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DISAMBIGUATING THE IDEA OF PUBLIC SPHERE AND SECULARISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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I. Introduction

It might be an obvious point that in a region such as the Middle East, where its political landscape is dominated by nondemocratic and even authoritarian and autocratic regimes, the discussion of the ideas of the public sphere and secularism requires some premises and conclusions that are not necessarily at work in another socio-political context. A premise about the character of the public sphere in this region is that it is either absent because of the political regimes' domination over and powerful control of the public space, or it is weak because of the lack of a political culture for public deliberation and justification. That is not to say that various manifestations of public sphere do not exist. There are, for example, street protests, social movements, civil society organizations, political parties, human rights organizations, women's rights organizations, student and youth movements, and independent media. There are also popular uprisings and revolutions, which could take a violent approach.[1]

A more controversial point is about the nature and content of the public sphere and how the secular/religious distinction is featured at the level of state institutions and in the public political life of citizens. The point is that the secular/religious distinction has no purchase in different public and political spaces in this region; there is no correspondence to be made between secular/religious spheres and public/private spheres. It has to be noted that the historical, genealogical and philosophical foundations of the secular/religious binary have been called to question by many scholars (Calhoun et al. 2011; Asad 2003; Casanova 2011; Cavanaugh 2009), as to

whether there was ever a clear-cut distinction between the two spheres and authorities. However, the socio-political changes in European and Western societies have made the secular/religious distinction with its corollary public/private distinction and spheres a more persistent phenomenon, especially with the secularization of Western liberal societies. The more important issue in relation to this controversial distinction is that it never existed in the Middle East, and that the socio-political changes triggered by modernity and globalization have not created a distant political sphere from the religious sphere.

In this chapter, it is argued that the secular/religious distinction with its corollary distinctions might be overcome or transcended by considering the nature of public sphere and civil society in the Middle East region and argue that secularism might only be achievable in a top-down statist process. In section (II), the characteristics of public sphere in this region will be outlined and a terminological issue will be identified and clarified. Section (III) will deal with the question of an analytical distinction between secularism and its derivatives, and I will argue that the secular/religious distinction becomes blurred in the function of public institutions and public policy. It will then be argued that we encounter theoretical and practical problems if secularism connected with the modernization in the Middle East region is conceived as a societal process of secularization when public sphere is fraught with identity politics (IV). In the final section (V), it is argued that in this socio-political context, multiple public spheres can be identified, and this phenomenon will be discussed in connection with the thesis of multiple modernities. I will conclude that while secularism in this context is, at best, a statist project, religion is to a large extent part of the public sphere and the secular.

II. Public sphere in a troubled region

What does the notion of public sphere mean, and how can this realm be identified? Habermas's theorization and historical investigation (1989 [1962]) of the bourgeois public sphere (bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in some European societies, shows the development of a public sphere that was first dominated by the state to a sphere that the new bourgeois class utilized to publicly monitor the state with the establishment of public discourses and critical discussions. Habermas's category of the bourgeois public sphere echoes Hegel's bürgerliche Gesellschaft (civil society), the inhabitants of which are the bourgeois class. Habermas's delineation of the concept of the public sphere comprises two important conditions: the rational-critical discussion by the public

of the rules of public authority and this is done – here Habermas refers to Kant – with "people's public use of their reason"; and the participation of citizens in the public sphere (Habermas 1989: 27, 1992; Calhoun 1992). Another significant, now controversial, point made by Habermas (1984, 1987, 1989) is that with the rise of modernity's public sphere, the public role of religion declines and this sphere becomes secularized. In other words, the secularization hypothesis ~~renders~~ that the development of the modern democratic public sphere makes secularized communicative reason a predominant feature of the rational-critical discourse in the public sphere. For Habermas, this feature would function as the foundation for a form of societal consensus between the citizens of plural liberal democratic societies. He states that, "the socially integrative and expressive functions that were at first fulfilled by ritual practice pass over to communicative action; the authority of the holy is gradually replaced by the authority of an achieved consensus" (Habermas 1987: 77). Habermas has given more attention, ever since, to his skeptical view of religion in the public sphere and the renewed role of religion in post-secular societies (Habermas 2008); and although he makes a clear distinction between faith and knowledge, he acknowledges the impact of religious ways of life as sources of motivation for democracy – however, not as normative sources for democratic procedures (Reder and Schmidt 2010).

