Migration and Religion
Christian Transatlantic Missions,
Islamic Migration to Germany

Edited by
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David Gramling

“YOU PRAY LIKE WE HAVE FUN”:
TOWARD A PHENOMENOLOGY OF SECULAR ISLAM

Abstract

Despite the commonplace nature of such terms as “secular Judaism” and the near synonymous relationship between modern secularism and classical liberal Christianity, there exists little discourse about “secular Islam.” One speaks of the “dynamic tension between Islam and secularism” or of split identities and loyalties between the two poles, but almost never of the possibility of secularity and Islam existing together, unproblematically, within the same civic subjectivity. While critiquing the distinction between secularity and laicism in the Turkish context, the article pursues a provisional, phenomenological explication of this dilemma and suggests why a conceptualization of secular Islam is ultimately necessary for European and German discourses about religion and civic culture.

Allow me to begin with a bit of self-disclosure, and a bit of participant-observation. While I was living in Ankara, Turkey (2008–2010), a colleague of mine invited me to his home one Friday evening for a “bite to eat”—which, in Turkey, meant a 5000-calorie blow-out that would completely throw off my post-Christmas dieting regimen. Mehmet (as I will call him) and I had students in common; I had met his wife Lale a few times before, and we had all hit it off nicely. And so I threw my diet to the wind and accepted their kind invitation.

I arrived with a few other mutual colleagues. We met his 13-year-old son and were encouraged to give him advice about the world. Then the son was summarily shooed back to his bedroom for the night to do homework, which is when Lale, Mehmet’s wife—who for me was the spitting image of Ankara cosmopolitan chic: a staunch Republican Kemalist, a feminist with no headscarf or any other

1 The title to this essay is a direct reference to Ayşe Saktanber’s essay “‘We Pray Like You Have Fun’: New Islamic Youth in Turkey between Intellectualism and Pop Culture.” In: Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey. Eds. Deniz Kandiyoti, Ayşe Saktanber. London 2002, pp. 254–76.
demonstrably modest sartorial choices, and a person with ten times more nervous energy and social intuition than I could ever hope to have — set the table (all twenty platters of it) for a party of eight, without anyone noticing she was no longer among us, in the foyer of their little apartment.

By the time we the guests had taken our first bites of delicious food at the dining room table, the raki (anise-flavored liquor) had been poured, and most of the guests were getting out their first cigarettes. And this is how we spent the next five hours: sitting, smoking, jumping up from the table in genuine excitement — or feigned disgust — about something someone had said about U.S. President George W. Bush, or Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

By 10 o’clock, there was no more foreign policy left to talk about, and most of the men had moved into the salon for a third nightcap and to start dozing inconspicuously in recliners or on the sofas. Meanwhile, the women had taken the opportunity to adjourn to the kitchen for more wine, and more cigarettes, and some nominal tidying up. And so I said to myself: should I sink into a recliner along with the other men? Or, go find out what the news is among the women in the kitchen? I sheepishly let myself through the kitchen door — and was greeted with outstretched arms and a glass of the reserve red wine that the hostess had been saving — for when the men, predictably, would doze off in the salon. And what happened next is why I have been telling this story. After I had sufficiently demonstrated that I could be in the women’s social space without disrupting its aura and texture, everyone just went back to telling stories, and taking me in as an honorary confidant(e) for the evening. Now: I had concluded, early in the evening — badly concluded, it turns out — that I was in the home of a secular, perhaps antireligious family that staked its understanding of leisure, pleasure, and virtue on an epicurean cosmopolitanism that was fundamentally at odds with Sunni Islam as I understood it. It was my first year living in Turkey and I was prone to such categorical misinterpretations.

So there we were, in the smoky kitchen, all pretty tipsy at 11pm and still holding full glasses of wine, and the most startling thing happened in the room. Someone mentioned Allah, in more than a rhetorical way. I can’t remember who did first. But I don’t think it was me.

