

Secular Powers and Heretic Undercurrents in a God-Fearing Part of the World

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First of all, thank you very much for inviting me to this conference here. I was here, I think, 2011, or was it 2010 or 12? (Chair: Twelve.) It was the first conference of the network, I think... (Chair: Second.) Second! And I'm very happy to be here again. And I'm very happy about the conference theme today that is consciously about expanding the vision of what do we understand with non-religion or secularity beyond the assumption that Europe or Northern America would somehow be the normal case against which the rest of the world can be compared. In fact, a lot of good research has shown that Europe and North America, and especially their secularised parts, are rather a peculiar historical anomaly, that clearly stand out as exceptional and not the rule. So it is indeed time to provincialise secularity and understand what meanings, if any, secularity, religion and non-religion might have in a world where Europe and North America are politically powerful but nevertheless a quite culturally specific spot.

At the same time, it seems clear that whatever we call secularity or secularism, something that has to do with the different ways we name it, is going on in different parts of the world. But it is going on in ways that don't match with normative theories of what secularism should be. As a researcher who has worked anthropologically and to a lesser degree historically in Egypt and the Middle Eastern region for a while, I bring the bad news that in the Middle East, secularism is alive and kicking, but it [provides] the ground for extremely brutal and violent dictatorial regimes, such as Bashar Al-Asad's and his family's Syria, and Abdelfattah El-Sisi's Egypt, where the idea of fighting religious extremism and the claim to a secular nationalist, national unity, becomes the ground for states to exert the power over life and death of their citizens in the most reckless way.

Now, many people would argue that this is not real secularism, that this is not what secularism really is about. But then many socialists have said that whatever the Soviet Union was about was not what socialism really is about. And there are free market supporters who argue that whatever failures our contemporary economy has, are not failures of the free market because [a] real, proper free market would not do that. And followers of religious traditions often say that militants and mobs that commit acts of violence are in fact not acting out the real message of their religion. This is something that I have called in my previous research "grand schemes": the idea that there are principles, ideals, ideal entities that are larger than life, that are purer than practice, that they exist and they should inform our actions, and that these grander ideas in a way are undamaged by human failures in putting them in practice.

Secularism as a grand scheme in that sense is an idea that [from the point of view of those who express faith in it] is in itself perfect and flawless, but the ways in which humans put it in practice are flawed. This is very much the way we can also talk about religions. Today, I don't want to talk about grand-scheme secularism in a sense of ideas invested in secularism "as such", as a sort of political, moral, philosophical solution to the world's problems. I want to talk about its ordinary-life counterpart: the kind of dirty, lived

experience and practice, and the very question: to what degree and how is it useful to talk about experience, politics, moral struggles in Egypt in terms of secularity and the secular? And where does this word fall short of its capacity to understand whatever is going on?

I have a long history of being involved in a somewhat unnecessarily polemical debate with a school of studying secularism, which actually in my view is the best currently available approach to secularism. It's mostly associated with Talal Asad [and] his ground-breaking book *Formations of the Secular* [Asad 2003], also available in Turkish and Arabic translation[s] in the meantime, by the way. And it has been elaborated by his students and people in the circle of the tradition of research inspired by him, with important researchers such as Charles Hirschkind, Saba Mahmood, Hussein Ali Agrama, and many others who, together, have articulated a way to think of secularism or, as they prefer to say it, "the secular" as a form of subjectivation, as a regime of power . [As Farzana Haniffa] put it [in a talk she gave at [the] Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient in 2016], it's not a quantitative theory of secularism, it's not about how much or how little people believe or follow religious traditions, but it's [a qualitative theory] about how and what kind of attitudes, affects, relationships, forms of discipline, or forms of ethics, are being produced. It's very much inspired by the late work of Foucault, which is about power not simply as an external discourse that disciplines people, but also as a form of self-discipline.

This has proven to be a very helpful approach for a number of reasons. The first reason is that it is one of the few theories of the secular that I know that does not try to tell what secularism should be, but [one that] tries to understand what secularity or the secular in a specific historic trajectory has been, or is becoming. It's often [a] quite critical theory, especially in research on Europe. It is about questioning certain secular assumptions, and questioning the taken-for-granted nature that they often have in Western political debates. Asad's theory of the secular has been especially useful in understanding the often-strange twists of the political societal debates about Islam and Muslims in Europe, [for example] why women's covering dress becomes an issue of such nationalist anxieties and concerns in many Western European countries.

