society."[12] Surprisingly, what unites this rather disparate group of Muslim reformers and intellectuals is not their approval of U.S. foreign policy in the region. Many of these reformers are critical of the current U.S. military occupation of Iraq, and their recruitment into the U.S. imperial agenda is not without complications. What joins these thinkers and makes them natural allies of the United States in this historical moment is, oddly enough, a shared approach to scriptural hermeneutics. The core problem from the perspective of U.S. analysts is not militancy itself but interpretation, insomuch as the interpretive act is regarded as the foundation of any religious subjectivity and therefore the key to its emancipation or secularization. In this understanding, the U.S. strategists have struck a common chord with self-identified secular liberal Muslim reformers who have been trying to refashion Islam along the lines of the Protestant Reformation.[13] The convergence of U.S. imperial interests and the secular liberal Muslim agenda needs to be understood, therefore, not simply as a fortuitous coming together of political objectives and an indigenous social formation, but, given my earlier argument, from the standpoint of normative secularity and the kind of religious subjectivity it endorses.

This is not to say that the U.S. imperial project is secular in the simple sense of being nonreligious; indeed, as widely noted, it is shot through with the interests, agendas, and aspirations of the Christian Right. My argument is that inasmuch as secularism is a modality of political rule that seeks to transform religious subjec-

12. This is the language used in a recent report released by the National Security Division of the Rand Corporation, about which I will have more to say below. See Cheryl Benard, *Civil and Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, Strategies* (Pittsburgh: Rand Corporation, 2003), 4.

13. Indeed, many of the intellectuals writing under the rubric of liberal Islam explicitly invoke the Protestant Reformation as their model, and some of them are called "Luthers of Islam."

tivity and give it a certain modular form, the current U.S. project, in its attempts to reform Islam, exhibits an extraordinary secular cast. Thus, when viewed from the perspective of the current U.S. imperial adventure in the Muslim world, secularism reveals itself in its civilizing and disciplinary aspects rather than as a circumscription of religion or a prophylaxis that immunizes politics from religion within the context of the nation-state. In what follows, I want to examine the structure of normative secularity, with its attendant anthropology of the subject, that has provided the ground for the current convergence between Muslim reformist viewpoints and U.S. strategic interests. This shared standpoint affords a common diagnosis of what ails contemporary Muslim societies (their backwardness, traditionalism, and fundamentalism) and the solutions by which these ailments are to be overcome. These solutions, as I will show, take on the form of theological prescriptions and a particular style of scriptural interpretation—all of which are aimed at the creation of an enlightened religious subject capable of realizing a "religiously neutral political ethic."

Muslim World Outreach

Many astute observers of the current geopolitical situation suggest that the Bush administration's occupation of Iraq, with its formidable roster of political and economic abuses, has only served to swell the ranks of opposition to the United States in the Muslim world. Indeed, as repeated polls conducted in countries as diverse as Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey suggest, the United States' popularity has never been at such a low. There is also every indication that Islamist opposition (whether reformist or militant) is thriving all over the Muslim world—this despite the efforts of the United States, following the events of 9/11, to target worldwide Islamist political parties, militant organizations, charities, and nongovernmental organizations as potential or de facto supporters of terrorism. Aware of these recent setbacks, the White House National Security Council (NSC) formally established a new program named Muslim World Outreach in 2003, with as much as $1.3 billion at its disposal (and with more allocations to come).[14] This is a project aimed at "transforming Islam from within": unearthing, identifying, and buttressing existing organizations and currents in

14. David Kaplan, "Hearts, Minds, and Dollars: In an Unseen Front in the War on Terrorism, America Is Spending Millions . . . to Change the Very Face of Islam," *U.S. News and World Report*, April 5, 2005, available at www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/050425/25roots.htm (accessed November 9, 2005). Also see the White House's "National Strategy for Combating Terrorism" (February 2003), which inaugurated the founding of the Muslim World Outreach program, available at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/02/counter_terrorism/counter_terrorism_strategy.pdf.

Muslim countries that the U.S. government deems moderate, tolerant, and prone to democratic values.[15]

Most of the money allocated for this project is funneled through USAID (United States Agency for International Development), rather than the CIA and the State Department,[16] and is spent on programs that include training Islamic preachers, establishing Islamic schools that counter the teachings of the now notorious fundamentalist madrassas,[17] reforming public school curriculums, and media production (which includes establishing radio and satellite television stations, producing and distributing Islamic talk shows, and generally shaping the content of public religious debate within the existing media in Muslim countries).[18] The aim of this multilayered project is singular: to foster what is now broadly called "moderate Islam" as an antidote and prophylactic to fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. This broad-based ideological project bears obvious similarities with the State Department's Cold War strategy of aiding and abetting oppositional currents in the former Soviet Union—with one important exception: the current campaign has an overt *theological* agenda. As one State Department official put it, "The Cold War was easy. It was a struggle against a godless ideology. But this has theological elements. It goes to the core of American belief that we don't mess with freedom of religion. Do we have any authority to influence this debate?"[19] Despite the voicing of such classic liberal anxiety about state neutrality toward religion, there is no indication that this broad-based campaign to reform Muslims will encounter any serious judicial challenges within or outside the United States. This lack of criticism is in part a result, I would suggest, of the

15. Kaplan, "Hearts, Minds, and Dollars."

16. In the three years since the events of 9/11, spending by USAID (United States Agency for International Development) has tripled to over $21 billion—more than half of it is dedicated to projects in the Muslim world (Kaplan, "Hearts, Minds, and Dollars").