Now, one might imagine that the invocation of Allah — not as a conversational device, as in “Allah Allah!” (“For God’s sake!”), but rather as a divine Being — i.e., that Allah for whom there is no other Allah but Allah, the most Gracious, the most Merciful — one might imagine that there would occur some shift of habitus, some affective, or sociolinguistic reorientation in this particular kitchen at this particular time. That we would be called to some kind of order, of piety, of moderation, or observance. This did not happen. What did happen was that all of the participants in the conversation leapt to their feet, one by one, wineglass and cigarette in hand, in spontaneous, ecstatic praise for what Allah had done for her today. For the joy and pleasure in the world, including the current moment of conviviality, that Allah had designed to confer upon us. Bits of Koranic ayats were recited and explicated, ostensibly not for my benefit alone. Lale took particular interest in assuring us that humans were meant to pray to the sky with open hands and smiling faces, rather than quietly and demurely in a church pew. And pity him or her — and this is where Lale turned to me — who was not born into such circumstances so as to be able to take daily refuge in this particular plenitude and grace, of an Allah who merely supported secular individuals in their bid to enjoy the quotidian delights of the temporal world, of an Allah who, had no interest in the guilt and suffering of individuals, which — for Lale — the Christian God seemed to require. Now, I had myself become well-acclimated by this point in my time in Turkey to praising Allah out loud in a more or less secular way, at work or with friends, for this or that serendipity in my daily life. But never had it taken this particular shape: of the absolute, ecstatic — and yet pragmatic, secular, and tipsy — gratitude that I witnessed in that kitchen.

I

Already in 2002, the sociologist Ayşe Şaktanber (Middle East Technical University) had written a fascinating ethnographic piece “We Pray Like You Have Fun” on the self-styling of young pious Muslim youth movements in Turkey, and how they have represented their subalterity vis-à-vis their secular counterparts over the course of the 1970s to 1990s. It was this particular evening in Ankara that alerted me to the fact that a corollary, complementary position-taking
was afoot in Turkish Islam as well: “You Pray Like We Have Fun” was the operational principle of the Islam of Lale’s kitchen — where Epicureanism, gossiping, and indiscretion were as much of an expression of worship as they were hindrances to the same in the eyes of others.

By this time I had, of course, written a dissertation in Germanistik on Turkish-German fiction and film, and had been through pretty much every monograph and article on how Muslim identities are apprehended in American and German Germanistik — and not one of these scholarly sources had prepared my conceptual imagination for the kind of Koran-schooling I received in the smoky haze of the women’s post-dinner dedikodu (gossip).

It is certainly not my immediate goal today to try to identify or categorize the kind of expression of belief — whether one considers it secular, pragmatic, compelled, devout, wayward, socially normative, agnostic or otherwise — that was reanimated in that kitchen. But I do think it is time for European (and US American) public discourse on Islam to make categorical room for it. There have been many homologous instances of secular Islamic practices that I have been party to since that evening in Ankara, but these practices are peremptorily misconstrued in German public discourse about Islam, primarily because they don’t meet the predominant, indeed hegemonic, rhetorical constraints of the Islamdebate. Let me just mention a few other anecdotal examples of secular Muslim subjectivities (by which I do not necessarily mean irreligious subjectivities):

— A 17-year-old pupil of mine in Berlin-Wedding who wore a headscarf to class but also tended to wear halter tops to show off her new belly-ring.

— Or a pious young German-Palestinian male student, also in Berlin, and his formerly irreligious wife, having a multifaceted, patient, pragmatic conversation about whether she should get her Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles tattoo removed, and whether tattoo-removal was perhaps as haram (sinful) as tattooing itself. These newly-weds then embarked on a bit of “fatwa shopping,” debating to which Shi’i jurisprudent they would seek consular recourse: whether Ayatollah Chomeni, Sistani, or Fadlallah. In the end, the young man decided that Fadlallah would be the best ayatollah to consult, because he was more progressive on women’s issues and “was the most like Kant” in

his critiques and reasoning about the social world. (The young man was a philosophy student at a Berlin university.)