Nadia Fadil, who is in my opinion one of the best researchers working in this tradition in Europe, has studied unveiling [Fadil 2011]. Her argument is that just as veiling is an embodied sartorial practice, where women learn to embody certain kinds of affects, a certain sense of shyness, a certain sense of modesty, a certain caution about one's own appearance: so is unveiling or not veiling also a similarly ethical practice, especially in a Muslim context where there are moral expectations that women might or even should veil. In this case, not wearing a covering dress is not a natural absence of a discipline, but it is another discipline. It is a different discipline that has a set of ethical aims, techniques, procedures and material forms, as does the religious practice of veiling.

Interestingly, this tradition has produced some of its most important theoretical contributions based on a place that might not be thought of as the most paradigmatic place to study secularism, namely Egypt. Egypt is a thoroughly God-fearing, pious country, where the Muslim majority largely is committed to the word of God, His message to Muhammad, and various ways to live and follow this message. A minority of Christians are committed to salvation in Christ and ways to reach salvation in the framework of the

community of the Church. Very few people would not be one or the other. I did a research about people who call themselves nonreligious, *ladini*, in late 2000s and it was difficult to find any, and I actually gave up on that research because I felt that it was a dead end in a society where both [the] strivings to live a God-fearing life, [as well as] also discontent about the God-fearing life, mostly found their expression within religious traditions, and not outside them. Meanwhile things have changed a bit, and I'm going to come to that at the end of my talk. [Correction: I did not come to that at the end of the talk. The lecture notes mention the rise of atheism as an urban bourgeois movement in Egypt after 2011, but I did not take it up in the lecture.]

In such a God-fearing society, nevertheless, Talal Asad, Hussein Ali Aghrama, [and] Saba Mahmood in what sadly became her last book because of her untimely death, have taken up Egypt as a case of a secular state. Not because Egypt would be a state where God is absent or where the question of religion doesn't arise in politics, but because God is present in the Egyptian state, and religion is an issue in politics in a way that is subordinated to the primacy of the nation state, and to the primacy of the sovereign state, which [in Egypt] is something else than the liberal theory of sovereignty. The liberal theory of sovereignty is one thing, [while] in Egypt the Egyptian regime talks about *baybat al dawla* [which translates as "the authority of the state", but also as "the ability of the state to instill dread and awe"], it basically means the right of the state [or more specifically: the security apparatus of the state] to do whatever it wants. So this is a more Hobbesian sovereignty. In that context, Hussein Ali Agrama [2012] has made a very interesting argument saying that there is a long academic and political debate whether Egypt is a secular state or not. It's an unanswerable question, he says, because secularity is a problem-space, it's a way to question, to be doubtful, to problematise certain relationships of power. So secularism is not an answer, he says, it's a problem. [To clarify: a problem in the sense of a question that calls for an engagement and a search for answers, not in the sense that there would be something wrong.]

This was to give a quick overview of some of the most important advances of a research program that in my opinion has made [it] possible to think of secularity and secularism or the secular, whatever you want to call it, as an object of study in historical, cultural context; as a specific, concrete configuration that has content, that has traditions. It's mostly about liberal secularism. The Asadian tradition has not spent much effort yet to study socialist secularism, for example, which in contrast to liberal secularism [more often] went along with a dramatic decrease in religious faith. Their work is more on liberal secularism and I think that has to do with the framework of research, which is in Western European societies where liberal secularism has to deal with all kinds of complex anxieties about Muslims in Europe.

I've been involved in a long, somewhat unnecessarily polemical debate with this tradition. My main problem has been that it's a bit too mystifying. If you read Asad's [2003] book, [the] secular is a concept that has a history. A few books later, by other people, it turns into a historical force. Right now there is a new book [in press] which I haven't been able to read yet, but the description describes the secular as an "entity" [Scheer et al. 2019]. So the secular turns from a concept with a history into a historical force, into a sort of almost metaphysical being. Interestingly, the first wave of this research at the same time had a remarkable hesitance to talk about a key issue, which is faith. The question of faith was somewhat side-

lined, [based on the methodological perspective that] said: first of all this is not a question about whether people are religious or not, it is a question about what kind of affects are being cultivated with the support of nation-states.

