Towards an Islamically democratic secularism

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After 9/11, calm and for the most part intellectual debates on secularism and Islam turned overnight into a mass of burning issues. The democratic transformation that was lagging behind under Islam suddenly attracted attention from many directions, and the war on terrorism was accompanied by a call for a more liberal, a more secular Islam. The main reason for this rising interest in democratising the Middle East is not solely political. Security is its major concern: a concern that over the last three years has provided an excuse for restricting many civil liberties and passing many laws that encroach on democracy and liberalism, in many Western countries.

On the other hand, in the same period, the over-preoccupation of mainstream Islamic movements in the region with the application of Shari'a law, and even more importantly, the equation of Shari'a with law in the first place, is striking. Liberal democracy is more under attack than ever, and the Arab human rights movement is facing serious challenges. Calls for respect for the cultural specificity of the region are bruited abroad by authoritarian regimes as well as their opponents. If the obsession of Western politics with security has had any effect on the region, sadly it has only made the task of democrats more difficult, as anti-Western nationalist sentiments are now a real obstacle to democratic change. Such changes are now seen as imposed from outside.

The claim that religion and the state must be separated if we are to have domestic or global peace and stability is provoking anti-democratic forces on to the political stage, and filling intellectual debate with anti-democratic rhetoric. Meanwhile, what are Muslim democrats supposed to do: rethink Islam and Shari'a, or redefine secularism?

In this context, widespread myths about Islam must be challenged. Islam does extend beyond matters of law or of authority, essentially into a moral vision of human nature and human destiny, coupled with a social order based on solidarity and compassion. Like any other faith it can contribute to the formation of civic virtues and embrace notions of human dignity and equality. Secularism, too, needs to be mapped so that we can take soundings of what is meant by it in different places at different times.

Those who insist on erecting a dividing wall between us, ignore the fact that this is not possible in our age, and assuredly not when we come to Islam. It is also worth noting from the outset that such a debate is a stimulating and challenging topic not only for Muslims and Arabs. In many traditional democracies such as France and Britain, and even in the USA, redefining secularism and the role of religion in politics has reached the top of the intellectual and political agenda. Muslims cannot engage in such debates in isolation from very similar debates in other religious traditions as well as other cultures. A comparative approach is a must.

On the other hand, the rise of global civil society allows new forms of thinking about the complex relation between the religious and the political on both the local–national and the global–international levels, including cyberspace. If the disagreement is all about the relation between religion and the state, with the nation state as the primary locale of politics, to what extent does an added global dimension shake up the old equations?

As for the world of Islam, there is a need to distinguish between diverse schools of thought and the wide range of movements, in testing the weight of those dimensions of Islam that each considers the more central, though all accept Islam in its totality. Some trends are more democratic, though not necessarily more secular. Given

the shifting boundaries of the world of Islam itself, moreover, how can such debates contribute to recapturing the central concept of the sociopolitical logic of Islam, namely not the state, but the *umma*, or community of the faithful?

Exposing the myths of secularism

The 'ism' in the concept of secularism indicates that secularism is more that just the separation between the church and the state. It is a vision, a set of concepts, or a conceptual frame of reference that forms an approach to such fundamental questions as the limits of state power and the logic of social relations and individual rights; the dynamics of power sharing; and the role of citizens in day-to-day governance. Once this is established, we can start applying what it actually means to be secular to a specific cultural context.

Secularism in contemporary Western thought and imagination is one of the manifestations of modernity. In fact, we could say that they are two faces of the same coin. However, while there is opposition, theoretically, between the ideas of modernity, human fulfilment, individual choice and political freedom on one hand, and religion on the other, in reality different matrices of notions and perceptions overlap and blend. If we want to discuss the potential for a public religious role within the context of a democratic debate, we need to deconstruct secularism sufficiently to be able to distinguish between the relations of church and state, the public and the private, and religion and politics. While there is a point in separating religious bodies from political ones, there is little wisdom in attempting to distinguish between religion and politics as such, or indeed religious devotion and the obligations of citizenship. Here a redefinition of what we mean by 'politics' itself is what is at stake. What we seek to do is to widen and stretch the meaning of it to become more democratic, based on day-to-day grass-root politics, and linked with the social dimension of participation and presence. There is nothing in itself very new about this. On a certain level one might understand the history of political theory as an intellectual struggle to redefine 'the political'.