— Or a young sociology student of mine who wears the full headscarf of modernist pious Islam in all of her MySpace pictures, but is otherwise known as something of a sartorial rock star in student circles because of her transgender fashion repertoire — including tweed jackets, bolo ties, fedoras, and Burberry scarves — and whom I have never seen wearing a headscarf except in Internet images.

— Or a young male colleague in Istanbul who insists that Islam is the best world religion, simply because its requirements are so easy to remember and fulfill — (“Just five things,” he says, holding up the fingers of one hand) — and because it is “less expensive than a psychotherapist.”

Now, if and when the Islamdebate (Islam debate) in Germany, or in the United States for that matter, encounters any of the phenomena of temporal subjectivity that I have just described — if and when Enlightenment fundamentalists like Monica Maron or Henryk Broder, or right-centrist reformists like Necla Kelek or Wolfgang Schäuble, confront these phenomena on their horizon of possibilities — the discursive conceit that arises to apprehend these practices is most often one of inveterate conflict, of split subjectivities, split allegiances, of the “tension” between secularity and Islam, or a tension between secularism and Islamism.

Almost exclusively, the German public debate on Islam registers such hybrid expressions of the sacred and profane as arrested dialectics, as developmental confusions, as false consciousness, or as cognitively incommensurable, pragmatically unlivable instantiations of the human condition in extremis — which will, eventually, need to resolve into a more stable form, or from which one will necessarily have a kind of “coming out” experience into post-Muslim self-identification. Public critique of Islam in Germany rests increasingly not on the meaning of Muslim practices, whether secular or pious, but on the normative evaluation of those practices2 — i.e., on a discourse that is exclusively attentive to the perceived macro-political

implications of everyday personal routines in the “European provinces of the Muslim world.”

And it seems Jürgen Habermas is quite alert to this problem when he writes the following in his “Dialectic of Secularization” (2008):

On the one hand, people who are neither able nor willing, to divide their convictions and vocabulary into profane and sacred, must be able to take part in public opinion using religious language. On the other hand, the democratic state should not precipitously reduce the polyphonous complexity of the diversity of public voices, because it is unable to know if, in so doing, it might cut off society from already scarce resources for the development of identity and sensibility.

And then, perhaps, comes the securitarian underbelly of that thought, as formulated by Jan Roß in his essay on Ernst Jünger’s tarry with Islam in the 1990s: “What about that grey zone in which inner reservations hide behind external inconspicuousness, where the consent to the rules of play in an open society appear to be mere lip service, where things are spoken differently within than without, differently in German than in Turkish, or when a general suspicion strikes those of us who don’t speak Turkish?”

Zafer Şenoaçk muses about this same dynamic of suspicion, affect, and epistemic aporia, though in a more cynical, pragmatic vein: “You know, the Germans and the Turks actually get along quite well together. They hardly know anything about us, barely notice us. We on the other hand know them very well. We play a kind of hide-and-seek. Our relationship is enlivened by an unspoken tension. [...] But they take notice of only those things that they can put into words. This is how we can protect ourselves from them.”

Clearly, one of the problems in the public debate, and the “structures of feeling” that tend to self-reproduce in predictable and normative ways, is — as Habermas points out — the translilingual instability of our conceptual vocabularies. Not only are there various, contradictory meanings of “secular life,” there is also the question of “secular versus secularism,” and also of “secularism versus laicism.” In this case the unfortunately predominant operating principle assumes — and here I am citing the political scientist Taha Parla from Boğaziçi University in Istanbul — “that ‘laicism’ is merely the linguistic form secularism has taken within the Francophone tradition, both in language and history, and that secularism as a word belongs to the Anglophone tradition. [...] Laicism, however, is a narrower term, denoting a phenomenon that may not be non-, ir- or anti-religious.”