I found this a little problematic because I felt that the key issue of secularity in monotheist context was being side-lined, namely the question of how and what kind of relations do humans have with God? Some people might actually become unbelievers. In the Middle East this is very rare; what is more common is that the power relationship which humans have with God shifts, and humans claim more power for themselves.

Saba Mahmood, in her last work, luckily came up and fixed this problem. Some of this elusiveness and vagueness becomes much clearer if we read her last chapter of her last book about Christians in Egypt and sectarian difference in a secular age [Mahmood 2016], where she talks about the debate that was caused by *Azazazel*, a novel by Youssef Ziedan [2012], an Egyptian novelist, that plays in Alexandria in the early Christian era, where there are lots of battles about different heretic movements and the church. [The novel] describes a theory of Christ that was apparently current in those days [and] that the Orthodox church rejected. The [Coptic] Orthodox church quite strongly objected to the depiction of Christ in this novel. Mahmood argues that in this debate, I cite her, [we encounter]

“two incommensurable understandings of religion: one in which humanity itself provides the values and models of human flourishing against which the contributions of religious tradition are to be measured and judged; and another wherein human existence must be molded in accord with the dictates of a transcendent god.” [Mahmood 2016: 182]

A few pages later, even clearer:

“We can perhaps at this point begin to get sense of the different meanings of the term *humanity* in Christological debates and in *Azazazel*: in the former, the humanity of Jesus is a medium for God’s Word, whereas in the latter, the humanity of Jesus is a symbol of man’s capacity to create truth and meaning. The second view wrests power from God and locates it in man. This secular-humanist conception of religion offends Bishoy [who was a Christian bishop who was arguing against the book] (as it would Muslims of similar sensibility) because it fundamentally reverses the epistemological basis of religion: it is not God who creates us, but we who create him.” [Mahmood 2016: 204]

So this brings back the issue of the relationship between humans and God, which is the fundamental ground of monotheistic traditions. Any attempt to make sense of secularity in a monotheistic context without talking about God creates an absence of a crucial absence. Saba Mahmood brings back this absent question.

However, let me come back a bit to my tradition of disagreement with part of this research tradition. I think that it is a very important step, but there is a problem and this is what the second half, or actually the main part of my talk today will be about, which is that this is a binary vision. The vision that Saba Mahmood presents here is one in which either a Creator God commands over humans and humans learn to live, act, desire, feel, hope, and fear, following the commands of the Creator God, *or* one in which a secular humanity creates God and puts into Him and reads into Him whatever humanity finds good for themselves. Both stances definitely exist. No question. But is this a good description of the various ways in which people in Egypt today try to relate with God, especially approaches that seem to be secular?

Based on my own fieldwork in Egypt, which in the last years I have conducted with literary writers in

Alexandria, which is one of the most secular milieus you could find in a God-fearing society like Egypt, I would say [that] even in literary milieus where it might be possible to find people to have actual materialist worldviews – [where] you might find actual nonreligious people sitting in cafés and debating these issues – even there this is a minority opinion. So I would agree that some secularism indeed is a cover for having faith in humans instead of God. Because this is the juxtaposition that Mahmood draws: it's either humanity wresting power to itself, or God having the power. In other words, it means the other position is an atheist position. If God is a human creation, that's as atheist as it can get. And some secularism really is a cover for having faith in humans but not in God. Because it's a way to make legitimate arguments without the discussion stopping. But I think it's only true of some. I don't think it's true of the Egyptian state. I think the Egyptian state is not only strategically playing around with religion, I think Egyptian state officials to a large part actually believe that they have a divine mission to defend the nation against its enemies. And many people I know who sympathize with various sorts of secular ideas about society and politics often try to cultivate a relationship with God who is definitely not god the human product, but very clearly the omnipotent Creator God.