The real task is not how to liberate politics from religion, but how to balance the relation between the two in the most effective way. The compromise should not deprive religion of having a say in the public sphere, but also it should not allow it to impose sacred authority and other-world considerations on matters of national interest, or opinions that are subject to contestation and controversy. This said, the question now is, do we have any choice left except to acknowledge the importance of different dimensions of religion, and their relevance to current debates within a democratic realm?

In the contemporary context of the nation state in the Arab world, the real concern is not only that religion might expand its influence and take over the independence of the state, but also that the state in many Arab and Islamic countries has too much authority over religious institutions and abuses religious discourse to its own ends and in order to legitimate authoritarian policies. When many social movements attempted to recapture the liberating, egalitarian and democratic role of faith, the clash became political. Such movements are engaged in a protracted struggle with these non-democratic regimes over matters of human rights, power-sharing and social justice.

However, as soon as we embark on such a discussion of secularism, politics and religion, we come up against at least three major myths:

The historical myth

The secularisation process is not confined to the realms of politics and economics: it plays its part in versions of history. One major myth would have it that secularism underpinned the Renaissance in Europe, and that once church and state were separated, progress and modernisation could be achieved. If the Arab and Muslim countries are to modernise themselves they should begin by

secularising their societies. Closer inspection of the facts encourages us to challenge this thesis. First, Europe undertook different routes to modernisation: some brutally revolutionary, others more pacifist. Even the reformulation of relations between Church and State took several different forms. Third, the history of one region cannot automatically form the basis for the future of another, as if there is only one true end to history, in which one model only prevails. This is neither human nor democratic. Only comparative studies, that widen the scope of research to encompass different endeavours to construct the relationship between the sacred and the profane in cultures and religions apart from those of Christianity and the West, allow us to see secularism and historical and social change in its full, multicultural perspective.

The sociological myth

Not only is the historical complexity of the matter often obscured, but also its sociology. It is amazing to see how widespread exhortations to secularise Islam by 'simply separating Islam and politics' emerge at exactly the same time as a dramatic reform of sociology in its understanding of religious phenomena. The spectacular and striking return of religious devotion across religious traditions has forced sociologists of religion to abandon the old positivist modernist paradigm in which unilinear progress in the separation between church and state leads inevitably to the privatisation of religion, and its eventual decline. It was assumed that this modernist prophecy, predicting the withering away of religion in an age of science and economic progress, was an irreversible, process of history. Today, many sociologists, joined by many philosophers, admit that this prediction has proved faulty, some even referring to it henceforth as the classic and outdated, 'myth of secularisation'.

The return of religion has become a central phenomenon in many societies, an international trend that has gained even more strength within the unfolding processes of globalisation. Religion impinges more than ever on the choice of political rhetoric as well as being a factor in decision-making in many societies. Many civil society actors, and even global civil society bodies, embrace religious and moral transcendental values, especially in the world's South.

It was sociologists and political scientists, the two groups that had marginalised this factor of human and social life in earlier studies, who now led the way in a renewed interest in studying secularisation and the re-emergence of religious devotion. Sociologists concentrated on the return of religion to the public arena – usually referred to as the de-privatisation of religion – and focus mainly on the rise of religious groups or the return of the public role of historically religious institutions. Political scientists focused on the politics of resurgence, and the relation between different fundamentalisms and the state. Both are concerned with 'public' manifestations of the return of religion, giving little attention to the private sphere, and how religion has played a major role in helping it regain its functions, centrality and power.

This turn towards religion is no mere repeat of the classic form of the political–religious formula of the Middle Ages, a threat that so many ultra-secularists warn against. Religious institutions no longer have sole authority over the religious devotion of people. In that aspect, the religious resurgence that we witness today across many different cultures and social movements empowers the individual and calls either for a more 'liberal' interpretation or a more socialist role for religion, both quite new phenomena in the history of religion in the public domain. Indeed such sociological studies have transformed our understanding of this history as a whole, by highlighting the fact that religion does not exist in a vacuum, and pointing to the importance of understanding the process of secularisation and/or de-secularisation as difficult to separate from larger, complex processes of urbanisation, industrialisation and modernisation.