And indeed this laicism, laiklik in Turkish — as opposed to secularism — has always meant that the Turkish state maintains a very robust and managerial relationship to religious life in Turkish society, ever since the abolition of the Caliphate. The Republic of Turkey has, consequentially, never been nor purported to be a secular state, but rather a laicist one, one that makes no bones about actively promoting and disseminating an orthodoxy Kemalist doctrine of Sunni Islam. And so the decades of hand-wringing in German feuilletons about purportedly self-contradictory aspects of Turkish civic identity in matters of religion have ultimately been “barking up the wrong discourse,” so to speak. So one task that a “phenomenology of secular Islam” in the German civic context would have to set out for itself is to forgo the notion that laicism is just the Francophone and Turkophone linguistic and historical translation of secularism, and then to allow these two conceptual systems to be co-present and mutually critical in future discussions. For its part, secularism has come to mean an equally difficult bundle of somewhat incommensurable things — all of which arose exclusively in the Christian ecclesiastical tradition. The Latin saeculum, for epoch or century, was the spatio-temporal gap between the First and Second Comings of the Messiah. According to Augustine in The City of God,

the holy Church was nothing more than a strange wanderer on the earth, never at home in the *saeculum* of the unredeemed world.

And although David Biale notes in his wonderful new monograph on secular Judaism *Not in the Heavens* that the Hebrew word *olam* carries a similar spatio-temporal, *heilsgeschichtliche* (salvation-historical) meaning as *saeculum* — and perhaps even the Arabic *oulmante* might also warrant comparison in this regard — it is clear that the ecclesiastical provenance of *saeculum* presents serious limitations to how we might apply the word secular to Muslim subjectivities.\(^8\) Nonetheless, we have inherited a very broad, contradictory, and useful palette of applications for the word *seccular*. Mark Lilla\(^9\) explains it as the Great Separation — i.e. the divorcing of the divine sword from the temporal sword, for which Luther, particularly, and not-so coincidentally, in his *On War with the Turks* (1528), emphasized the distinct symbolic offices of the two swords.

Other notions of secularization have referenced the appropriation of church property for civic use in the French Revolutionary context. In the Turkish Republican period, too, the Aghia Sofia has been a highly visible mythic synecdoche of secularization, because the former Ottoman mosque (which had, also formerly, been a patriarchal Orthodox basilica before 1453) was transformed into a state-run museum. There is a popular Turkish Islamic pop song by Esref Ziya called “Aya Sofya” that laments the loss of the former mosque to its current secular function. Certainly, the chiastic structure of *seculatio* that this song performs — on the one hand the *seculatio* of Islamic pop music, and on the other the secularization of the Aya Sofya — warrants detailed critique. And, of course, the tradition of philosophical atheism and antitheism belong to the category “seccular,” as political theorists in the 17th century began to use “seccular” to imagine a world without religion.

But *seccular* also means the activities and comportment of a pious person or clergy-member living outside of monastic seclusion. Until the seventeenth century at least, *seculatio* referred to the spiritual protocols and banal procedures of leaving the monastery. In this sense, secular in the medieval vocabulary could not be divorced from...

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religious engagement with the temporal world. Yet, the word secular — originating in a deeply pious metaphysics — was eventually allowed to signify a world opposed to religion.

II

The thought experiment that inspired this line of argumentation was the question: what does it mean to say “secular Islam” — instead of, say, the “dynamic tension between secularism and Islam” or even merely “the relationship between secularism and Islam.” And this thought experiment required that I bear all of these contradictory senses of secularism, secularity, *saeculum, seculatio, laicax*, and *laiklik* in mind, and not to privilege just one of these, merely for the convenience of national-structuralist analytical consistency. The idea of secular Judaism is old hat by now, as it has come into wide use as an ethnic communitarian descriptor, but also in the sense of the Polish socialist revolutionary Isaac Deutscher in his essay “The Non-Jewish Jew,” which claimed that “the Jewish heretic who transcends Jewry belongs to a Jewish tradition” — including, therefore, every antireligious and irreligious Jew from Spinoza to Streisand. So with Judaism, we have both an ethnocultural and rabbinical affordance for “secular Judaism.”\(^10\)