The structure and content of the public sphere is not very clear when it is mentioned in the socio-political contexts of the Middle East. That is not only because of the strong presence of religion and religiosity in these societies, but also because of the lack of certain conditions in the structure of political regimes – such as the lack of public deliberative practices regarding matters of law and public policy, and the lack of genuine civil society institutions. However, this is not to say that the presence of religion and religiosity in the public political space is unique to the 'Muslim' Middle East or to 'Muslim societies.' Two points of clarification are required at this stage. First, the term Middle East referred to here does not represent a monolithic aggregation of a single culture, religion and identity. It does not arbitrarily and deliberately neglect the differences and nuances that exist between the societies that fall within this region. So, the political culture of, for example, Gulf states and societies is different from, say, that of Tunisia or Lebanon. Second, although reference to the Middle East is mainly a reference to Muslim majority societies and for that reason it will include Turkey, the North Africa region and Iran, it should not prima facie be interpreted as essentially signifying to mean 'Muslim' societies. The underlying presupposition that seems to be problematic in relation to religion and culture is that religion constitutes a significant part of culture, if not

the totality of a culture – hence religion considered as a cultural universal, in the sense that the most important constitutive identity of a culture is coming from religion.[2]

In fact, different religious characteristics and religiosities – such as beliefs, rituals, spiritualities and observance are also dominant in other societies, like in the Christian Evangelicalism of the U.S., the Orthodox Christianity of Eastern Europe, the Catholicism of Latin America and in the Orthodox Judaism of Israel (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 223–6). Although it can be argued that religion has a prominent role in these societies and that they can be described as religious societies, there are also cultural and religious differences between them which contribute to the receptiveness of the issue considered in this paper. Thus, as a result of different political regimes, the processes of secularization and modernization, and the rise and function of the public sphere in these societies, will eventually be different. In some of these societies, the public sphere as a critical space for deliberation appears to be more solid and institutionalized in the form of civil society institutions, and in others this seems to be a frail space dominated by the governments and their repressive apparatuses. This last phenomenon is characteristic, one can argue, of the public sphere in Middle Eastern societies.

Two significant points will follow from this proposition. First, the fact that there are different structures, constructions and complexities of the public sphere and different religious and cultural norms in these religious societies, it seems that this variability is not wholly and inarguably due to religion. Second, although religiosity is deeply ingrained in these religious societies and their citizens' everyday life, their different socio-political and cultural structures diversify the emergence and flourishing of the public sphere. It is the process of state secularization that drives a wedge between the strong religiosity present in society and the political institutions, and neutralizes the effects of religion on the processes of legislation and policy making. The secularized state will, ideally, aim to practice toleration towards all religions and protect the right of individuals to freedom of conscience. The presence of religion and religiosity in American, Middle Eastern and Eastern European societies all represent the presence of a kind of theological authority, to different degrees, over the state's political behavior. However, the secular state together with a secular constitution in the U.S., for example, which guarantees religious freedom and certain political and social rights, can be said to have facilitated for citizens' participation in the public sphere and their deliberation and criticism of the state's approach to religion. It is then argued that a strong presence of the public sphere is not to be predicated, to a great extent, on the secularization of the state.

In fact, what makes this strong presence possible is, on the one hand, the democratic and toleration-based politics that grants individuals important rights and liberties and, on the other, the discursive space in which citizens can participate to scrutinize and criticize government policies.

III. Secular, secularization and secularism

The normative claim of the secularization thesis is that in order for a society to be modern, it has to be secular, and for it to be secular, it has to relegate religion to the private sphere (c.f., Asad 2003: 182). Now, since the secularization thesis – that is, the correlativity between modernity and secularization – has been widely criticized (Casanova 1994; Asad 2003), the question which comes up with regard to the public sphere in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region is this: How should we understand the strong presence of religion in the public and political life, and does this undermine the project of democratization and the hope for secularism? Before answering this question, a brief analytical explanation and distinction of the concept of secularism and its co-concepts is required.