The democratic myth

The third paradox that faces many researchers in that domain is that secularism is seen as a precondition for a democratic transformation that will guarantee civil liberties and bring equality to women and religious minorities.

Again, closer attention reveals a process in which such achievements were only procured in tandem with the rise of a state machine capable of manipulating popular choice in the event of elections. The state became the ultimate arbiter over who is democratic and who is not – the relatively recent Algerian débâcle providing a striking as well as a shocking example. If free elections bring into a position of authority people with strong religious convictions, who is to decide if they are a threat to democracy or not? Is preserving the status quo really more democratic than taking a risk that would give people more say in the future of their country? There is a further dimension which is more usually overlooked, and this is the way in which religious devotion creates a buffer zone between the state and the individual, where communions and communities provide a shelter and in many cases empower citizens. Especially in the Arab world, we might ask ourselves to what extent the separation between religion and politics might advance the power of the state apparatus at the expense of the citizen? We ought not to forget that the nation state not only claimed to be the supreme rational authority, but also presented itself as a moral agent, lifting the moral burden from the shoulders of the individual, a function whose consequences are thoroughly debated in moral philosophy.

Secularism necessitated the rise of the *secular state* ostensibly as the guardian of equal freedom of faith. But this gradually resulted in its appropriation of most of the functions once performed by religious institutions, communities, neighbourhoods and informal networks. Secularisation, in this sense, simply reflects a desire to disengage the individual from any form of communally-based understanding: the social regulation of every detail of life. To what extent might the public presence of religion protect, rather than undermine, personal freedom and privacy?

While common heritage and belief was seen by modernists as a hindrance to self-fulfilment, since the new-born individual should become 'responsible for his own fate' – one of the major achievements of modernity, Renaissance man, was liberated from these bonds only to fall under the mercy of the Leviathan state or the inhumane machine which is the market. Modernity has indeed expended much of its energy on fighting communities – those larger-than-life groupings into which people are born, in which it feared that they would be trapped for life. From the Enlightenment onwards, 'common sense' has dictated that human emancipation and the full release of human potential require that the bonds of community be broken and individuals set free from the circumstances of their birth.

But the development of the welfare state has seen a continual redrawing of lines between the public and the private sphere, between the state and civil society. This trend has opened to public debate matters previously confined to the private realm, as well as raising new questions about the relationship between man and God. The recent rise of multicultural and ethnic identities, as well as the emergence of many religious movements, has challenged former notions of democracy, introducing important new dimensions to the debate. In particular, it has raised the prospect of building a more deliberative democracy, one more informed by a politics of presence and participation than by simple representation, which draws on people's search for meaning and the celebration of difference, rather than the enforcement of a modular concept of citizenship.

So the question arises: if religion is one of the major sources of meaning and value, how then can we exclude it from such democratic debates and deliberations?

Challenges to an open debate

Let us say that we managed to address those myths and set the

stage for a more sophisticated understanding of what we are trying to formulate, namely a vision of the role and limitations of religion in the public sphere, one that tries to see where and how it can become a constructive force in active citizenship and civility in general. We will immediately find ourselves confronted by three challenges in the political domain in the Arab world that threaten to render this debate ineffective, lacklustre and intractable. There is little question that a serious debate on the role of Islam in the public sphere and the economic and political domain is very much overdue. Such a debate, whatever its outcome, should not have any pre-set limitations, though it has to be said that it is difficult to imagine any outcome which deprived religion of its public role being implemented, given the very religious mood of these cultures at large. Even so, there are three major obstacles to such a debate ever taking place.