Secular Catholicism also has a rather well-studied tradition and a relatively unproblematic status in public and scholarly discourse. Catholic scholar Thomas Beaudoin bases a theory of secular Catholicism on the example of Paul’s personal “cultural complexity” and his endeavor to “hold disparity together.” For Beaudoin, “Secular Catholics find their Catholicism returning at some level that cannot be dispensed with, but do not or cannot make of it a regular and central set of explicit and conscious practices.”\(^11\)

And yet, despite ample quotidian evidence of the diverse ways communities and individuals practice a secular Islam, there is no discursive affordance for such a concept; it belongs to our...
vocabularies in only the most precarious and/or coercive ways. Indeed the rare instances in which this pairing of words is used in the press is when it is wielded by antireligious, Enlightenment fundamentalists who understand the “Islam” part of “secular Muslim” as referring not to a modulated faith practice, but rather to those secular people who, against their better interests, find themselves living in a Muslim society — in which case “secular” is understood to mean irreligious. A case in point is the so-called Secular Islam conference of 2007, held in St. Petersburg, Florida. While sounding rather promising on a conceptual level, the event was sponsored by a certain “Institution for the Secularization of Islamic Society” and broadcast in full on Fox News’ Glenn Beck Show. The umbrella funder for the event was an outfit called the Center for Inquiry, whose mission statement declares that the center is committed to:
— an end to the influence that religion and pseudoscience have on public policy,
— an end to the privileged position that religion and pseudoscience continue to enjoy in many societies,
— an end to the stigma attached to being a nonbeliever, whether the nonbeliever describes her/himself as an atheist, agnostic, humanist, freethinker or skeptic. 12

So clearly, in these cases, “secular Islam” is used with the intention to disparage “Islam” from the “secular Muslim,” and to do so, whenever possible, in English, German, or French — rather than Arabic, Turkish, or Persian. And the few instances of its use in Germany come, as I said just a moment ago, from latter-day Enlightenment fundamentalists like Monica Maron, who wrote in her 2010 essay “Die Besserfundis”:

What is going on here? Why does Enlightenment suddenly count as fundamentalist? What moves our enlightened, tolerant colleagues in the editorial offices to question the legal guarantees for our individual freedom? Who are they, that they deny the right of secular or devout Muslims to criticize their culture and religion? 13

Here we see one of the few uses of “secular Muslim” in German social discourse, and how it is tactically embedded in a highly polarized public drama revolving around one’s position-takings on the Necla Kelek versus Yasemin Karakosoglu dispute. 14

In a 2010 interview I conducted with Judith Butler in Ankara, upon her visit for the International Meeting Against Homophobia, I posed the following question about Europe’s perennial aversion to thinking Islam in a secular light:

State secularism has an intricate and violent history in Republican Turkey. Yet on the personal level, the civic trait of “being secular” has for generations meant a willingness to carry out one’s public affairs regardless of your interlocutor’s faith practice. Thus it is often understood as a kind of “siblingship” (kardeşlik) across differences, rather than as an identification with atheism. Nonetheless, the story of twentieth-century Turkey is often told as a great battle between religious people and secular people. This narrative fails to recognize the vast swaths of this society who are both secular and religious, and have no need to explain the coexistence of these two principles within their own subjectivity. But it seems to me that European and American observers seldom conceptualize “secular Islam” in the way they are willing to do with “secular Judaism” and “secular Christianity.” Where do you suppose this unwillingness comes from, to whom is it of the greatest use, and whose responsibility is it to change the narrative?