1. The secular

In the extensive literature on secularism, the concept of 'the secular' is characterized as an epistemic category signifying a specific realm in which reference is made heavily to the present modern profane world, which is meant to be detached from the realm that is non-secular, the religious realm (Asad 2003; Casanova 2011). The secular sphere, particularly in the modern era, is understood in terms of public spaces where they are taken to be separate from religious symbols and theological interpretations. However, in the pre-modern age, there were no separate spheres and the religious did not have its own separate sphere; it was part of other spheres of human life. (Taylor 2007: 2) Hence, characterizing 'the secular' as an epistemic category denotes to those reasons that individuals and societies can give for their actions in a vast area of human life; that is, devoid of reference to God or divine interpretations. Casanova contends that "the secular" and "the religious" are "always and everywhere mutually constituted" (Casanova 2011: 54). It might not be possible to talk about a realm that is purely secular and empty of religious content. The public space is laden with religious symbols, festivities, carnivals and celebrations. There are religious remainders in the legislative texts of some liberal democratic states. The public presence of religion can be witnessed in different socio-political contexts, in Western and non-Western societies. There are different spheres in

which the secular and the religious are intertwined and there are references to God or religion/church in the constitutions of those countries, which are believed to have either secular societies, in Taylor's sense that people are less churchgoers and practice religious rituals less, or secular states whether they have religious establishment or not.[3]

This mutuality between the two realms can be traced back to the historical fact that the secular grew out of a specific theological interpretation of the world as originated in Christianity (Asad 2003). Casanova, for example, argues that "any discussion of the secular has to begin with the recognition that it emerged first as a theological category of Western Christendom that has no equivalent in other religious traditions or even in Eastern Christianity" (Casanova 2011: 56). If it is true that this intertwinement of the secular and the religious does no longer hold in the Western world because the modern states in the West are all based on political and legal fundamentals that are essentially secular, it will then be interesting to see to what extent religiosity is present in the secular institutions. A good example would be the spiritual services such as chaplaincy offered by the prison services, hospitals and the army.[4] However, it must be noted that these spiritual services in secular states are arguably justified by reference to religious freedom; that is, everyone should have the right to practice their own faith.

The mutuality and intertwinement of the secular and the religious in the socio-politico-cultural contexts of the Middle East is most evident, but also many different secularities are present in many different realms as discussed previously. However, when it comes to the spiritual services offered by secular institutions, it would not appear to be a common phenomenon, for example, to find Muslim imams working as chaplains or priests in hospitals, prisons and the army, offering religious services in the MENA societies.[5] The religious/secular spheres are constituted by one another and both are present in different supposedly secular institutions such as schools. The most visible area where the religious can be found is in the politico-legal sphere, which always represents the most contentious point and a reason for turmoil in the political reality of the Middle East.[6]

It seems that the religious/secular binary has not been clearly demarcated in modern secular states and that 'the religious' is a feature of the public life of citizens in secular states. Asad, in his critical reflection on the concept of 'religion' as a modern construction, argues that in secular countries like France, Britain and the U.S., the place of religion varies and it can be noticed that France and U.S. are both secular states and have secular constitutions. However, U.S. citizens are largely religious, and religiosity is present in the public while French citizens are considered to be secular. By

contrast, although the state of Britain is linked to the established Anglican Church, its population is largely nonreligious. He argues that this shows that religion has never disappeared from the public sphere and present in both Britain and the U.S. regardless of the presence of the establishment (Asad 2003: 5).