Secularism confused with atheism

Many historians of secularism in Europe argue that it was not that people stopped believing in God and in the authority of the church first, and then started behaving differently; but rather that society first of all lost any overall social consensus as to the right ways to live together, so ceasing to be able to make sense of any claims to moral authority. This is not the case in many Islamic societies, where religious devotion is woven into its social norms, even in the case of the Christian minorities living within these societies. Moreover, Islam itself lacks a church in the institutionalised hierarchical sense that would enforce moral authority, leading to an individualist backlash from lay people. In many Arab countries what is at stake is not the right to disbelief as in Europe before the Enlightenment, but rather the right to belief and expressing one's religious devotion in the sociopolitical sphere, advocating social justice by employing a religious rhetoric.

Hence it is not secularism that is at stake, but religious freedom in the opposite sense – the freedom of people to turn Islam into a liberation theology against despotic regimes. When they do, even in the most pacifist way, they are accused of being terrorists and are subject to harassment, human rights violations, imprisonment and even death sentences by military courts. This was the case in Syria and Iraq, and still is the case in Egypt and Tunisia (the latter often described as 'soft dictatorships' simply because of their close economic relations with the EU).

No wonder that for many people, secularism has negative connotations. The most brutal regimes that the region has witnessed were secular: the Ba'ath in Syria and Iraq after independence. The strong religious mood among Muslims and Christians alike in the Arab region sees the separation between religion and politics as a form of heresy, almost an expression of atheism. This is a serious challenge to an open debate about secularism, no matter how the relationship between religion and politics is couched. This explains why the writings of many secularists have been received with extreme sensitivity and in some cases violent reactions, a response we consider neither appropriate nor useful. We will come on to how the debate needs to be reformulated beyond the dichotomy of state and religion, shortly.

Secularism imposed by neo-colonialism

The second obstacle to opening up the issue of secularism and the spaces for a religious legacy to debate in an appropriately complex manner, is the fact that the political rhetoric of the West since the colonial era has stressed secularism as a necessary precondition for modernisation.

Since the 19th century, many Islamic reformers have attempted to find a compromise and claim that Islam is not against modernity, which would mean that it is not in need of secularisation to become civil and progressive. The problem with such attempts was that they gave too much weight and centrality to the state in an era of

nationalist aspirations, leading to the current impasse in which we find ourselves caught between two bitter choices: accepting the authoritarian regimes and simply adding a religious rhetoric to their policies (policies that in many cases militate against the notions of justice, equality and transparency advocated by Islam); or go to the other extreme and struggle by all means, including violent ones, to establish an Islamic state drawing on a purely religious legality. This again is an option that cannot be traced to Islam itself as a religion. It constitutes rather a historically unprecedented Islamisation of the model of the nation state.

What cannot be discounted is that both these different forms loom large in the anti-colonial imagination. Before independence, the whole debate on Khilafa (the restoration of the Caliphate) among secular and Islamist intellectuals, as well as among political parties, that took place in virtually all Islamic societies, was linked to different notions and projects of national liberation and independence. The relation between Islam and politics, the Islamic ties with the Ottoman empire, as well as pan-Islamic and pan-Arab solidarity, was aimed at situating Muslim societies vis-à-vis the colonial powers. After independence, religion was manipulated by the state, and all religious endowment came under official control. Islamic universities and Islamic institutions became nationalised and the nation state deployed a very strong religious rhetoric in times of crisis to deflect attention from its direct responsibility for military and political disasters. Now, neo-colonialism and the rise of unipolar hegemony, as well as the over-militarisation of international relations has again aroused hostility to the policies of the West in Palestine and Iraq. As it was during independence in the middle of the last century, religion is again used as a foundation for resistance. The more the West advocates a secular version of Islam and stresses that Islam and democracy are incompatible, the more severe is the resistance to notions of secularism. A smooth transition to a stronger civil version of Islam is almost impossible to imagine in this hostile atmosphere.

Secularism merged with liberalism

At the moment the debate on religion and politics in many Western countries as well as in the Muslims world is shaped by a *liberal fundamentalist assumption*. A very specific republican strand of classical liberal political philosophy, especially its French version, is accepted as a precondition for democracy. This holds that all institutions internal to a democratic society must conform to a single authority principle and a single vocabulary of political discussion. Religion is routinely discounted, according to this secularisation hypothesis, as basically irrational, or a search for epistemological privilege. It is seen as a 'conversation stopper', irrelevant if not profoundly anti-democratic.