Butler responded:

I think secular Islam is, for most people in the US and even in Europe, an unthinkable combination. And this is nonsensical, given how often we refer to the secular Jew, which is understood as utterly possible. We even can talk about secular Catholics now, apparently. I always thought you could only talk about “fallen” Catholics, but I guess you can talk about secular Catholics now. And a lot of that just depends on what kind of government structure or civil life you’re committed to, and where and how you place religion in your life. But it is a presupposition in the Netherlands, in Belgium, and the UK, that a particular combination of secularism and religion can work with Judeo-Christian religions, but that it cannot work with Islam, that Islam will attack and override and engulf and destroy whatever is left of secularism. And this strikes me as a paranoid assumption, an ignorant assumption, and one that persists in misunderstanding the various ways in which Islam is actually lived. 15

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13 Transit (fn. 4), p. 352, my emphasis and translation.
14 Ibid., pp. 317–22.
Despite the precarious, coerced, and inchoate status of the term “secular Islam,” Muslim seculatio covers a gamut of practices that are and always have been proliferating and changing shape. And this is why I am pursuing not a sociology or history of secular Islam, but a phenomenology of it — roughly in the tradition of Chantepie de la Saussaye, whose 1877 Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte understood the phenomenology of religion to be a critical task, attending to the meanings and manifestations of religious practices, in terms that are consistent with the symbolic habitus of worshippers themselves — a task that therefore does not approach religious practice in the social functionalist and macro-political terms that come so naturally to Monica Maron, Henryk Broder, and others.

And in pursuing a phenomenology of secular Islam, one would have to take care neither to overstate, nor underrecognize, important, historical distinctions — like that between secular Islam and Islamic pop culture (or Green pop), or among other things that might look like secular Islam but are perhaps better described otherwise: For instance, while a pious Shi’i Muslim who grew up in the 1990s was often raised in the midst of more or less well-established Islamic social institutions, and therefore might have a detailed, highly literate, regulatory approach to orthodox practice, that person’s grandparent, who is no less pious, but who was raised in the post-colonial absence of national religious governmentality, might appear to have a more laissez-faire, individualist habitus of devotion.

But this intergenerational phenomenon, often described under the interpretive rubric of “a resurgence of political Islam in the 1990s” might not be so much attributable to the relative secularity of various generations, as to the fact that the elder generation was reared in the absence of an Islamically inflected socio-political and institutional apparatus — may see the only true orthodoxy in the Din Muhammadi (the emulation of the prophet), and would therefore be skeptical of or indifferent to the kind of government sponsored imams and mosques that became commonplace after 1970. In terms of a phenomenology of Muslim seculatio, it is instructive to look to the Lebanese case, and what Lara Deeb calls the “leisurely Islam” of Shi’i South Beirut, where a young pious generation is becoming accustomed to the shifting social mores of the new coffeehouse culture in the neighborhood of Al-Dahie.16

Or to look at the predominant trend among devout young men and women in Turkey to filter their faith practices through the fiction of Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, the music of Pink Floyd, New Age Music, video games, geek talk, etc. (See Saktanber)17 Or one may look to Germany, where, in the city of Lehrte, the children’s song “Ringlein, Ringlein, du musst wandern” has been translated for public-school Islam curricula as “Pilger, pilger, du musst wandern” (Pilgrim, pilgrim, you must travel).18

All of these practices indicate a lively, transnational, intertextual, hybrid counternarrative of seculatio in the making. And yet German public discourse continues to rely on critical frameworks that hinder a phenomenology of hybrid secular Islams — frameworks that make it more or less discursively impossible at the moment to think “secular Islam” as anything but a duplicitous oxymoron. And I’ll give only two more examples of such frameworks before concluding:

The following imagery comes from a 1997 essay by Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff called “Deutschland, deine Islamisten,” concerning large stadium-size meetings of Milli Görüs (National Perception) enthusiasts in North-Rhine Westphalia:

As if an invisible hand were showing the way, the masses streamed through the gates of the Westphalia Stadium. No authority need intervene, everyone seems to know where they are headed. Women to the left, men to the right. No questions. No protest. Today, order reigns supreme in the sold-out stadium, Islamic order. Were there no advertisements for ‘Brameier Bundesliga-Bettwäsche’ and the command ‘Borussia — just do it’ one could imagine oneself way back in Turkey.19

Regardless of what “way back in Turkey” might mean, I am concerned about the veiled suggestion of fascist socialization that whittles its way into Kleine-Brockhoff’s figural vocabulary. Here, the dionara he presents, without any knowledge of the language the

17 See fn 1.
19 Ibid., p. 206.
participants of this event speak, relies on tropes of the concentration camp, and of the mass Nazi youth rallies of the 1930’s, which Turkish religious organizations in Germany have apparently inherited here against their will. With Katrin Sieg, one might describe this as a kind of imposed “ethnic drag” in reverse. 20

We see such a metonymy as well in Bassam Tibi, the Leitfigur of Euro-Islam, who wrote in 2002: “We must Westernize the Islam practiced here (den hier praktizierten Islam), just as Germany was Westernized after 1945.”21 Somewhat unalarming on the surface, this assertion however places Islam in a homologous symbolic position as National Socialism, and obscures the extent to which both Germany and Islam had been in intense negotiation with “Westernization,” at least a century before 1945.

Such predominant elisions and metonymies hint at why Fazil, a young male interlocutor of the poet Ka in Orhan Pamuk’s 2002 novel Snow, speaks back to his Turkish-German exile “author” as follows:

“I don’t want you to put me in into a novel like that.” “Why not?” (replies Ka.) “Because you don’t even know me, that’s why! Even if you got to know me and described me as I am, your Western readers would be so caught up in pitying me for being poor that they wouldn’t have a chance to see my life. For example, if you said I was writing an Islamist science-fiction novel, they’d just laugh. I don’t want to be described as someone people smile at out of pity and compassion.”22

III

In conclusion, I’d like to bundle up the foregoing observations into a short list of axioms, which might guide us toward a viable, sober, and politically relevant phenomenology of secular Islam:

1. We must learn to remain wary of the hermeneutics of the headscarf: Sartorial choices have never been a reliable indicator for relative piety and secularity, alluring as they are as a totalitarian cipher of biopolitics. The wide range of styles of headscarves in use today indicates an equally wide range of social, generational, geographic, familial, and situational affiliations, not just of modes of observance.

21 Transit Deutschland (fn. 4), p. 304.

What one wears on one’s head (or elsewhere) should serve as only a tertiary criterion for piety and/or seculatio. What its wearer thinks, says, or does not say about the sartorial is far more consequential, and the patent aversion among non-Muslims to pursue or imagine the latter amounts to a wholesale intellectual failure.

2. Which “secular”, whose “secular”? Until scholarly and public discourse comes to resolution about which secular is meant in, say, a text like the “Dialectic of Secularization,” then a phenomenology of secular Islam must maintain a stereoscopic view to all the meanings of secularity and laicism: ranging from the secular state’s management and administration of religious orthodoxy (as in Turkish laicism); to seculatio (how religious individuals sojourn through the temporal world (a more Cerfian approach to quotidian practices); to secularization, as in how states and individuals appropriate formerly religious property (whether that property be a building, symbol, icon, or utterance). The ecclesiastical provenance of the “saeculum” will always necessarily present meaningful symbolic frictions when applied to Muslim subjectivities.

3. Secular does not mean critical; critical does not mean secular: Butler, Brown, and Asad released a promising set of essays in 2007 under the title Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech. A great deal of effort during the symposium event upon which the book was based, particular from the feminist Christian scholar Amy Hollywood, was devoted to demonstrating that religious people, indeed very pious people, have always been among the vanguard of critique, despite Marx’s perseverations to the contrary. Critique — in a Kantian, Marxian, and Adornian mode — among middle and lower-middle class Muslims in Turkey is as vibrant in daily life as it is effaced in Western representations. 23 In addition to that fact, it is important to maintain an awareness that there a broad gamut of secular practices that are patently acritical or uncritical, and are not any less secular as a consequence. Secularity must not be considered as co-extensive, dependent on, or legitimated primarily by its putative capacity for “critique.”