17. The most ambitious program was launched in Pakistan, under the auspices of USAID in cooperation with the Pakistan Ministry of Education, to establish a model madrassa program that might include more than one thousand schools. Similar programs, on a more modest scale, have been launched in the Horn of Africa (Kaplan, "Hearts, Minds, and Dollars").

18. In the post-9/11 period, the U.S. government has established Radio Sawa and the satellite television station Al-Hurra to propagate its views and promote what it understands to be a liberal interpretation of Islam. In addition, the State Department has sought to influence the programming of existing television networks such as al-Jazeera and al-Arabiyya (particularly their religious programming) through overt and covert political pressure. See Samantha Shapiro, "The War inside the Arab Newsroom," *New York Times Magazine*, January 2, 2005. Steven Weisman reports that under intense American pressure, the Qatari government is planning to scale back its financial subsidy for the al-Jazeera television station and to put it on the market. "Under Pressure, Qatar May Sell Jazeera Station," *New York Times*, January 30, 2005.

19. Kaplan, "Hearts, Minds, and Dollars."

broad consensus among secular liberals and radicals alike that Islam does indeed need to be reformed—even if brute U.S. power has to underwrite some of the unsavory aspects of such a campaign.[20]

The kind of Muslim sensibility that the Muslim World Outreach project aims to transform has been labeled "traditionalist" in an important report released by the National Security Research Division of the Rand Corporation.[21] The Rand report, *Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies*, argues that even though Islamic militant groups (also referred to as "fundamentalists") have garnered the attention of the West since 9/11, the more serious and long-term threat to both U.S. strategic interests and "democratic values" comes from "traditionalist Islam," whose adherents constitute a significant portion of the world population.[22] According to the report, the traditionalists believe that the Quran is the actual word of god, and their "goal is to preserve orthodox norms and values and conservative behavior."[23] They do so by observing Islamic rituals closely (such as praying five times a day, fasting, veiling, and so on) and consulting the Quran, the

20. This is a view held not only by Americans but also by many secular Muslims who view the current American foreign policy, with its vast economic and political resources, as a necessary evil that will help them fight the regressive and backward force of Islamism in their countries. As one Pakistani secular activist gleefully put it to me, "The Americans are beating the shit out of the mullahs these days. It's great to see them doing what they should have done years ago. Osama finally taught them a lesson: they [the Americans] should have never helped those crazy 'fundies' [the Afghan mujahideen]. Now that they have come to their senses, we can certainly use all the help they can provide with their guns and money" (Ahmed Omar, in an interview conducted and translated by the author, Karachi, Pakistan, December 20, 2004).

21. The Rand Corporation is a prominent conservative think tank whose board members and directors have included figures such as Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, and Condoleezza Rice. The Rand Corporation was first founded in the post–World War II period under a U.S. Air Force contract with Douglas Aircraft Company but since then has become a nonprofit institute. The Rand Corporation has played a key role in determining the direction U.S. foreign policy has taken in regions as diverse as the former Soviet Union, Vietnam, Latin America, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe. More recently, the Rand Corporation has become active on domestic issues such as the campaign to privatize federal and state prisons and the reform of Social Security.

22. Cheryl Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam*. Significantly, this Rand report was published in the same year as the launching of the Muslim World Outreach project, which is broadly seen as the outcome of the White House's National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, released in February 2003.

23. Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam*, 4. The term *traditionalist* is not an invention of the Rand Corporation. The distinction between fundamentalist and traditional Islam is endemic to the scholarship on Islamism and often marks political versus quietist forms of Islamic activism. My own view is that such easy distinctions do not adequately problematize the analytical assumptions that construct the idea of political Islam as an anomaly. Furthermore, such a distinction fails to attend to the complicated ways in which Islamist movements have changed the political field through their ethical and moral activism. On this point, see my book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Prophetic tradition (hadith), and the Islamic juristic scholarship to seek guidance on matters of daily conduct. In their consultation of scripture and juristic sources, the report acknowledges that the traditionalist attitudes vary widely: some "stick to the letter of the law" and others remain open to interpreting and reformulating the recommendations contained in the juristic corpus. Nonetheless, the report concludes that those who seek guidance in this fashion exhibit "a mentality willing to accept authority with few questions," a condition "causally linked with backwardness and underdevelopment, which in turn are the breeding ground for social and political problems of all sorts."[24]

Despite this judgment, the Rand report is forced to acknowledge throughout its text that in regard to sociopolitical issues the traditionalists "do not generally favor violence and terrorism," represent "an essentially moderate position," and "often proactively seek interfaith dialogue," and that some of their leaders even espouse "a relatively progressive stance on many social issues"—such as the position of women, the right to political dissent, and reform of the Islamic juristic corpus.[25] The report is also clear that the traditionalists, while seeking state support, do not aim to seize the state in order to realize their vision of a religiously devout society. Their goal is to transform the social mores, values, and lifestyles of the vast majority of Muslims through grassroots activism. It is the traditionalists, the report recognizes, who are largely responsible for the establishment of the vast array of charitable organizations, schools, printing presses, mosques, and social and welfare programs. The report fails to say, but it needs to be pointed out, that these organizations provide the backbone of civil society in the Muslim world, especially at a time when postcolonial states have withdrawn from the provision of social services under the pressure of neoliberal economic policies increasingly adopted since the 1970s.