A very interesting clue for understanding this comes from the work of Armando Salvatore [2008], and Emanuel Schaeublin [2016], who have been thinking of ethical relations as triadic relations. Triadic relations in the sense as, for example, in Emanuel Schaeublin's work on alms-giving in Nablus in Palestine. Almsgiving is an Islamic obligation. If I give somebody alms, I at the same time give to God and God will reward me. Almsgiving is a relationship in which my relation with the other person is always also a relation which I and the other person have with god. God is the fundamental arbiter, the witness, the judge of that relation. And the same works not only in alms-giving, but also in polite greetings, in acts of justice and in acts of injustice. Ethical relations are in that sense not individualistic; they are also not communal, collective in the sense that they would be based on some kind of collective entity (as this old-fashioned idea of individualistic versus collective societies would say), but they are based on the idea that an ethical act is a relationship of three, where God is always involved in [the] conversation.

Whoever tries to learn Arabic knows that learning Arabic includes learning to speak with God. If I offer somebody, like “please, have a seat”, and they say “may God reward this well to you”: *Allah yikballik*. [Correction: I confused two different greetings. The correct translation is “may God keep you” or “may God protect you.”] Some of these are formulaic expressions that people just say like that, but even if they're formulaic, they performatively make God part of the conversation. And very often they are not just formulaic, people really mean them, they cultivate them, they use the longer version in order to be actively in this relationship of communication. [Using the longer version of a greeting also brings more divine reward.]

What secularisms in different ways do is that they transform this triadic relation, where[by] some of the power of God over humans becomes individualized. Some of the power that God has over how humans relate to each other becomes restricted. God may have power over certain relations but not others. And this is often what secularism is understood to be in a place like Egypt: the idea of separation of religion from politics, which means that there are certain matters of the common good, of public life, that are

subject to democratic deliberation, and not necessarily grounded in searching God's answers.

There is a tendency from triadic relations to[wards] binary relations where nevertheless at the same time I can cultivate a very intense relationship of worship and faith. This is also not simply either triadic or binary. We see, for example, that many contemporary secularists are up against public religion not because they are against public religion as such, but because they are against certain values, such as heteronormative family relationships, or ideas of sectarian closure, which they reject. But if communities under God come together to help refugees and poor people, they find it good. So actually then, [they are not] against public religion [in general]. On the other hand, you also have a form of right-wing secularism where people might be opposed to what they see as extremist movements whose solidarity is based on something that is alien to the nation, and therefore they must be fought and killed. But at the same time, they [i.e. the followers of right-wing secular ideas] are certain that God will support their nation [in] wars against its enemies. Again, some community-constitutive relations, some politics-constitutive relations, are accepted and others rejected. So it's very much also about the question what God wants, and how humans react to that, and what kind of requirements they recognise, and what kind of requirements they problematise.

So, this is my attempt to elaborate Saba Mahmood's way of bringing God back into the study of secularism. [Her approach] makes a lot of sense, but I think it's helpful to think about it in a non-binary way. Also because there are ways of being secular that have more to do with life-worldly experience: the question how much in my intimate relations, how much in my sexual life, how much in my way of thinking about marriage, how much in my imagination of what kind of future I want to have for me do certain authoritative ideas of God and tradition influence my ways of doing that?

[Correction: This sounds like I would be slipping back to a quantitative theory of secularism, which I did not intend to. The above question can and should be asked as a "how" question as well.]

[That question concerns what] I would call *life-worldly secularism*, or secularity. Another one is the question of how do regimes like the Egyptian regime try to incorporate religious reasoning under and within the sovereignty of the Egyptian state, such as by maintaining very powerful religious institutions that have a requirement of loyalty, but a certain independence such as al-Azhar and the official religious hierarchies, or the way the tradition of Shari'a (which is not a code, you know there is no lawbook of Shari'a)... how the Shari'a is translated into positive law in a country like Egypt. That would be what could be called *governmental secularism*, which has a different framework.

So far so good, but does this give a sufficient account, when we start to think about not relationships of governance, but relationships of power that exist between humans and God in complex often triadic relationships? Is religion, or [the] secular, or non-religion a sufficient framework?