According to such liberals, citizens who are devout believers are obliged to translate every view stemming from their beliefs into a 'neutral', secular language. Only in this way is civic consensus achievable. But what if, instead of posing the question: 'How much religion can, or should, the polity tolerate?' we were to pose a very different question: 'What sort of political arrangements enable religion to play the constructive public role that religious commitments themselves demand?'

It makes no sense in the Muslim world to ask people to 'bracket' what they care about most deeply when they debate issues that are properly political, or the many rising social questions in a post-modern age that are very controversial and confusing – those to which people will naturally react by holding firmly to their religious values and their faith.

In this context let us remember the fact that liberal political theory did not start out as secular, and that such founding fathers as James Mill and John Locke had a very clear idea that liberalism could be founded on religious devotion and Christian notions of human dignity and equality. For them at least, individual rights and liberties are not necessarily a-religious or anti-religious. Civic virtues were seen as a civil and collective expression of Christian ethics, and

political obligation as very much linked with religious social commitment. To impose today a single model of liberal democratic politics means simply aggravating all these concerns and sensitivities in a negative way. That is why human rights activists and democrats in the Arab world are struggling with many challenges imposed, not just by their non-democratic opponents or authoritarian regimes, but also by monolithic liberal notions that refuse religion any public role.

Here we must also note the fact that this debate, at this historic moment, obscures the other face of liberal politics, namely the global capitalist economy. Debates on liberalism, freedom and secularism are usually isolated from the debates on the central role of the market – the other face of liberalism. How far can liberal ideas survive within a liberal economy is a serious question that has always been raised by many critics of liberalism as a confusing and sometimes even deceptive ideology. Why should Muslims accept the whole deal without having the right to tailor their own version of liberal ideals and civic virtues, rooted in their faith?

The fact that human existence and self-fulfilment are achieved in the capitalist market economy via consumerism and ultra-individualism, a path that has resulted in the commodification of human relations on many levels, is a serious challenge to the social and moral concepts of Islam as a religion of social, if not socialist, justice.

While human intellect was the central concern of modernity, a concern that endorsed the exclusion of religion from politics, gradually only the human body has remained the constant factor among all the changing realities and hybrid identities. This body, the material, tangible container, carrier and executor of all past, present and future identities, desires and material expectations, has triumphed over reason. Hence the process of secularisation did not result in empowering reason but fostering physicality, with citizens more concerned about the well-being of their bodies and their bodily desires than their concern about the body politic in an age of multiculturalism and globalisation.

Liberalism claims secularism as a guarantor of personal choice. Yet it can hardly be denied that capitalism has strongly absorbed *homo politicus* into the market economy to become a *homo economicus*. Utilitarian notions of rationality have overtaken the moral and social dimensions of human existence.

While the notion of citizenship is undergoing revision and reconstruction in current Western political theory, Arab secularists insist on placing their demands under the banner of 'equal citizenship', without offering any deeper explanation about what they mean by this, or what wider political democratic change they want to see, together with the social costs it might exact.

Islamic secularism: redesigning the matrix

There are voices in the Arab world which advocate a separation of religion and politics in both the intellectual domain and the political arena. What they want to see is a secular Islam shifting to the personal realm, and making way for structural adjustment programmes and privatisation, coupled with the democratic mechanisms of representative democracy.

What we suggest is rather different. We do not call for the word of God to be made subject to secular interpretations alien to Islamic hermeneutic methodology, or to jockeying definitions of national interest. We are no more keen to see Islam turned into a weapon in the hands of another puritan political elite that claims to be establishing an Islamic state, while adopting a vision of politics as authoritarian as those currently dominant in the Arab world.

Rather than secularising Islam, a third option must be put on the table, namely what we refer to as Islamic secularism. Instead of reducing Islam to a few rites and rituals, disclaiming its social and political dimensions, we see these as valuable assets in building an Islamic democracy which would be very much in demand. Islamic secularism is an orientation that explores the whole matrix of public and private spheres, asking how Islam is relevant to these, and what

type of authority it can exert in each. In some spaces, Islam will express itself as a moral ethos, while in others it has a legal contribution to make, and in a third category, it can become a vehicle for social change by inspiring social movements for peace, social justice or the liberation of women.