Despite these variable tendencies found among the traditionalists, the Rand Corporation firmly rejects the possibility of making an alliance with them to "help foster democracy" in the Muslim world. The Rand report offers two primary reasons for this rejection: first, the traditionalists tend to share the militant and fundamentalist critique of U.S. and Western domination of Muslim lands and resources; second, it is the traditionalists' approach to scripture, as much as their way of life, that is incompatible with Western Enlightenment values.[26] It is not

24. Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam*, 32, 34.
25. Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam*, 4–6, 29, 30.
26. The report argues: "There are critical issues on which the traditionalists are closer to the fundamentalists than to any other segment. These issues include sharia implementation, attitudes toward

the fundamentalists and militants but the traditionalists on whom the Rand report focuses its attention, not unlike the Muslim World Outreach program. The Rand report argues that it is not so much the substantive positions of the traditionalists that are intolerable as their beliefs, attitudes, and modes of reasoning.[27] Key among them: (1) their belief in the divinity of the Quran and a failure to regard it as a *historical* document; (2) their failure to realize that Muhammad was a product of his time whose life offers little of practical value to solving the exigencies of modern existence; and (3) their inability to denounce the juristic tradition for its deficient and contradictory character.

It is striking that a policy think tank concerned with issues of realpolitik and geopolitical strategy should spend so much effort analyzing the theological flaws and interpretive errors in traditionalist moral reasoning. What is perhaps even more surprising is that the Rand Corporation finds the traditionalist Muslim subject not simply deficient but *dangerous*—even more dangerous than the militant or the fundamentalist. Notably, the traditionalist's attitude to scripture, juristic authority, and prophetic exemplars constitutes an obstacle to the civilizing project imagined by the report's authors. As the Rand report concludes, "Modern democracy rests on the values of the Enlightenment: traditionalism opposes these values. . . . Traditionalism is antithetical to the basic requirements of a modern democratic mind-set: critical thinking, creative problem solving, individual liberty, secularism."[28]

Apart from the fact that the notion of democracy in this kind of document is left purposefully vacuous, this preoccupation with the question of the Muslim

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the West and the United States, gender relations and the status of women, and the nature of the ideal political order. . . . Even the reformist traditionalists, whose views on social and lifestyle issues are more compatible with international modernity, are often much closer to the fundamentalists than to the West on issues of international politics" (Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam*, 30). It needs to be pointed out that the report's conclusion that the traditionalists are close to the fundamentalists and militants is not based on any empirical evidence. The author of the report acknowledges this: "While only solid intelligence work can uncover concrete linkages between Islamic organizations and extremist movements, connections between traditionalist platforms and fundamentalist sponsors can often be found even through superficial effort" (Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam*, 32).

27. For example, the Rand report criticizes those traditional Muslims who oppose the practice of polygamy (permitted by the sharia) because they engage with the pertinent Quranic verses and juristic commentaries to express their opposition to polygamy. Notably, the Rand report faults this position not on substantive but on *procedural* grounds, arguing that these Muslims should reject the canonical sources outright because these sources do not speak to modern questions and concerns (Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam*, 16–17).

28. Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam*, 33.

subject's progress up the Enlightenment ladder stands in sharp contrast to the State Department's well-documented alliances with Osama bin Laden and his brand of Afghan mujahideen during the 1970s and 1980s to mobilize opposition to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Similarly, the United States government has long tolerated the Saudi monarchy's promotion of the now widely spurned form of Wahhabi Islam as a prophylactic against pan-Arab socialist currents in the Middle East. What seems evident in the Rand report's arguments is a recognition of the inadequacy of this earlier political strategy centered on tactical alliances (whether with the mujahideen in Afghanistan or the Saudi Wahhabis) and the importance of delineating a much broader and pervasive strategy of governance and ideological transformation.[29] Beneath the jargon of "critical thinking and creative problem solving" lies a suspicion that so-called traditionalism, while quiescent in itself, may provide the concepts and rationalities through which various forms of opposition to U.S. policies and ambitions in the region can be imagined and expressed. To address this problem, the State Department has decided, at least for the time being, that what is required is secular theology—not power politics. This war of ideological reformation has therefore taken a secular cast, especially if we understand secularism to be not the dissolution of religion but its rearrangement so as to make it more congruent with a certain modality of liberal political rule.[30] Secularism in this sense refers both to an analytical standpoint and a political field of intervention.

Secular Hermeneutics

The pedagogical strategy proposed by the Rand Corporation report and promoted by programs like Muslim World Outreach is now commonly echoed in a variety of newspaper articles and television talk shows as well as manifestos written both by Muslims and by non-Muslims. A cornerstone of this strategy is to convince Muslims that they must learn to *historicize* the Quran, not unlike what Christians

29. Both the United States' support for the Afghan mujahideen (of which Osama bin Laden was a prominent member) as well as its alliance with Saudi-Wahhabi Islam have now come to be criticized widely, including within State Department sources and publications. See, for example, Angel Rabasa, Cheryl Benard, Peter Chlak, C. Christine Fair, Theodore Karasik, Rollie Lal, Ian Lesser, and David Thaler, *The Muslim World after 9/11* (Pittsburgh: Rand Corporation, 2004). This report was commissioned by the United States Air Force.