An interesting case here is the affair that began in the early 1990s about the work of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, a professor at the University of Cairo whose tenure was denied because his colleagues claimed that he was writing against Islamic faith and its basic tenets. He wrote a number of books where he proposed a hermeneutic approach on reading Islamic scripture, that is, the Qur'an. His basic argument is that the

Qur'an is a divine revelation in human historical context, and that's why the divine revelation can only be understood from within the human historical context. Basically he maintains the idea of the divinity of the Qur'an but insists that its interpretation is always a human, wilful act. Which in a way is a blow against the idea that there's an orthodox correct reading. If we follow Abu Zayd there is no such thing as a correct reading, because every reading is historically based in a certain situation.

Charles Hirschkind, who is an influential student of Talal Asad, wrote an interesting article in 1996, shortly after the affair of Abu Zayd, after Abu Zayd had been officially declared an infidel by an Egyptian court, forced to officially divorce his wife [Correction: His marriage was declared null and void by the court], and had to leave Egypt [and] move to the Netherlands. Hirschkind's article reads through [Abu Zayd's work] against the grain. He argues that what Abu Zayd does is thoroughly and deeply grounded in a secular, modernist idea of humanity, a form of reason that is alien to the traditions of Muslim scholarly religious reasoning that has been established in a long-standing discursive tradition. [Hirschkind's] argument is that Abu Zayd refers to the Qur'an, claims to speak about Islam, but his argument is not part of the traditional way in which an Islamic argument is made. It is actually a dissimulation:

“...his call for Muslims to continue to interrogate the Qur'an may best be understood as a tactical response to the social context of his writings and thus accessorial to the argument itself.”
(Hirschkind 1996: 469)

Hirschkind says basically [that] Abu Zayd wants to dethrone God, turn the Qur'an into a text like any other that can be read like any other, and [that Abu-Zayd] is arguing it as a hermeneutic reading of the scripture, because that is a way to get away with it in Egypt.

That's a tough argument that stops short of agreeing with the detractors of Abu Zayd who were saying that he was an infidel. And indeed, Charles Hirschkind sees at work here a historical secularising project. Abu Zayd belongs to this secularising project, or what Hirschkind calls

“...the now long-standing project that seeks to reorganize the conceptual and material structures organizing the daily practice and experience of nonwestern peoples.” (Hirschkind 1996: 474)

[In other words:] an imperial project to turn Islam into something else than what it historically is. Many Egyptian academics [of secularist orientation] were furious about this. Abu Zayd had faced grave injustice for his writings, was banished from Egypt, and here comes somebody who basically is delegitimising his argument.

But let's take Hirschkind seriously. What is true and what is not about his argument? One part of it is true. The kind of liberal hermeneutics that Abu Zayd represents indeed stands firmly in the modernist secular tradition. No question about that. Key ideas, key techniques of inquiry that he brings in, are in that sense contemporary imports. Second, his work indeed has been co-opted by cultural policies in the West, where there has been an enormous interest to support what is called “liberal Islam”, that actually has fairly few

followers, but is very highly mediated, because it is the kind of plurality, the kind of religious others that we like. It's much nicer to have plurality with other people who are actually not that different.

So far so good, but I still think that Hirschkind mistakes Abu Zayd and does injustice to him. [Abu Zayd's] work is ambiguous. It can be read and it has been read by people who are not believers in God as a subversive way to question the validity of the Qur'an and its power over people. Some people have read it that way. It *can* be read that way. But a lot of people, a lot of his readers in Egypt and elsewhere in the Muslim world have not read it that way. They have explicitly read it as a way to live their tradition, as a way to relate to the word of God, to God's ultimate message to humanity, in a way that makes sense for them. A lot of Abu Zayd's readers *have* read him as a way to be part of the tradition, and this is something that Hirschkind's critique of Abu Zayd doesn't include.

What Hirschkind's critique of Abu Zayd also doesn't include is that Abu Zayd relies heavily on contemporary modernist liberal thought, but not exclusively. Abu Zayd also insists on a crucial Muslim theological principle which is the *i'jaz*, the miraculous nature of the Quran. The *i'jaz* doctrine says that the Quran is inimitable, it has a miraculous beauty that humans cannot possibly reproduce, and this is a proof of its divine nature. Abu Zayd subscribes to the [doctrine of] *i'jaz*.

