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Toward A Post-Secular Modernity[i]
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Modernity is best understood in the context of everyday pluralism. Here, cultural and political realities do not dwell in compartments labelled 'east' and 'west', but instead overlap and intertwine. In the convergence of what is 'Muslim', 'secular' or 'traditional' and what is not, everyday cosmopolitanism is a more reliable measure of modernity than are ideologies of the state or of social movements.

From births, weddings and funerals, to rules on who inherits property and where you park your car: these everyday practices come together to shape the 'social imaginary' that we have as communities and societies finding our way in the world. The everyday may be mundane and routine, but it is where modernity is actually encountered and made sense of. There is even high poetry in the everyday, as we are reminded by T.S. Eliot, Saadi Youssef and Forugh Farrokhzad.

Indeed, this is where the most cherished aspects of civic modernity are fostered: the rule of law, human rights and civil society. The everyday is also the domain of science and technology, with its 'hallmark' impact on public health, consumerism and information technology. Likewise, for all its aspirations to transcendence, religion – and particularly its ethics – is primarily addressed to (and obviously practiced in) the here and now. Much of the Qur'an, certainly, is about the 'signs' of the divine in everyday reality; even the scriptural verses are named *ayat*s or signs.

It is tempting to believe that what matters in the everyday is determined by elites – of the state, socioeconomic class or patriarchy. Yet this slips into a narrowly ideological view of the modern, so fiercely contested in the Enlightenment critique of Johannes Herder (1744-1803) in Prussia. Herder insisted on speaking of a plurality of cultures within a society, defending 'folk culture' against that of the political and social establishment. Over a century later, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) offered one of the most influential advances on Herder in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). Durkheim saw culture as the result of 'collective representations' – ordinary acts and practices that gave meaning to the lives of people at large. The idea of the sacred was part and parcel of this search for meaning.

This article holds that modernity and its cognates – secularism, civil society, accountable governance, techno-scientific rationalism – are best understood in the context of everyday pluralism. Here, cultural and political geographies overlap, rather than dwelling in compartments labelled 'east' and 'west'. This is not to deny the distinctiveness of being Muslim, but to locate it in spaces that are genuinely cosmopolitan in the ways that ordinary citizens live and understand their lifeworlds.

Picturing the Modern

The first use of the term 'modernity' is ascribed to Charles Baudelaire's essay, *The Painter of Modern Life* (1860).[ii] In depicting the everyday with its 'crowds and incognitos',[iii] Baudelaire draws attention to the narrative power of images. He does this in a domain that is profane, mundane, stolen from the realm of the sacred like the fire of Prometheus. Although he found

much to embrace and disdain here, Baudelaire was on a stubborn quest for an elusive present – showing an appreciation and measure of ordinary time that we regard as the quintessence of modernity.

Today, cinema as a medium lends itself especially well to such social narrative. Cinema captures the visual flattening of time, its technology allowing humans and their environment to be caught in *flows* of varying complexity and depth. Consider Jafar Panahi's acclaimed 2003 film, *Crimson Gold* (*Talaye Sorkh*). The main character, Hossein, is a stolid, blue-collar veteran of the Iran-Iraq war who delivers pizzas in Tehran. This exposes him to the full spectrum of urban sprawl, from clogged traffic to privileged suburbs whose denizens might as well be in Las Vegas. In a poignant encounter, Hossein finds himself in the lavish quarters of the Other: a client who is lean, loquacious, wealthy and worldly. This occurs on the heels of a delivery impeded by police, who have cordoned off decadent young guests at a late-night party. It all conspires to drive Hossein to extremes, though he is generous enough to dole out pizza slices to the policemen who thwart his delivery.

Crimson Gold interrogates more than the 1979 Iranian Revolution's cry of *mustaz'afin*, 'solidarity with the oppressed'. There is plenty of blame to go around. If the personal freedoms that youths crave are elusive, we are reminded of the class complications by a policeman who says of indulgent party-goers, 'Their kind sleeps during the day.' If the wealthy are awash in new technology, what frustrates Hossein is a broken elevator that compels him to climb four flights of stairs. The traffic chokes, yet Hossein is a participant on his sizable motorcycle. Avarice is everywhere: 'If you want to arrest a thief, you'll have to arrest the world,' offers a common felon.

It is the human condition that *Crimson Gold* engages with plaintively, in the spirit of contemporary Iranian cinema spearheaded by Panahi, Abbas Kiarostami, and Samira Makhmalbaf, among others. We are invited not simply to observe the sins and blessings of onscreen characters but to reflect on the culture, ethics and political reality in which individuals and communities live – and on the outcomes of choices made by a widening circle that finally encompasses history itself.