30. Some people might object that liberalism and empire are antithetical modalities of rule. This is an erroneous understanding of liberalism's historical imbrication with the politics of empire. On this point, see Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

did with the Bible. In a distinctly paternalistic tone, the Rand report spells this pre-scription out: "The Old Testament is not different from the Quran in endorsing con-duct and containing a number of rules and values that are literally unthinkable . . . in today's society. This does not pose a problem because few people would today insist that we should all be living in the exact literal manner of the Biblical patri-archs. Instead, we allow our vision of Judaism's and Christianity's true message to dominate over the literal text, which we regard as history and legend."[31] It should be noted that the traditionalist is here rendered as an absurd and almost comic figure in his purported ignorance of reason and history.[32] But setting aside this polemic, what requires careful unpacking is the religious sensibility the tradition-alist Muslim is beckoned to embrace (with its attendant scriptural hermeneutics). The recalcitrant Muslim is faulted for his inability to recognize that the truth of Quranic scripture is grounded not in its theological claims but in culture and his-tory. The Quran, like the Bible, should therefore be appreciated for its cultural significance, as an object of aesthetic, poetic, and spiritual appreciation, rather than treated as a source that can guide one through the problems of contemporary existence. In this view, a correct interpretation is neither allegorical nor literal; it is based instead on an empiricist notion of history in which the particularity of the Quranic verses is rooted but from which their true meaning must be abstracted through the poetic resources of human labor.

To get a better sense of what is being argued here, I want to turn to the writings of some contemporary Muslim reformers who exemplify the interpretive stance advocated by the Rand report. Indeed, the report calls these thinkers "moder-ates" and suggests that, despite the small following they command among fellow Muslims, they are the best partners to help the United States foster an enlightened form of Islam.[33] It is important to point out that these disparate figures do not

31. Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam*, 37.

32. Much of the Rand report's earlier discussion of the traditionalist profile goes against this pic-ture. There seems to be tremendous variation and debate among the so-called traditionalist Muslims about how to interpret even those Quranic verses that contain specific edicts. Incidentally, the Quran contains very few specific injunctions; the vast majority of the corpus of Islamic law is grounded in deductions that trained religious scholars have made based on the way in which the Prophet and his companions settled disputes and analogical readings of the broader principles contained in the Quran.

33. Among the reformers the Rand Corporation mentions are Khaled Abou El Fadl, Serif Mardin, Abdulaziz Sachedina (United States), Bassam Tibi (Germany), and Muhammad Shahrur (Syria). They are upheld as "good Muslims," distinct from their "bad" counterparts. Among the lat-ter, the report mentions Yusuf al-Qardawi (an Egyptian scholar now based in Qatar) who commands a formidable following among Muslims all over the world and whose views are aired regularly in

represent a single political position: some of them are critical of the current U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and others are more ambivalent on this issue; some embrace a neo-Marxist paradigm and others embrace a more liberal position in support of constitutional democracy and neoliberal economics. Despite such important differences, these self-identified secular liberal Muslim intellectuals share a common set of views about the kind of text the Quran is and the techniques by which it is to be interpreted.

One of the leading and well-respected figures within this group of liberal Muslim thinkers is Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who received worldwide attention when he was denied tenure at Cairo University for his religious views and subsequently charged with apostasy. After being threatened with the forced dissolution of his marriage, Abu Zayd migrated to the Netherlands, where he currently holds an academic position at the University of Leiden. In his book *Naqd al-khitab al-dini* (*Critique of Religious Discourse*), Abu Zayd lays down the basis for a historically grounded hermeneutics of the Quran that he claims is both scientific and secular.[34] It is secular because secularism "in its essence is nothing but the true interpretation and scientific understanding of religion."[35] By defining his interpretive framework as "objective" (*maudu'i*) and "scientific" (*'ilmi*), he distinguishes it from the work of traditional scholars who fail to recognize the historical dimensions of both the text in question and their own labor. Echoing the Rand report's contention that the Quran is a human rather than divine text, Abu Zayd argues that the Quran, once revealed to Muhammad, entered history and became subject to historical and sociological laws or regularities. He argues,

> The Quran . . . [which is perceived to be] a fixed religious text from the standpoint of the literal wording . . . becomes a concept [*mafhum*] once it has been subjected to human reason [*al-'aql al-insani*], which loses its fixedness as it moves and its meanings proliferate. . . . It is imperative here that we affirm that the state of the original sacred text is a metaphysical one

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the Islamic press, on the Internet, and on a number of Arab television channels (including al-Jazeera). While Qardawi has been critical of the Islamic juristic corpus, he remains deeply committed to its resources in his attempts to reform it. In the reasoning of the Rand report, he remains procedurally (and therefore erroneously) bound to the corpus's faulty premises. For a review of Qardawi's arguments and positions, see www.islam-online.net and www.qardawi.net.

34. My reading of Abu Zayd's work is deeply indebted to Charles Hirschkind's work, particularly his article "Heresy or Hermeneutics: The Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," *Stanford Humanities Review* 5, no. 1 (1996): 35–50.

35. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-dini* (*Critique of Religious Discourse*) (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 1995), 9. All translations from Arabic sources are mine.

about which we can know nothing except that which the text itself mentions and which always comes to us via a historically changing humanity.[36]

Abu Zayd is not alone in this position. Hasan Hanafi, another prominent Egyptian writer known for his liberal reformist views, makes a similar argument for dislocating the originary Quran—widely believed by Muslims to be the eternal word of god—from its human interpretations. Hanafi accomplishes this by ascribing different levels (*mustawayat*) of being to the Quran and then defining the first three as beyond human comprehension.[37] At the first level, the Quran exists as the eternal word of god in its total abstraction and nonmateriality; at the second level, it exists in relation to other forms of divine revelation (such as the Torah, the Bible, etc.); and finally, at the third level, the Quran is that which was communicated to the creation at large outside of intelligible human history. According to Hanafi, the Quran becomes comprehensible to the human intellect only when it descends from these levels into the worldly realm, that is, when it becomes materialized in a human language (Arabic) and revealed to a particular man (Muhammad), in a particular location (Arabia), at a particular moment in human history. The result of this distantiation is to place a silence over the divine voice of "true religion." In the words of the Iranian reformer Abdul Karim Soroush, often hailed as "the Luther of Islam": "Religion, or revelation for that matter, is silent."[38] It is worth pointing out here that Muslim critics of this position concede that god, or the divine, is unknowable, but unlike these reformers they understand this to be one of the necessary epistemological conditions for interpreting the word of god (the Quran itself). For Hanafi, Abu Zayd, and others, in contrast, the impenetrability of the divine means that the project itself is flawed and should therefore be discarded.

One effect of emphasizing the inaccessibility of the divine origin of the Quran is to humanize the "earthly" version to the extent that it can increasingly approximate and be compared with other human texts. This rhetorical assertion opens up a space for a variety of different readings of the Quran (literary, historical, sociological), thereby rendering the text more malleable and responsive to non-

36. Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-dini*, 93. My aim here is not to challenge this claim, which finds echoes in earlier Islamic scholarship as well (albeit with crucial differences). Rather, I am interested in analyzing how this claim functions in this context to authorize certain secular arguments and undermine others.

37. Hasan Hanafi, "Mustawayat al-nas al-Qurani" ("Levels of the Quranic Text"), *Adab wa naqd* (*Literature and Criticism*), May 1993, 21–22.

38. Abdul Karim Soroush, "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge," in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 245.

religious concerns. In the words of Abdul Karim Soroush, the interpretation of religious texts

> is subject to expansion and contraction according to the assumptions preceding them and/or the questions enquiring them. . . . Since it is only through those presuppositions that one can hear the voice of revelation—hence religion itself is silent—and since interpretation of the text is social by nature and depends on the community of experts, like all learned activity, it will be an independent dynamic activity . . . containing right and wrong . . . the wrong ones being as important as the right ones from the evolutionary point of view.[39]

For these reformers, to historicize the Quran means to analyze its narrative in the context of the cultural, political, and ideological domain of the period in which it was first revealed and then later interpreted and put into practice. "Religious texts," writes Abu Zayd, "in the final analysis are nothing but linguistic texts, belonging to a specific cultural structure and produced in accord with the rules of that culture."[40] For Abu Zayd, then, not unlike Soroush and Hanafi, the primary task of critical thinking is to reveal the biases and prejudices that are a natural result of the Quran's and the exegetes' situatedness within the ideological apparatuses of their time. According to Abu Zayd, "the principle of divine sovereignty simply results in the sovereignty of religious men—in the end, nothing but human beings with their own biases and ideological inclinations."[41] Critical reading of the text here assumes a sovereign subject who reconciles the claims of scripture against those of reason, wherein reason is defined in accord with protocols of empiricist historiography. Given the progressivist and empiricist conception of history that animates the interpretive method of Abu Zayd, Hanafi, Soroush, and others, this form of critical reading is the nadir of man's attempt to grapple with the divine—all others who do not agree with this method stand in a false relation to this quest.

What is notable here is that these liberal reformers do not abandon the religious text but resituate it. The question is, once metaphysical intention is separated from the text, how is this text to be read and what would its significance be for the secularized believer? The liberal reformers are resolute in their answer, as is the Rand Corporation report: the Quran should be read as a system of signs and symbols, whose meaning is to be deciphered in a manner not dissimilar to how

39. Soroush, "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge," 245.
40. Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-dini*, 193.
41. Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-dini*, 56.

we read literature or poetry—its meaning open to infinite play but also to histori-cal determination. The notion of the transcendent, no longer locatable within the religious text, finds a place in the ineffable and privatized world of individual readers who turn not to traditional authority but to their own cultured sensibili-ties to experience the true meaning of the word. In the words of Hanafi, "The interpreter, reading the text, recreates it by accommodating it to his own use. He may create new meaning; the present may be seen in the past; the past may be constructed in light of the present. Every interpretation expresses the psychologi-cal and socio-political position of the interpreter. Every interpretation expresses a certain *Zeitgeist*, a *Weltanschauung* of a special community in time and in space. Every text is a context."[42]

Notably, the autonomous individual believer, privileged in the arguments of these thinkers, is a necessary protagonist in the plot of secular political rational-ity, one who owes his allegiance to the sovereign rule of the state rather than structures of traditional authority. Scripture is accorded a certain place in this secular arrangement of power, but its interpretive authority must be histori-cally wrested from traditional methods of reading and their embodied practices. Thinkers such as Hanafi and Abu Zayd are engaged precisely in formulating the interpretive arguments through which traditional hermeneutical methods can be displaced. Their arguments unfold, of course, against the backdrop of at least a hundred years of modern political rule in which colonial and postcolonial govern-ments have been engaged in wresting power from traditional centers of religious authority. This process of disenfranchising traditional modes of interpretation has historically been a contentious one in Muslim societies and has reached a new level of intensified struggle with the ascendance of Islamist movements in the Muslim world. Notably, a significant portion of the Islamist movement's labor is dedicated to recreating the conditions and practices that sustained the older methods of interpreting the Quran.[43] Since this model of secular liberal political

42. Hasan Hanafi, "Qirat al-nas" ("Reading the Text"), *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 8 (1988): 6.