2. Secularization

The phenomenological variations of secularity in modern secular countries, i.e., the different ways in which societies have experienced the phenomenon of secularity, can be traced back to the different ways in which the processes of secularization took place in these countries. Secularization could be the result of religious antagonisms and divisions which contribute to the weakness of religious authority and power over society and against other spheres of power and, consequently, leads to the rise of political power that is secular in terms of its structure and direction. The division within Catholicism and the emergence of the Protestant Reformation had influenced the dominant religious view and helped dislocate it and paved the way unintentionally for secularization to take place. However, this unintended secularization tendency helped by the Reformation was only meant to bring the monks from their religious life of perfection in the monasteries into the world, to live in the saeculum[7] (Casanova 2011: 56–7). Casanova argues that the more important secularization process happened in the form of laicization, and it took a completely opposite direction from the former tendency. While the Protestant Reformation wanted the clerics to be part of the world of ordinary individuals and to defuse the religious/secular binary, the laicization tendency solidified the binary and emancipated all secular spheres from religious authority and symbols. The radical applications of this latter form have found their way to and were exemplified in the French Revolution and other liberal revolutions (Casanova 2011: 56–7).

Although the two tendencies and processes of secularization seem to be interlinked and complementing one another, the different receptions of secularization in European societies can be historically traced back to these processes. Two conclusions can be drawn from these divergent processes of secularization; one is historical, and the other is normative. First, the historicity claim of the described processes of secularization is that the path of secularization in most Western societies followed the unintended secularization process, which happened in medieval Christianity in which the 'religious' was meant to be part and parcel of the 'secular' world. The second process of secularization or laicization exemplified in the French Revolution only affected some Western societies, and not all followed this

secularization dynamic. This might, somehow, explain the religiosity of some of these societies; that is, their secularization was an upshot of the unintended processes of secularization. Second, the normative claim is that 'the religious' and 'religion' are products of the European secular modernity as it is the result of the process of secularization or laicization. So building on the historicity claim, Asad argues that this poses a paradox; for while 'the secular' is essentially a Christian theological discourse, 'the religious' in the meantime takes form in the secularization process, and hence 'religion' is presented as a construction of European secular modernity (Asad 2003: 192–3).

The difficulty that this complicated story of secularization poses is that secularization as a historical process never emerged and continued in the same fashion everywhere in the West, and for that reason, it should not be viewed as a universal process which all Western societies have gone through a singular route (Kaviraj 2002). It should, instead, be viewed as a multiple process that has both theoretical and empirical implications for understanding secularism (Calhoun et al. 2011). However, what makes the matter more complicated for the purposes of the topic considered here is that the processes of secularization in the West cannot be generalized and replicated across the historical development of human societies. It cannot be replicated, therefore, in the historical, religious and social contexts of Middle Eastern societies. The point here is not that religious movements in the Middle East and other places claim that since secularization is specific to the West, secularism then has to be rejected as alien to their societies and it goes against their religious principles and traditions. The point is rather subtler, that is to say, Middle Eastern and other non-Western societies encountered secularism only in their encounter with the European colonialist powers. These powers viewed, in most cases, secular Christianity as the religion that could modernize and civilize these societies, which were dominated by backward and intolerant religions (Van der Veer 2007; Bhargava 2009). There are no similar historical emergences of secularization processes in the history of Islam, for example, in the same way that happened in Western Christendom, despite similar religious divisions in Islam into Sunni and Shia doctrines and other subdivisions.

3. Secularism

It has become fairly an undisputed position among many scholars, especially after the critique of the secularization thesis, that modernization is no longer tightly connected to secularism in today's world societies and that the religious can perfectly survive in today's modern conditions. For instance,

all the nonsecular 'modernities' that exist today in the Middle East have not experienced a process of secularization. They are, rather, witnessing a form of religious revivalism that has displaced the nonreligious nationalist discourse,[8] which dominated the region's political scene since the rise of its postcolonial states. In fact, different forms of modernization have taken place in the MENA region as a result of globalization, in areas such as media technology, mass communications, the rise of new concepts of the city as the center of capitalist functions from stock exchanges to foreign direct investments and trade markets, and the urban developments of major cities (Ghannam 2002). However, the modernization that is happening in the region is more economically, rather than politically and religiously, oriented; the political and religious areas are the most stagnant sides of the modernization process. The political structures of regimes in the Middle East lack – except for Turkey and Israel, to some extent – major democratic elements in their forms of governance and rule. The 'Arab Spring' in that sense can be understood as a popular revolt in the Middle East against this stagnation of political rule, which has been dominated by certain families and political elites and their determination to cling to power for decades at the cost of civil wars.