[Clarification: Abu Zayd draws upon early Muslim linguists and interpreters of the Qur'an to argue that the miraculous inimitability of the Qur'an is an effect of specific linguistic, stylistic, rhetorical and melodic characteristics that can be studied and analysed, and which were perceived by early audiences of the Qur'an through a comparison with other textual genres. Abu Zayd builds his argument upon a long-standing tradition of Muslim scholarship, but his conclusions differ: For Abu Zayd, the Qur'an as a text is both unique as well as comparable, and the recognition of its inimitability is the outcome of a human engagement with the text (Abu Zayd 1991: 137-157). Hirschkind would likely argue that this is a secularised or de-sacralised version of the *i'jaz* doctrine, and I would agree with him about that. However, it is not the same as saying that the Qur'an is a human text like any other.]

If you subscribe to *i'jaz* then you cannot be said to claim that it's a text like another. The *i'jaz* is the thing that marks the Quran as *not* a text like any other, even if it can be studied by the same means.

So Abu Zayd's work is hybrid. It's hybrid, it's ambiguous, it's open to different readings. It's open for pious readings *and* it is open also for very impious readings. If we try to reduce it [to] one or the other, [it would be] the typical mistake that results from a binary theory that tries to understand the relationship of a godly life or a less godly life in the juxtaposition of two ways to be in the world, or two ways to subjectivise, the religious and the secular.

Abu Zayd's work is perhaps something else and [the title of] Hirschkind's article interestingly points at what it is, but strangely, I don't know why, he doesn't refer to the title anywhere in the article. The article is called "Heresy or hermeneutics?" And my reading of Hirschkind is, but I might be wrong, that he would go towards the direction of saying that it is heresy. But heresy is not external; heresy is not something that

is not part of the tradition. Heresy is dangerous because it's an internal threat to an orthodoxy. It's helpful to think of orthodoxy in terms of Talal Asad, who, at least in my reading of his work, interprets orthodoxy as a relationship of power, where one party, one tradition, one line of thinking is able to successfully claim that their reading is the correct, objective, right understanding. In a religious tradition of monotheism, an orthodox tradition is that which can credibly say [i.e. can successfully claim] that this is what God and the prophet wanted to say. I very much look forward to the other keynotes that will also provincialise monotheism, but we stay here in a monotheist context. Heresy in a monotheist context is an unauthorised relationship with God. It might be novel, and it often includes borrowings, hybrids, syncretisms. The threat that comes from heresy is that it does not abide by the [border]lines of traditions. It is not an outsider, an other towards which we can have a fairly relaxed attitude, [such as:] "You say that because you're Christian. Well, whatever."

Heresy in fact is very much part of what Asad called a "discursive tradition", the kind of tradition of humans trying to figure out what is the correct way to read and live by the word of God. The creation of an orthodoxy, the successful claim about what is the correct way, is always followed by a shadow of other ways that do not manage to make themselves the correct ones. Abu Zayd's work is heretic in that sense that it is a way to read, to live by the tradition that for a lot of the readers is understood as a positive way to live by the tradition of Muhammad's message, [but it] goes against the grain of what at this historical moment is the orthodox reading. In which case, the fact that [Abu Zayd] partially stands in the secular tradition [provides for a partially true account; but without taking into account other dimensions of his work, it] becomes an insufficient way to understand heresy.

So there we come to the other part of the title [of this lecture]. When we talk about "secular powers and heretic undercurrents", "secular powers" provides an understanding of certain things. Secular powers are good to understand some stuff, and not good enough to understand heretic undercurrents, the kind of shadow, or in a more positive sense, the halo that surrounds any tradition that tries to produce an orthodoxy. However, I think "heresy" is maybe a somewhat [too] polemical way to put it. Because what characterises heresy is the idea that it's judged to be wrong. Heresy has this air of being persecuted, of being controversial. All true of Abu Zayd. But there is a whole field of spiritual experimentation, curiosity, imaginary moves that don't try to formulate doctrine in the first place. What about them? Maybe heresy is not quite the right term for them as well.