43. It would be wrong to simply label these practices "literalist," as is often done. Not unlike literal Biblical hermeneutics, traditional hermeneutics of the Quran also involves several levels of interpretation in which metaphorical, allegorical, and analogical forms of reasoning play a role. Furthermore, as Charles Hirschkind argues, even "the current movement aimed at preserving the status of the Quran as the true word of god" does not treat the Quran simply as if it is a container of meanings ready to be decoded. Rather, the efforts of this movement are directed at developing a certain kind of literacy (in the broadest sense of the term) that involves capacities of reason, aesthetic judgment, and moral discernment that are germane to any hermeneutical approach. See Charles Hirschkind, *Ethics of Listening: Affect, Media, and the Islamic Counter-public* (New York: Colum-bia University Press, 2006).

rule has often required a particular scriptural hermeneutic and a concomitant religious subject, it should come as no surprise that there is now an unexpected convergence between secular Muslim reformers and the interests of the U.S. State Department.

Secular Religion

Underlying this hermeneutical project is a secularized conception of religion in which religion is understood to be an abstracted category of beliefs and doctrines from which the individual believer stands apart to examine, compare, and evaluate its various manifestations.[44] Religion is therefore an object of individual free choice whose abstract truths nonetheless have universal value—as long as they do not contradict the dictates of reason and science. Soroush espouses this position when he argues, "I believe that truths everywhere are compatible; no truth clashes with any other truth. . . . One truth in one corner of the world has to be harmonious and compatible with all truths elsewhere, or else it is not a truth. That is why I have never tired of my search for truth in other arenas of intellect and opinion. This truthfulness of the world is a blessing indeed, because it instigates constant search and engenders a healthy pluralism."[45]

Furthermore, for this group of writers, a religion's phenomenal forms—its liturgies, rituals, and scriptures—are understood to be inessential to it and are not to be confused with the universal truth for which they are made to stand in. It is precisely because the philosophically unsophisticated and ordinary adherent is so easily drawn to the phenomenal forms of religion that these forms constitute a certain danger: they can easily be turned into tools of manipulation by elites who want to exploit the religious passions of the masses toward their own ends. Hanafi expresses this position when he criticizes the resurgence of Islamic rituals in Egypt as a woeful sign of the ascendance of the Islamist movement:

> [Ritualism] is used by the ruling elite as a cover up, a religious surface on an otherwise irreligious social, economic, and political situation. Islamic groups [i.e., Islamists] concentrate most of their efforts on ritualism to attract the masses to become members of the groups. Ritualism is part of a public relations campaign. For females, it plays a role in attracting males,

44. For one genealogy of this conception of religion, see Colin Jager, "After the Secular: The Subject of Romanticism," in this issue.

45. Abdul Karim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, ed. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21. Notably, Soroush is a strong proponent of Quine's philosophy of science as a means to think through the universal character of religious and scientific truth.

giving them proof of virtue, chastity, and good morals. The masses find ritualism the easiest means through which they can express their religious zeal and traditional faith. Once political consciousness is absent or falsified, religious ritualism can be a real substitute.[46]

The adherence of ordinary Muslims to Islamic rituals, liturgies, and observances is regarded as evidence of a distorted relationship to religious truth (universal and abstract), turning them into pawns in the hands of those who seek to manipulate them for worldly reasons. There is a resonance here between Hanafi's dismissal of a religiosity that mistakes Islam's real truth with its ritual forms and the Rand report's repeated judgment that the traditionalist Muslims' strict abidance by Islamic rituals is evidence of their "slavish mentality" and their inability to question authority.[47] We might suggest here that the project of a secular hermeneutics, and the form of discipline and rule it inaugurates, finds its telos in precisely a subject who recognizes that material expressions of a particular religion—its rituals, observances, laws, and scriptures—are linked only contingently to religious truth.[48]

Once religious doctrine is shorn of its manifest forms, and divinity of its worldly presence, scripture can then be read for its symbolic significance. In the words of an influential anthropologist, "religion *is* a system of symbols" that

46. Hasan Hanafi, "The Relevance of the Islamic Alternative in Egypt," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 4 (1982): 65. This view, it is worth pointing out, is quite common even among scholars of religion within the academy. See, for example, the anthropologist Maurice Bloch's oft-cited analysis of religious ritual as a means to securing domination in "traditional societies," *Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society* (New York: Academic, 1975).

47. See, for example, the dismissal with which Internet discussions among Muslims about questions of diet, divorce, and the performance of prayer are treated in the Rand report (Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam*, 32). It is striking that the disdain that secular cosmopolitans reserve for religious concerns with bodily comportment is seldom visited upon the care lavished on the exercising, dieting, and sexually adroit body in the plethora of contemporary fashion magazines. I suspect this is because religious observances and rituals mark what is considered to be the coercive character of religion, whereas the pursuit of these latter forms of discipline and cultivation is assumed to be a result of "individual free choice." Needless to say, this simplistic and polarized view is highly inadequate for understanding the work that embodied practices perform within a particular regime of truth and discipline.