The religious authority is another which has not been affected much by the modernization process. In other words, no religious reform has arisen from within the religious quarter, and no reform been triggered by religious movements.[9] There are, of course, certain influences and pressures; for instance, some religious groups have addressed and tried to reconcile their convictions with the main discourses of modernity, such as democracy, civil society and public sphere as sites of public discussion and criticism of the state and using them for the benefit of their religious agendas. On the other side of the spectrum, an intellectual project aimed at the critique of religion has been underway by religious and nonreligious intellectuals.[10] The political regimes in the region have benefited from the process of modernization to solidify their power, and it also led to religious revival and not to religious decline. The recent popular revolts in the region have shown that the Islamic groups and movements were the main actors in the public space and the main contestants for political power. Thus it should be stressed that the modernization process or modernity does not necessarily bring about religious reformation, and it is not to be seen à la Protestant Reformation, which gives rise to the mistaken view of the universality of Western secularization and its necessary development in non-Western societies (Asad 2003; Casanova 2011: 63–4). This is not to argue that there would be some correlation between the reform in Islam and the emergence of secularism. The reform of Islam could not in any way lead to secularism

or be a reason for establishing secular orders. Against this backdrop, it has been argued that secularism as a political principle is not essentially linked to religious reformation, but to the form of law which articulates it and to the rise of the state which uses power to impose and institutionalize it.[11]

The previous discussion will allow us to answer the question, put in the last section, as to how we should understand the public sphere in the MENA region. I have argued that we cannot interpret the concept of the public sphere in the MENA societies in a secular manner or, more precisely, in the light of the secularization thesis. The public sphere in such socio-political contexts can best be understood as multi-layered spheres where convergence, but not consensus, is reached, though disagreement is permanent and a recurring political phenomenon. One of the questions that remains unanswered and yet to be seen is that what the structures and contents of secularism would be if it is adopted as the political doctrine of one of the states in the Middle East region, and what model it would follow.[12]

IV. Identity politics and public spheres: modernization but not secularization?

The existing deep democratic lacunae in the decision making processes, the autocratic rules and finally, the use and abuse of religion to curtail individual liberties and weaken civil society in the MENA region, have all made the potentiality for the emergence of a stable and free public sphere, as an arena for critically evaluating the actions of the government and for free public discussion and social integration unrealizable. These factors contribute to the degeneration of a communicative public sphere in which religious and nonreligious citizens can reason the basic political principles and reach consensus without denouncing their own conceptions of the good life. The politics of identity that dominates the political spectrum in this region is not a novel phenomenon, but is a product of the political structure of the region's postcolonial states. This form of politics has, at certain times, manifested itself in deep conflicts and civil strife, which worked as a real obstacle to the formation of a free public sphere in which civil society organizations can flourish independently of the state and in opposition to it. The politically motivating identities in the anti-colonial movements were predominantly nationalist and hence a form of national identity was developed by nationalist activists, who led these movements for national liberation. National identity continued to be the prevailing form of politics in the Middle East, at least up until the rise of Islamic movements, which managed to divert people's consciousness from a nationalist to a

religiously-based consciousness. However, in the postcolonial period of strong national sentiments, people's political activism and presence in the public were not reduced to a politics of identity. In fact, different forms of politics were at work, like public protests and labor struggles for better conditions of life, ordinary people's resistance and demands, for example, for land reforms (Owen 2000; Bayat 2010).