I'm right now reading a very interesting book by Alireza Doostdar [2018] called *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam and the Uncanny*. I can very much [recommend] this as a reading. It's about the lively culture of spiritual experimentation, search for the unseen, for the invisible, that is going on in Iran after the Islamic revolution. It has a long pre-history, which is often very hybrid, bringing together Shia Muslim traditions, veneration of the friends of God, long-established Muslim techniques of divination, Islamic theologies of the *jinn* and the unseen. The unseen is a fundamental part of Islamic faith, it's even part of the commonly understood basic creed: being a Muslim includes not only believing in God and prophets, but also in *jinn*s and the invisible. At the same time [the metaphysical explorations studied by Doostdar are] also bringing together New Age religiosities, older spiritualist traditions from the West,

Hollywood cinematic imagination, the whole cultivation of a certain rise in urban culture.

Alireza Doostdar is careful about not framing these movements as a resistance or a counter-hegemonic space vis-à-vis the Islamic republic. [Framing them as resistance] would be appealing, but actually lots of these people have an ambivalent relationship with the Islamic republic. They are not necessarily oppositional. Sometimes they avoid talking about politics. More interesting, he says, [is that] Iranian anti-clerical secularists, the Islamic republic and these metaphysical movements, they all share, in different combinations, an interest for the unseen and a great concern for rationality. Many of these metaphysical movements are very concerned about being scientific in their approach to the *jinn* and the invisible. Just like the anti-clerical secularists ridicule popular superstitions, and the Islamic republic's establishment is trying to fight popular superstition, [so] also the metaphysical seekers want to say that [what they're doing] is not popular superstition. There is a shared way to bring the unseen and rationality together.

Alireza Doostdar makes an interesting argument that [metaphysical exploration is] a sort of social avant-garde space of experimentation. He talks about the uncanny not so much in the Freudian sense, but in the sense of unsettling experiences, where things that seem familiar become strange. He says that he is studying

“...the ways in which the uncanny arouses curiosity, even (or perhaps especially) as it instills a sense of dread. This approach allows me to examine metaphysical inquiries as avant-garde practices that lie at the forefront of societal shifts and provide useful diagnostics of larger transformations.” (Doostdar 2018: 21)

So if you want to look at what is new and developing in the Islamic republic of Iran, maybe don't look at those bourgeois anti-clerical secularists, look at the people who are trying to figure out the scientific reality of *jinn*s, because there a space of often surprisingly rationalist explorations is going on.

This is congruent with what I have seen in Egypt in the last years after the failed revolution. After 2011 there's been an increasing diversification of ways in which people live their faith and approach God. Scripturalist, discipline-oriented practices that are about the ethics of living a good, God-fearing life towards going to paradise, still are the most powerful way of being Muslim in Egypt. But they have become paralleled, complicated and diversified by more spiritual experimentation. There is a revival of Sufism, Islamic mysticism. Sufism has become extremely productive across the range. It's promoted by the Egyptian regime because it's considered to be loyal. And most Sufi movements are very loyal, so it's good to keep in mind that the kind that might seem like the “good Muslims” from the point of view of Western analyses, often are supporting some of the most violent regimes. But [Sufism also appeals to] many people who used to be revolutionary supporters. Even [some] people who used to be Muslim brotherhood supporters are now drawn to Sufism and are citing Sufi poetry, sometimes more in the traditional sense, and sometimes in a very eclectic sense.

I'm going to conclude today with a poem which in my view is a good example of the kind of explorations

that attempt to make sense – or perhaps not make sense, but poetically address reality in a way that tries to not get stuck in binaries. [Motivating them] seems to be also a certain kind of political spiritual desire in a very polarised social situation. How can we explore the world, explore existence in a way that is not polarised? A friend of mine in his early 30s, a leftist guy from a rural area, conventionally religious, occasionally praying, wrote this poem in 2015. It's called "The delicate regress by the Sheikh and comrade" – my translation:

Those who have a heart, pay attention!
people's hearts have colours
and colours have taste and energy
and the scent of the soul precedes.
Always use your souls...
And do not lean on your bodies,
for the senses have their detestable limits.
Drink,
watch,
read,
play,
and fulfill your lives with them...
upon you there is no fear, and you will not grieve