48. This view accords well with Immanuel Kant's reformulation of religion in accord with Enlightenment values and modern political rationality. Kant famously argued that phenomenal forms of religion are a leftover from the infancy of the human race, when man needed such aids, and should be discarded when the human species has reached its appropriate level of maturity. For Kant, the value of scripture lay not in its temporal narrative but in the rational structure it symbolized. See *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanno (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), particularly 127–30.

affirms for the believers a general order of existence and provides them with a certain order of meaning.[49] For many modern liberals and progressives, such a formulation is not only commonsensical but necessary for the realization of a liberal democratic polity. The fact that this understanding of religion and scripture as a system of signs and symbols, ready for a cultured individual to interpret according to her poetic resources, enjoys such broad appeal is in part what the term *normative secularity* captures. One ubiquitous manifestation of it is the way in which Muslim women's consensual adoption of the veil has been treated in academic and popular writings. It is widely assumed that the veil is a symbol whose variable meanings inhere either in the woman's intentions or in the context of its adornment.[50] Whether it is those who hail the veil as a symbol of their religious or cultural identity or those who spurn it as a symbol of women's oppression (as do many feminists), the idea that the veil should be understood primarily as a sign (that signifies *something*) reigns supreme. Women who contend that the veil is part of a religious doctrine, a divine edict, or a form of ethical practice and that it therefore has nothing to do with "identity" are usually judged to be victims of false consciousness, mired in a traditionalism that leads them to mistakenly internalize the opinions of misogynist jurists whom they should resist.[51] Such is the fate that must befall the veil in a secular imaginary: it can only symbolize the

49. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic, 1973); emphasis added. Geertz's formulation is widely embraced within the humanities and the social sciences. For a critique of this conception and its genealogy, see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993), 27–55.

50. Thus the plethora of studies aimed at explaining the resurgence of the veil among Muslims remain caught between providing instrumentalist reasons (e.g., women wear the veil to avoid sexual harassment), on the one hand, and a hermeneutics of the social context (e.g., the veil is a symbolic expression of Muslim women's resistance to Western cultural hegemony), on the other. The idea that the veil is a religious obligation, as many Muslim women claim, is seldom, if ever, addressed in these studies. In my *Politics of Piety*, I show that for many of those who adopt it, the veil is both a means and an end to realizing the "will of god." Such a conception of the veil enables an ethical-political imaginary quite distinct from one geared toward a politics of cultural identity, which most studies of the veil presume.

51. Nawal el-Saadawi, a prominent secular Egyptian feminist, expressed this view upon observing a sign, displayed by French Muslim women protesting the recent ban on the veil, which said: "The veil is a doctrine, not a symbol." Saadawi found this slogan to be an expression of the false consciousness of the protesting Muslim women, a sign of their naive complicity with the capitalist plot to keep the Muslim world from coming to a "true political consciousness." Once again, any concern with religious doctrine can only be understood as a ruse for material power in this kind of an argument. See Nawal al-Saadawi, "An Unholy Alliance," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, January 22, 2004, available at www.weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/674/op2.htm.

world of authority and tradition that already stands in a false relation to history and requisite progress; its proper meaning is decided by a prior verdict, namely, that this tradition (often glossed as literalist) must be destroyed in order for reason, culture, and the free spirit to grasp the true meaning of religion. Any attempt to resist such a judgment cannot but take on the terms of its own demise. The argument that the veil is the symbol of Muslim women's freedom to choose their identity against Western cultural imperialism only reverses the judgment, while remaining consistent with the terms of secular reasoning. One might wonder: can it be otherwise?

Secular Critique?

Let me recapitulate the central points of my argument and raise some questions, opened up by this line of thinking, that critics of the current U.S. imperial project might want to ponder. I have suggested that contrary to normative understandings of secularism today, its force seems to reside not in neutralizing the space of politics from religion but in producing a particular kind of religious subject who is compatible with the rationality and exercise of liberal political rule. In the current moment of empire, this aspect of secularism is most evident in the ambitious campaign the U.S. government has undertaken to reform and reshape Islam. In analyzing the programs and strategies of State Department planners, I have suggested that they have located a powerful partner in secular liberal Muslim reformers who agree with them in their diagnosis that the central problem haunting Muslim societies lies in their inability to achieve critical distance between the divine text and the world, and a concomitant overvaluation of received authority. Their hermeneutical project is aimed at creating the conditions for the emergence of a normative religious subject who understands religion—its scriptures and its ritual forms—as a congeries of symbols to be flexibly interpreted in a manner consonant with the imperatives of secular liberal political rule. This insistence on a particularly singular relationship between subject and text is essential to what might be called *secularity*, and it is the secular genealogy of this relationship that connects the discourses of liberal Muslim reformers and operatives such as the Rand Corporation.

The fact that this normative secular religiosity commands such uncritical acceptance among liberals and leftists alike should, I want to argue, be thought through far more carefully than is customary. This is, in part, because for those of us who want to think critically about what the U.S. imperial venture represents in the Muslim world today, this consensus constitutes the Achilles' heel. We know,

on the one hand, that the unabashedly imperial goal of the United States to secure its domination in Muslim lands is morally flawed. But on the other hand, many of us remain suspicious, if not afraid, of the kind of religiosity that the Islamic resurgence has facilitated in Euro-American cities and in various parts of the Muslim world. The fear is that orthodox Islamic practices—from the veil to public prayers to abidance by rules of sexual segregation—are expressions of a fanatical literalist mentality and, as such, a threat to the entire edifice of our liberal political system. Thus the unequivocal opposition to U.S. occupation of the Middle East is often seasoned with caveats about the necessity to fight the irrationality of Muslim beliefs and practices through cultural, if not military, means.