However, from possibly the 1970s and onwards, this form of political sentimentality that was most attached to nationalism transformed to a different form of identity politics and ideological attachment represented in the revival of Islamic identity and political movements that emerged as a response to the defeatism of the nationalist discourse. This new reshaping of identity politics which is marked by a form of politico-religious consciousness took roots in the social consciousness of society as a whole. This change is important in understanding the present revivalism and continual growth of the religious in every part of the public sphere, and how this form of religious identity was a response, in the meantime, to the failures of the politics of nationalism and to the challenges of globalization and modernization. The rise of diverse identity politics in the political life of citizens has been a catalyst for the plurality of the public sphere and the rise of divergent civil society associations. The greatest challenges, perhaps, for these publics have been the question of their survival in light of the political environment of the autocratic rules and repressive regimes of the Middle East and the question of building public opinion to contest government policies and becoming part of the process of decision making. This reality has forced some political groups, Islamists and non-Islamists, to resort to other ways to appear in the public space and to camouflage in the form of civil society or charity groups.

In her critical study of Habermas's articulation of the concept of the public sphere, Nancy Fraser argues that Habermas's concept requires a sharp separation between civil society and the state and this would promote a distinction between, what she calls, weak and strong publics.[13] Weak publics are those whose deliberative practices are aimed only at opinion formation and not decision making. Strong publics, on the other hand, are those whose deliberative practices encompass both opinion formation and decision making, such as a parliament, which functions as a public sphere within the state and this would make the separation blurred (Fraser 1997: 134). She concludes that any conception of the public sphere that requires a sharp separation between civil society and the state will fail to recognize the interrelations between weak and strong publics and is not adequate for a contemporary critical theory and for a democratic society. A democratic

conception of the public sphere should overstep this separation and allow us to imagine public spheres that encompass both opinion formation and decision making (Fraser, 136).

However, in the socio-political context that this chapter takes as its subject of study, strong publics are not represented by parliaments; they are not publics within the state, but they are the states' tools to generate public legitimacy for their policies. Here it is the separation between strong and weak publics which is blurred, and not between the state and civil society. There is no separation between opinion formation and decision making when considering the public spheres and civil society in the MENA region. Every public sphere and civil society association is engaged in a form of political activism, and although they have no direct participation in the decision-making process, they can influence this process and force changes. Thus, the separation between strong and weak publics is blurred by virtue of the separation between the state and civil society. Hence, strong and weak publics are represented by non-state actors; by street politics, social movements, popular uprisings and other forms of political activism and avant-garde forms of politics. What has given support in Eastern and Central Europe in the 1990s to the formation of public spheres as independent spaces in opposition to the state was the emergence of the idea of civil society. The failure and ineffectiveness of parliaments, and in some cases, their pseudo existence in these authoritarian and autocratic states, led activists to form civil society associations, in which they sought to challenge state authorities and demand their individual and political rights through non-violent means, such as street protests, demonstrations and establishing human rights organizations (Chandhoke 2007).

The rise of civil society as separate from the state and its institutions has come as a result of developments in social consciousness about rights and freedoms and the formation of diverse identity groups in the postcolonial states. The absence of effective parliaments and political oppositions, and the domination of authoritarian and autocratic rules, have created antagonistic state-civil society relations. These publics have resorted to multiple channels and avenues such as audio-visual and printed media, charities, political parties, trade unions, public demonstrations and strikes to form public opinion as well as to participate in the decision-making processes. The growing number of civil society organizations is not an indication of growing democratic public spheres that citizens can freely use to deliberate the laws and policies. In Egypt, for instance, by the end of 2008, there were 30,000 active and nominal civil society organizations, more than half of which were religious and development associations (Hassan 2011: 7).

V. Multiple public spheres and multiple modernities

What the study of the public spheres in the MENA societies brings to our attention is that these societies have undergone modernization processes at the social, economic, technical and educational levels, mainly due to the opening up of these societies to the process of globalization. However, modernization processes, as argued earlier in the chapter, have not given rise to secularism as a political principle, which could function to regulate the relation between the state and religion and to protect the plurality that exists in society. They have, rather, given rise to different religious groups that have made use of modern communication technologies ranging from social media and blogs to the internet and audio-visual channels in order to publicize their ideologies and offer politico-religious alternatives to the ongoing social and political poverty in the region. This easy accessibility to modern methods of communication made the articulation of religion and the revival of radical religious movements and ideologies conceivable; this is not true only for Islamic movements but also for other religions groups, such as Evangelical Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism (Eickelman and Anderson 1999). The modernization of these societies and the adoption of globalization have not resulted in the fading away of religion from the public sphere or to its privatization and, therefore, no secularization has taken place.