(This is an indirect citation from the Qur'an about the friends of God: "upon them there is no fear and they will not grieve")

Welcome the morning with the enthrallment it has for you...
stand by the side of your souls while you are in love...
make singing prayer
and invocation music
and drink the voices... don't listen.
Fill your thirst with the voice of the night
and improve your relationship with things,
dogs,
flowers,
buildings,
time,
your mobile phones,
your beds,
your libraries;
your souls are the first to be adjusted,
master the expanse around you without arrogance or vanity, with all singing of praise that may
be... with the mastery of the seekers of higher love...

wrap in the lights of your soul the weakness of your senses and ascend, move away from
propositional procedures,
return to your first path,
examine yourselves with longing and burning love,
be friends with the sun,
the winds,
the water,
and the fire,
recline on the four directions and what is above them,
do not fear the sky...
love it...
depart towards it every moment...
do not worship God... love Him passionately...
let Him cast upon your brains His radiant light...
do not ride horses...
unite with their backs while you are fasting,
feel their desire to race, and race...
get drunk with the wine of flirtation
and beware of getting tired...
Choose the words in their right place...
Light does not suit in place of radiance,
love has senses other than passion and longing,
grace is not the same as beauty,
the heart is one thing and the cardiac organ another,
drinking does not mean filling of thirst...
do not stand at the doorsteps of words...
craving foils desire.
Do not give up your divine graciousness,
and do not lose your balance to pretentious tension...
There is no fault in universe other than the corruption of souls.

By Bassem Mohamed Abu Gweily [2016: 119-122] from his collection of poetry that was recently published. I can show it around to the Arabic readers; the original is better. [You can read it [here](http://samuliegypt.blogspot.com/2018/07/this-text-by-poet-bassem-mohamed-abu.html)<http://samuliegypt.blogspot.com/2018/07/this-text-by-poet-bassem-mohamed-abu.html>] I wrote to him and I said: "Can I quote this in a lecture I'm giving about secularism? I try to argue that there's a space of experimentation that doesn't fit into the binary of religion and non-religion." And he said: "Yeah, that's exactly what we're trying to say." So I have my interpretation of his poem authorised.

There's much to interpret here. There is a whole amount of Islamic and Sufi allusions of a search for experience [in the poem]. I can't get into the details of it; the important and interesting thing is the conscious search for a space of exploration and experience which he calls a regress, moving backwards

from what he calls propositional means of communication. And of course, it's escapist. You could say: this contains no political programme to change the world in the hydro-carbon age. And that is one of the interesting features of this kind of spiritualities. They often do not contain a political programme, which in the situation [in Egypt] after 2011 is quite interesting: that many of the most politicised people got into this. I don't know exactly how to place this because it's all in process. You have this spiritual proliferation and diversification, and it is not what is called in the US and Western Europe "spiritual but not religious", because these people would usually quite clearly identify themselves as Muslim or Christian. It's religious in spiritual ways that do not attempt to articulate orthodoxy or correct practice. So in a sense they are not committed to the discursive tradition of trying to understand what is the correct practice. They recognise that there is correct practice, but they are after something else. And this "something else" is societally productive right now and is leading - I don't know where.

[This] is what I originally called "heretic undercurrents", as that what cannot be understood by the religious-secular binary. Although meanwhile I'm not so sure if "heretic" is the right word, because so much of the stuff that Doostdar describes and that people like Bassem Abu Gweily make, is not heretic in the sense that it would be against orthodoxy. It has altogether different concerns.

A final word is that this is, I think, helpful to think of this kind of movements as a shadow or halo of discursive traditions or of discursive formations, powerful configurations of subjectivity, in the sense [the latter] kind of strivings produce more than they expect. They create an excess. A very Sufi thought: that there is an excess, something that goes over the discursive and the rational. Which is never unlimited. It's not a free fantasy people can just embark on. Fantasy is quite limited because it's based on socially available means. But all traditions that try to produce certain ways of living, they create strivings, desires, ideas that exceed their original scope of striving. Any attempt to understand disciplinary subjectivation projects, needs to also pay attention to the excess such projects produce. That excess is the kind of third ground that we need to understand beyond religion and non-religion. Thank you.

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