We need to challenge a number of assumptions that underwrite this judgment, key among them the line of causality drawn between abidance by conservative social mores and the danger posed to liberal political principles such as democracy, tolerance, and equality. Do orthodox religious sensibilities, including those that might challenge secular norms of sociability, actually threaten the entire edifice of our liberal political system? If so, how? Or does the threat that the liberal political system currently faces have a more complex topography and a more implicated genealogy? Would the subject of a secular hermeneutics be "more democratic"? If so, then in what ways and at what costs? And would such a democracy necessarily be sympathetic to the geopolitical ambitions of the United States government?

Second, the "terrifying" figure of the literalist needs to be complicated in much the same way as the heroic figure of the rational critic needs to be chastened.[52] Apart from the fact that the Kantian model of autonomous reason (underlying the secular concept of religion) is not short of its own aspirations to dogmatism, what is called literalism has always entailed more complex notions of history and temporality than generally recognized—albeit different ones than our secular models inscribe. A range of concepts in traditional Quranic hermeneutics, for example, are aimed at parsing out how to approximate god's reason to solve problems that had no historical precedents. Attacks on literalist and certain allegorical

52. In the aftermath of 9/11, it has become quite common to draw a causal relationship between literalist hermeneutics and Islamic militancy. This view has just begun to be questioned in the mainstream press. Two research associates of the New America Foundation, for example, suggest that there is little empirical evidence that madrassas—the purported centers of dissemination of literal interpretation of the Quran—are the incubating ground for terrorists. They show that a majority of those involved in the main terrorist attacks since 1993 were college educated, often in technical subjects like engineering, and had never been to a madrassa. See Peter Bergen and Swati Pandey, "The Madrassa Myth," *New York Times*, June 14, 2005.

interpretive traditions by the secular liberal reformers discussed above embrace a different kind of literalism (if not a certain kind of dogmatism). The form of historicism that reformers such as Abu Zayd and Soroush champion practices its own kind of literalism by anchoring the Quran within the empirical sociology of the time period in which it was revealed and tying its subsequent interpretations to the material interests of generations of Muslim jurists and scholars who developed the traditional hermeneutical approach. This historical method, like its Biblical precedents, charges allegorical and literal readings with inexactitude while authorizing only certain readings and closing down a range of other (heretical?) possibilities.[53]

The antipathy that progressive secular intellectuals exhibit toward those forms of religiosity glossed as orthodox or traditionalist is often, paradoxically, conjoined with a certain commitment to the poetic resources of the Judeo-Christian tradition—evident in a literary and aesthetic sensibility, albeit denuded from the requirements of prophecy, doctrine, and traditional authority. This antipathy toward traditional religious authority has many earlier precedents, including Marx, who argued that the dissolution of "the religious claim" was a necessary precursor for human emancipation to proceed.[54] The certainty of this critical stance has to be attenuated by a recognition of the paucity and parochialism of this universalist vision, both because of the historical disasters it has facilitated and because of the manner in which it is currently cavorting with one of the most ambitious imperial projects in history, which seeks to make the world in a singular image. Such a total project, I fear, can only elicit an equally singular vision in response, one in which all shades of interpretive, moral, and ethical ambiguity must be leveled so as to salvage the dregs of what might have once constituted a tradition or a life-world.

Since the events of 9/11, it has become customary to hear pleas—in the academy as well as in the popular press—for the restoration of secular reasoning, principles, and orientations so that some semblance of order may be restored from

53. For an exploration of a religious reading of scripture that is commensurate neither with literalism nor historical empiricism in the Christian tradition, see Amy Hollywood, "Reading as Self-Annihilation," in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), 39–63.

54. Marx famously argued, "It is the *task of history*, therefore, once the *other-world of truth* has vanished, to establish the *truth of this world*. The immediate *task of philosophy*, which is in the service of history, is to unmask human self-alienation in its *secular form* now that it has been unmasked from its *sacred form*" ("Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker [New York: Norton, 1978], 54).

the havoc religious politics has wrought in the world today.[55] For many intellectuals, what is needed right now is a fierce and reasoned assertion of the moral necessity and superiority of secularism. This essay clearly departs from this line of thinking. My sense is that what is needed in the current moment of political chaos is not so much stringent and pious calls for the reassertion of secularism but a critical analysis of what has been assumed to be the truth of secularism, its normative claims, and its assumptions about what constitutes "the human" in this world. This is not simply because such an exercise is intellectually compelling, but because what we take to be the moral superiority of the secular vision needs to be rethought urgently. Apart from the fact that this secular vision does not command broad allegiance in the world today, I fear that it is premised on a propensity to violence that is seldom questioned. The vantage point accorded from the position of the current U.S. foreign policy, in its vast ambition to remake Islam, makes this violence visible in a manner that should give one pause about what might be entailed in calls for the restoration of secular liberal political rule.

55. For one set of essays that make such a plea from a variety of disciplinary locations, see the special issue of *boundary 2* 31 (2004), "Critical Secularism," edited by Aamir Mufti.