The rise of religious fundamentalist movements and their appropriation of modern communication methods to create their own public sphere ~~in~~ which they not only challenge the state, but also the existing religious interpretations of the scripture offered by moderate Muslim scholars. However, AuQ4 the rise of a salafist public sphere is not representative of a Muslim public sphere. What needs to be realized in terms of the public presence of religion is that there is no one single discourse and no one sphere which functions according to agreed-upon lines of communication and reasoning. There are different religious discourses within these publics, i.e., different 'religious publics,' and this fragmentation of religious authority is a marked feature of all religions and not only of Islam (Salvatore and Eickelman 2006: xii). The normative significance of this argument is that the fragmentary nature of religious discourses and the growing radicalization of Islam and, perhaps, future social discontent with the abuses of religion would lead to contradictory religious publics which, in turn, lends support to other competing public spheres including secular publics, which can grow in light of this contradictory nature of religious discourses.[14]

This complex relation between different public spheres can be understood in light of the notion of multiple modernities. This suggests that there are heterogeneous dimensions of modernity, whether in Western or

non-Western societies, which create not a single project but different processes, as Eisenstadt argues (2000: 24):

> While the common starting point was once the cultural programme of modernity as it developed in the West, more recent developments have seen a multiplicity of cultural and social formations going far beyond the very homogenizing aspects of the original version. All these developments do indeed attest to the continual development of multiple modernities, or of multiple interpretations of modernity – and, above all, to attempts at 'de-Westernization,' depriving the West of its monopoly on modernity.

This notion helps us understand the variety of modernization processes that have happened in the MENA region and, in fact, their different outcomes and implications from one society to another. Any talk, therefore, of the project of secularism and its application should take into account the different sociological, political and faith structures that exist between these societies, regardless of their shared religious and cultural values. The holistic approach in studying the question of secularism and its applicability to this region is fraught with a prejudiced assumption of this region as a monolithic entity of one religion and culture, an assumption that has been challenged above.

This notion can be understood in two different ways. One way is to say that European modernity is a universal process that all other societies will follow and, as a result, secularization and a secular public sphere will eventually emerge in modern non-Western societies. Even though this reading that is implied by the notion runs counter to the theoretical aims of the scholars who argued for the notion that there are multiple paths of modernity different from Western forms, the resultant implications of secularization or the privatization of religion and the rise of secular public spheres have been rendered by theoreticians as the reality of the modern age (Taylor 1992; Eisenstadt 2000; Katzenstein 2006).

The alternative reading for the notion of multiple modernities is exactly contrary to the previous reading, and it states that secularism or the process of secularization as it happened in European societies is not a universal process and outcome for the development of all societies and that it cannot and will not be replicated in other modern non-European societies. It asserts that, as argued in this chapter, the secularization process is specific to Western European Christendom. The plurality of modernity does not mean that the multiplicity of modernization processes between Western and non-Western societies is a matter of degree and not content.

It is argued that non-secular and religious modernities are substantially different from secular modernities in that they do not go through the same secularization processes and do not give rise to secular public spheres. The European model of secularism and secularization is an exceptional model, and it cannot be reproduced in other socio-politico and cultural contexts (Chakrabarty 2000).

To conclude, it has been argued that secularization is not conceivable even though modernization has taken place in the Middle Eastern societies and, for that reason, the emerging public spheres are not secular. Secularism as a political principle is then related to the state, which as a political entity can regulate the relationship between the political realm and the sphere of religious beliefs and practices. It is the state which should delineate the boundaries between these two spheres and tolerate religious and nonreligious beliefs and practices. In some instances, a peaceful secularization process follows secularism when this is conceived as the state's political doctrine. The project of secularism in this region is, by and large, a political project, which its main actor is represented in the state and its laws and constitutions. I have also argued that public sphere in the Middle East region can better be seen in its multiplicity and that there are different publics. Thus, the secular/religious distinction might be overcome once it is considered in light of public spheres in this region as the lines demarcating the spheres of the religious and secular are blurred and the two spheres are interconnected. I finally argued that these multiple public spheres and secularism can be read in line with the thesis of multiple modernities, and provided that this reading renders that the European model of secularism and secularization cannot be replicated in a region like the Middle East and that secularism in this region will have its own characteristics that do not necessarily follow a particular conventional model.