4. Euro-Islam is patently deceptive: A critique or program of secular (and/or pious) Islam can be beholden to no supra-local, i.e.

national or supra-national, place-deixis, as in the case of Bassam Tibi’s “hier praktizierten Islam” (Islam practiced here) above, nor to Euro-Islam; because even the most autochthonous Muslims in Europe (those, say, who rarely leave Berlin-Wedding) negotiate their identity as Muslims through what Sakstaner calls a “panoramic narrative” that will always be multilocational (through travel, family, pilgrimage, and mediation). German Muslim practices (both pious and secular) will be affectively invested in Libya, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Philippines, just as they are in Berlin. (One might consider comparing the necessity of Muslim transnationalism to that of Jesuit transnationalism, based perhaps on Ulrike Strasser’s analysis in this volume in her essay “Mission, Migration and German Manhood: Central-European Jesuits in the Spanish Indies.”) So, programmatic interpretations that attempt to geographically corral Islam into Euro-Islam and other “geographic” Islams are always already obscuring the everyday habitus of those to whom those interpretations are supposed to attest.

5. Turkey has never been secular and secularist at the same time. We need to gently let go of the notion that Turkey is and has been the ultimate vanguard experiment of secular Islam, and that Turks are the symbolic embodiment of the relative commensurability of secularism and piety. This is rather an ethnicized, symbolic labor into which several generations of Turks in Germany have now been inscribed, primarily because of a mis-understanding of the meaning and implementation of laicism in Turkish Republican history on the part of Western Europeans.

6. Secularism isn’t safe. Safety isn’t secular. In a phenomenology of secular Islam — or secular Anything for that matter — “secular” may not serve as the symbolic handmaiden of the “securitarian.” Given that the vast majority of systematic global militarization since World War I has taken place under the missionary sign of the “secular,” the equation of the “secular” with the “secure” must be rigorously disarticulated at all levels of social life.

7. “I suggest that we begin to interrogate the difficulty of thinking of Islam non-politically.”24 This thought, from the anthropologist

Jeremy Walton, meditates on the recent uprisings in Egypt in spring 2011. The “compulsive” politicization of Islam among Western observers preemptively obscures how Muslims variously conceive of the relationship between faith and politics, and also of the possibility of a seculatio that is provisionally indifferent to its perceived macro-political import.

And, as luck would have it, one of the responses I received from my recent Facebook query “What do you think secular Islam is?” goes in a similar direction as Walton wants to guide us in. And to a great extent, this response flies in the face of everything that I have said thus far, and is perhaps all the more important for that reason. In any case, I feel it is thus most appropriate here to give a secular, and devout Muslim, writing in her third language of English, the last word on the subject:

Actually [secular Islam] is the Islam that it should be & the Islam as it meant to be. Islam is not a political concept, it is a religion that is meant to regulate people's lives. Yet, as a result of Our Prophet's being the political leader of his community — which was inevitable at that time if you consider the situation he was in — and later on the Caliphs (sic) and their interference with religion, Islam got closer to politics, indeed, politics get closer to Islam. Anyway, my point is that Islam is actually secular. You would see my point if you consider the great Islam Ulama. They did not interfere with their country's politics. Even, there are rulers who gave up their right to rule after deciding on being devoted Muslims. While Islam tells you how you should clean yourself in many details, it lacks giving details about how to rule a country — because it is secular.”25

I close with these thoughts from one devout and worldly young Muslim woman in 2011, and suggest that the vernacular conceptual ambiguities she presents to us may clear the way for a further, critical, and painstaking phenomenology of “secular Islam.”


25 I thank Nurulhude Baykal for this contribution.

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