What is required to advance Islamic secularism is no less than a collective civil *ijtihad* (a process of juristic scholarly deliberation combined with constructive public debate to reach an overlapping consensus) which reshapes the whole debate concerning Islam and secularism to avoid the polarisation between traditionalists (whether fundamentalist or reformist) and secularists which currently prevails. For this to take place, there will have to be a shift in the debate's 'conceptual strategies', allowing us to break new ground .

Four concepts would allow us to rethink the complex effect of Islam in all its different realms of effectiveness:

1 The concept of *umma* has substantial authority within the process of religious deliberation and interpretation. The nation of Islam as created by the bond of faith plays an important part in defending the ethos of Islam and its ultimate values and aims. Shari'a, meanwhile, has often been portrayed as an esoteric legal system, a set of arcane secrets over which the class of clerics (mullahs) has a monopoly. Nothing in Islam and Islamic history could be further from the case. The relationship between scholars of Islam and lay Muslims is not one of authority and blind obedience, but is closer to a partnership whereby religious thinking is required to serve the spiritual and social needs of people, as well as educating and empowering them to advance their own knowledge of Islam in each fresh encounter with the experts. Lay Muslims have the right to debate and argue, to ask for explanations and request clarifications, thereby becoming rational adherents of the faith and fellow-protectors of Shari'a as a multilayered system of values, codes of ethics and behaviour, as well as legal opinions governing different aspects of daily life.

   Recently we have been developing such a practice into the idea of 'interactive *fatwa*'. If the *umma* was accorded equal authority with the Shari'a, we could start investigating the mechanisms through which the *umma* could facilitate both a grass-roots politics and a grass-roots *ijtihad*. Democracy would not then be regarded as an alien notion introduced by foreign powers in head-on defiance of Islam, but as the avenues of participation through which the *umma* with all its members – including non-Muslims – come together to engage in a prolonged and extensive exercise in what, in democratic theory, is nowadays referred to as the 'politics of presence', as distinct from the 'politics of representation'.

2 The second concept that needs to be introduced into the debate is a notion of 'civility' which encompasses civil society and civil activism. If the *umma* plays a part in civil society, can this civility include non-Muslims? The *umma* would have to have two dimensions: the religious dimension focusing on the bond of faith of Islam, and a civil dimension that acknowledges the equal citizenship of non-Muslims (mainly Arab Christians in the current Arab context) and Muslims.

   The status of minorities is one of the issues most frequently invoked by secularists as a reason for secularising Islam. Yet Arab Christians have their own religiosity, and in many Arab countries defend a strong link between religion at large and civic virtues and social norms. Having a multilayered definition of the *umma* would bring many concerns and questions into the horizon of our debate, instead of provoking a counter-argument that sees the marginalisation of Shari'a as the only way to guarantee equal citizenship.

3 The third notion that needs redefinition and reformulation is the concept of politics.

So far, much of the controversy has been confined to calls for the separation of church and state, or religion from politics. Such panaceas offer little in the way of solving the problems we face in the region. The Islamic imagination finds neither distinction relevant either to Islam or to its notion of politics. In Islam, we do not have a fixed notion of a formal church, or a theocratic state. What we should actually discuss is the nature of politics. Do we seek a politics of power in which the nation state has a monopoly over decision-making, legislation and executive authority, or a more everyday politics that could engage people in social and economic decision-making on all levels? In Islam, after all, there is a strong commitment to a politics of presence and local governance. Notions of justice and equality are interwoven into our rituals and daily practices. The defence of socio-economic rights is part and parcel of a religious devotion in which the notion of salvation is not individual as in Christian understanding, but rather collective. For us, salvation is embedded in civil engagement, and has something of the strong flavour of notions of democratic republican active citizenship.

So how can we 're-imagine' politics, and conceptualise civil society and civil liberties in a way that does not contradict religious devotion? This debate is gaining ground in many circles in the USA and Europe that are interested in democracy. Meanwhile, in our own societies, we should concentrate our energies on religious reform, and ask how Islam can defend notions of justice and equality, and what strategies Islamic jurists can deploy when it comes to questions of economic dependence or independence, the social implications of a market economy, alleviating poverty, protecting the environment, the morality of violence and the ethical ceiling of scientific discoveries.