Notes

1 For a discussion of social movements and revolutions in the Middle East, see, e.g., Bayat (2010).
2 For a detailed discussion of this presupposition, see, e.g., Balagangadhara (1994: 2). Here, in the context of this chapter, terms like 'Muslim societies or culture' or 'Islamic world,' etc. are not used as normative notions, but as descriptive and explanatory tools in the argument.
3 At least, reference to God or the church is present in the constitutions of these democratic countries and, in fact, some of them give privilege to a certain denomination or establish it as the state religion. For example, look at the constitutions of Germany, Australia, Argentina, Scandinavian countries, Ireland, Switzerland, Spain and Poland.
4 See Sullivan (2014) and Swift (2009).

5 Some may argue that this is so because there is no religious freedom in these societies as an essential individual right that is protected by the law.
6 The point here is not that all legal bodies and legislations in Middle Eastern countries are based on and constituted by the religious law. There are many secular articles, elements and practices within the law of some of the states in the region as this, for example, can be seen in the law practices of the Egyptian state before the 2011 uprisings. For a detailed account on this point, see Agrama (2012). The point is rather that religion causes political turmoil in the Middle East through two aspects. First, religion is used by authoritarian regimes in the region to marginalize Islamic groups and minority sects or religions; and second, this results in the creation of strong religious reactions on the part of the oppressed and leads to the creation of religious extremism and fanaticism.
7 The original Latin word is *in saecula saeculorum*, which means forever and ever, a reference to an indefinite period of time in which the clergy, in ~~the~~ medieval Christendom, lived in the spatial and temporal world along with others and these were the "secular" clergy.
8 Some writers have described the regimes of Egypt's Nasser, Syria's Assad and Iraq's Saddam and the like not as nonreligious but as secular regimes. I believe that this description is conceptually misleading if another descriptive term is not added to it. So, when secular regimes tend to be intolerant towards minority religions and religion in general, violating the right of religious freedom and destabilize the peaceful coexistence between different religions in society, it is imperative that they are branded as unethical or authoritarian or fascist secularisms in contrast to ethical and liberal secularisms.
9 Reforms within Islam do not necessarily require denouncing the Islamic teachings, but it could be aimed at denouncing those principles in Shari'a that starkly contradict the human consciousness in the modern age.
10 For example, Nasr Abu Zayd, Hussein Marwa, Faraj Fuda and Muhammad Abed al-Jabri were mainly secular intellectuals who embarked on intellectual projects for religious reform. Abdolkarim Soroush from Iran is a religious intellectual who also greatly contributed to this project, and also many others. The point here is that an effective reform has to come from the religious scholars and theologians who can create a debate in the public sphere between religious and nonreligious citizens. See, for example, Saba Mahmood (2006) for reading the works of some of these reformers as converging with the U.S. foreign policy to call for the reform of Islam.
11 Even if the Christian roots of Western secularization is acknowledged, which is an agreed position among many scholars, this does not amount to the idea that secularization in Western Christendom was a direct result of Reformation, but the result of political will and institutionalization. On this point, see Olivier Roy (2007).
12 For a discussion on a different model from the European model of secularism and a comparison of different models in various countries, see Bhargava (2009, 2011) and Stepan (2011).
13 Habermas later (1992: 424–5, 1996: 307–8) adopts Fraser's distinction.
14 The most pressing issue that the Salafist groups concentrate on is the issue of Shari'a that they claim to make it the sole source of legislation. The disentanglement of Shari'a from the political sphere and civil law is the role of

the institutions of the modern state, since Shari'a practices are not part and parcel of the essence of the postcolonial modern states in the Middle East (An-Naim 2008; Hallaq 2013).

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