Cinema has a politically transgressive power which keeps censors busy everywhere. *Crimson Gold* was banned in Iran, even as Jafar Panahi and several fellow directors have been denied permission to enter the United States. That transgressive power is not only about *what* the images say but also *how* they do so. Like Baudelaire, Panahi's roving camera sought to extract meaning from the everyday.

Time, technology, the cherishing of subjectivity amid class difference, civil society and a heightened consciousness of the presence of the State, all these give substance to the varying guises of modernity. The ways in which they do may appear inevitable, much like the anarchic traffic in which Hossein delivers pizzas. But the outcomes of myriad choices are hardly inevitable; nor do they bear the same significance, emerging out of histories both shared and distinct. Baudelaire's obsession with the here and now was integral to the secular as a new phenomenon, and to secularism as a European socio-political doctrine. Panahi's obsession with urban time may gesture to the secular, but is located in a public space clearly different from that of Euro-secularism. It is thus that we find expressions of the civil which make for plural modernities.

What Identity, Which Tradition ?

Social imaginaries in the Muslim world, for all their differences, partake of the Modern. True, strident western narratives (especially under the banner of the 'War on Terror') have spurred an industry in counter-assertions of identity, of difference as essential. The talk of authenticity figures much in the postmodern critique, in reply to the over-determination of identity by hegemons, real or perceived. In Muslim contexts, it finds expression in the insistence of a 'return', usually to a pristine original – text, historical period, practice – cast as authentic. This is mirrored by western commentators for whom the distinctiveness of Islam is expedient. In both cases this othering serves political ends, where it isn't exoticisation for its own sake.

Aziz al-Azmeh pits historicity against the rhetoric of authenticity to avoid exceptionalising Islam,[iv] though he does not directly link this to the nature or making of plural modernities. Mohammed Arkoun is explicit in tying the historical role of the *imaginaire* in managing 'symbolic capital' to claims of authenticity.[v] However, it is the religious imaginary of Islam and the Judeo-Christian traditions that concern Arkoun, rather than the broader social imaginary that occupies us here.

Historicism of a special sort – sacralisation – feeds the talk of authenticity in revivalist (*salafi*) trends. Tradition is placed in binary opposition to Modernity, as is often done in western accounts. Yet it is on a continuum between old and new, past and present, that individuals and communities locate themselves in practice. It is the everyday expressions of Muslim identity and citizenship, piety and protest, music and modes of dress that more reliably yield a picture of the secular than do ideological markers.

After all, even 'core' religious traditions are highly diverse among Muslims, down to interpretations of the Qur'an and *shari'a*. The more evident this becomes in a globalised world, the more it is denounced by defenders of a univocal Tradition – outside of which all is profane. Yet sacred and secular motifs nowhere travel more cordially together than in the folk-tales, music and architecture of Muslims. These are formative elements in the identity and ethos of individuals, communities, nations, and civilisations – usually more penetratingly than formal doctrines and ideologies. *The Thousand and One Nights,* the songs of Umm Kulthum, and the Alhambra don't just captivate but also shape how Muslims and non-Muslims see the world and themselves. In the richly illustrated *Hamzanama* (Adventures of Hamza), a collection of heroic narratives about the Prophet Muhammad's uncle, imaginative courage serves virtue: nature is celebrated, political power is mocked, females are empowered, saints are playful. Such themes educate, socialise and refresh devotion as they are indigenised and Islamised in the reinvention of traditions.

The Ethics of Cosmopolitanism

The narratives and markers that have plied the circuits of the Silk Road, the Mediterranean, the Sahel and beyond remind us of the vintage – and vantage – of a pluralist ethos. Yes, it was fed by what sociologists call 'the economy of desire' – the driving consumerism of material culture – but there is more to it. For Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240 CE), coming out of Andalusia's melting pot, overlapping faith traditions across cultures spoke to an underlying unity; and they did so without a relativism where anything goes.[vi] For the Fatimids in Egypt (969-1171 CE), the Mughals under Akbar (r.1556-1605 CE), and often under the Ottomans, the cultivation of a *modus vivendi* among diverse subjects gave rise to a pluralist ethic enshrined in law. Yes, there were lapses – as there are in the best cosmopolitanisms. But the narrowing of tolerance in Muslim modernity has more

to do with secular nationalism and colonial legacies than with a jealous religiosity.