This conceptual as well as sociopolitical logic of Islam neither gives the upper hand to the state apparatus, nor reduces the Islamic Shari'a to a penal code or a legal system. People are empowered to fulfil their religious–civic virtues by civil engagement and democratic participation. Equal citizenship is the backbone of this vision, fostered by a characteristic Islamic tolerance towards non-Muslims, as well a strong respect for personal privacy – a pillar of civil liberties. The challenge is thereby redefined. Instead of asking how to avoid the creation of an Islamic state, or indeed, how to advocate on its behalf, we can engage in a serious debate about that central plank in all theories of democracy – the relationship between the state and politics itself.

4 The last concept that needs to be interrogated is the notion of the state, a core element of modernity and secularism as hitherto conceived. The monopoly of the modern state over power in society, ranging from legal or political decision-making to the delivery of political socialisation and civil education tends to marginalise religion as a source of morality. But in an age of globalisation, this monopoly is fast becoming history. In many of the debates around secularising Islam, the notion of the state invoked is the strong nation state. But this is in retreat; instead we need to take seriously the emergence of new, complex notions of citizenship – multicultural and global.

Prevalent Islamist calls for establishing an 'Islamic state', are problematic, not because they envisage a resurgence of Islamic morality (hardly different from any religious morality) but because of the notion of the 'state' that is involved. Little attention has been given to the philosophical nature and logic of this 'state' as advocated both by the supporters as well as the opponents of the 'Islamic State', but it is not hard to infer from the various writings on this subject, that it is envisaged as a powerful central authority, bridging the public/private divide,

and controlling all aspects of the life of its citizens. Its 'totality' is not far removed from forms of totalitarianism. Without clear definition, Islamic governance in this form could all too easily slide into a form of authoritarianism. The minute this image of the 'state' became the focal point for Islamist political debate and mobilisation, organised groups such as Jama'at took upon themselves a distinctive and leading role in achieving such a vision. Their version explicitly spelt out the need for strict moral codes in attitudes, morals, behaviour and dress, as well as favouring a rather second-rate cultivation of populist forms of religiosity. This 'power-centred' statist paradigm opted sometimes for non-pacifist means, not because it was necessarily violent by nature, but to challenge the monopoly over the use of power by a Hobbesian nation state, a Leviathan that violated the basic human rights of its citizens. The inevitable clash of forces was political in essence, and can be compared to similar developments in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa or non-Muslim Asia.

Politics, viewed from such statist perspectives, is inextricable from issues of representation, quotas, and conflict. The rather different approach of the *umma* would help us develop an understanding of the politics of presence, deliberation, communication and negotiation in daily life, as well as the active role of women and minorities in local politics – in short, all those aspects easily overlooked where the focus is on political parties and loud-speaker political rhetoric. Though the analogy is rarely made, many current debates in the Muslim world on a democratic and progressive Islam are relevant to the debates about radical democracy and the reform of democracy in the Western world. It is amazing to us that these debates are never compared or networked.

Within that alternative paradigm, it would be possible to share with religious minorities in the region common concerns such as hybrid identities, shifting boundaries and loyalties, and family and community mores. It is not a matter of offering a moralist view versus a legal view of Islam and Shari'a. The major concern here is to explain how the centrality of the state, with its law and power politics, sets the agenda of debate in Muslim societies, restricting the Muslim mind to a narrow horizon of concerns that do not do justice to the rich complexity of Islam as a world view and a civilisation.

However, the Islamic State model has entered the imaginary not only of the wider non-organised forces of Islamic resurgence, but of a broader audience which is attracted to personal religiosity but which sees politics through the lens of that dominant Islamic discourse. Ironically, the very image of the nation state that inspired this vision of the future is now itself subject to emergent challenges, thanks to the domestic and international changes brought about by rapid globalisation.

Now we must add to our list of questions: will globalisation decrease or increase the role of religion in the public sphere? Is it the case that in this crisis of the nation state, many cultures may expect religion to return to fill the void of moral values as well as civic virtues?

Third-way Islam

After more than three decades of confronting the powers of the nation state in the Islamic world, 'Political Islam' is not much nearer to achieving its goals, compared with the scope and weight of the Islamic movements in society. When we asked ourselves why this is the case, we realised that we would have to seek an answer further afield than the political arena.

Young voices committed to Islam are now calling for self-criticism and revision, and a serious rethinking of the founding notions of this debate. Authoritative political concepts such as the 'Islamic State' need to be debated, and dominant reductionist definitions of Shari'a need to

be revised. Within the Islamic movements in Egypt, for example, no one, as yet, has gone so far as to call very vociferously for a new version of Islamic secularism that will protect religion and the *umma* against the state, rather than attempting to protect the secular state by secularising Islam. However, there is a gathering critique of the apparatus of the nation state and its limitations and paradoxes, and a search for new forms of political governance – new mechanisms for a political democratic presence that minimise the role of the state. Some of these experiments are actively taking place. They are occurring at an exciting time when global civil society as a whole is introducing many new concepts and arenas for an alternative politics. Islam is not at all isolated from the more general endeavour to empower local communities, as well as theorise about the nature and functions of the state in the new millennium and the age of globalisation, with all its unprecedented economic and social structures, relations and networks.

Islamic secularism, in retrieving from the state apparatus many functions such as moral guidance and education, local politics and civil activism, would redefine the public roles of religion as a force of empowerment and liberation. If the nation state is getting weaker we should remember that simultaneously the global capitalist market is getting stronger – threatening the independence, privacy and authority of citizens. Globalisation, the rise of the network society and the amazing opportunities that IT technology offers us, can empower us, not to take over state power, but to build communities and defend the politics of presence, along with a new mapping of the spheres of influence of the *umma* and the different spheres of Shari'a. These new responsibilities for Muslims today in an age when Islam is a global force, would take us beyond legalistic notions to form the basis of a democratic sociopolitical contract that aims to be as inspiring as the bond underlying the early city state of Islam, bearing in mind all the differences, but recapturing its humanist egalitarian logic.

Last but not least there should be an increasing effort on our part to deconstruct liberalism. Early liberal thinkers, such as James Mill and those who anticipated him in the Scottish and German Enlightenments, make interesting reading to many Muslims advocating a civil role for religion today. But they are swiftly repelled when liberal values are overridden by liberal economic utilitarian arguments based on narrow individual interests. While they may feel obliged to defend the ideas of human rights, cultural rights and social justice, they see 'secularising Islam' as too high a price to pay for being accepted into the family of democratic states or even 'civilised' global society.

Islam, for those of us who propound Islamic secularism, is a major source of liberation, equality and justice, not a heap of false legacies and authoritarian policies. It is a religion that can have a strong impact in cyberspace, connecting different parts of the *umma* directly at a time when we need to exchange experiences, develop visions for change, empower people and give them an equal say on the non-governmental international stage.

If we can put the debate about faith and politics on a new footing, we can look forward to a third-way Islam that could embark on a pacifist struggle for civil *jihad*, a *jihad* that would target neither the state nor the Other, but aim to win the fight over poverty and discrimination by expanding and empowering religion in a more civilised public sphere. This in turn means seriously considering that the road to eternity and paradise can start only by building an open and strong civil society that cherishes human integrity and dignity, a commitment that we see deeply rooted in the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, but one that has been long neglected because of the over-politicisation of Islam.

Beyond Church and State, both now losing ground and seeming more alien to Islam than ever, secularism need not be a stagnant concept. It can be subject to *ijtihad* (debating and innovation) like any other concept. But if in the meantime, secular dogmatism elicits a strong negative reaction in the Islamic world, jumping to the

conclusion that Islam itself is uncivil would be more than unjust. It would be a gross misinterpretation of a religion that denies the contradiction between reason and revelation; or human dignity, freedom, tolerance and diversity on the one hand and religious devotion on the other. If Islam could once more be recognised for what it is – a legitimate root of the imaginary of humanist egalitarianism – we can construct a different future; a future that would be counter to unjust hegemony and extremism.