If the essence of cosmopolitanism is captured in the aphorism 'universality plus difference',[vii] then there is reason for scepticism as to whether it is served well enough by mainstream secular liberalism. Difference must, of course, include varieties of religious affiliation and commitment. But secular liberalism can only tolerate this particular difference on grounds of 'neutrality' and 'autonomy', while denying the *moral basis* on which religious liberty is actually asserted.[viii] From the wearing of headscarves in state institutions to ethno-religious 'profiling', the limits of liberal tolerance are quickly evident.

In the wake of September 11, 2001, a serious democratic engagement with religion is still more likely to fall in the shadow of national security. Kevin McDonald notes that at best, liberalism flaunts a purely abstract view of agency and subjectivity grounded in the ideal of autonomy - which thrives on its opposite, fundamentalism.[ix] The liberal cosmopolitan is everywhere at home, welcoming the unknown; the fundamentalist is confined by tradition. The former is curious and open to change; the latter fears and opposes it in tribal anti-modernism.

What this posture fails to grasp are religious grammars outside the secularised personal Christianity of Europe, though such grammars were vital in the West as 'sources of the self' that ushered in new public cultures.[x] Today, older movements (like the Muslim Brotherhood) must contend with globalised forms of religiosity linked to mobility and diaspora. Some religious movements are violent, others are peaceful; but there is more to either than identity politics or resistance to globalism. Post-secular understandings of agency, ethics and responsibility are needed to deal with new questions confronting the civil. The secular public sphere of mainstream liberalism no longer cuts ice, if it ever did.

Muslim Modernity in Practice

In 2005 Cairo became host to Al-Azhar Park, a 74-acre green space that has come to embody historic, ecological and social renewal amid urban overcrowding and decay.[xi] It was the culmination of an initiative led by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), after 20 years of consultative planning, excavation, rehabilitation, home upgrading and urban design. A site whose harshly saline soil served as a repository for debris and fill was refreshed and endowed with water reservoirs and tens of thousands of trees - in the midst of Egypt's 1,000 year old capital packed with 17 million people.

The Al-Azhar Park project aspires to an alternative to the usual approaches to development in declining historic locales.[xii] These have tended to privilege monuments at the expense of neighbourhoods where residents are commonly displaced, often by force; commercial development follows on laissez-faire lines. The critique of neoliberal modernisation ideology has much to do with such schemes, where corporate and technocratic priorities hold sway. By contrast, Darb Al-Ahmar's residents have been active stakeholders from the outset. Residents of the neighbourhood, with its appalling housing conditions and massive unemployment, were engaged in a renewal of housing, health, work and credit resources. They were also integral to an archaeological initiative to recover key historic landmarks.

The Park site is integrated with the adjacent Urban Plaza that comprises the new Museum of Historic Cairo as well as spaces for commerce. Broadly, it serves to mould a wider cultural memory and sense of civic belonging, of continuity rather than rupture.[xiii] It also invokes the distinctive place of public gardens in Muslim settings from Cordoba, Marrakesh and Damascus to Isfahan, Lahore and Delhi.[xiv]

As such, the Park sits congruently with the civic visions of two of the most influential designers of modern public space, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1923 CE) and Hassan Fathy (1900-1989 CE).[xv] For Olmsted, landscapes that framed park spaces were key to urban civility; his work included New York's Central Park. Fathy insisted on socially responsible buildings alive to the needs of less privileged rural and urban citizens; his 'architecture for the poor' across Egypt won global acclaim. The Olmsted-Fathy conjunction also subverts the Orientalist 'segregated Islamic city' of Tradition that is contrasted with Modernity's integrated city.

In embodying the ideals of Fathy and Olmsted, Al-Azhar Park signals a modernity that is also Muslim. It re-imagines the civil in ways that may set fresh standards for vernaculars, western and otherwise – rather like the innovative Iranian cinema of Panahi, Kiarostami and Makhmalbaf. In the convergence time and again of what is 'Muslim', 'eastern' or 'traditional' and what is not, the everyday trumps the claims of the ideological. This may leave little room for the rhetoric of a 'clash of civilisations', but it allows plenty for the practice of a post-secular civility.

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[i] This essay draws upon the author's introduction in *Muslim Modernities: Expressions of the Civil Imagination*, ed. Amyn B. Sajoo, London, 2008.

[ii] Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, New York, 1992.

[iii] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays,* trans. and edited by Jonathan Mayne, London, 1964, p. 5.

[iv] Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, London, 1993, pp. 22-24.

[v] Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers,* trans R. D. Lee, Boulder, CO, 1994, pp. 6-14, 86-105.

[vi] William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity*, New York, 1994; Parens, J. 'Multiculturalism and the problem of particularism' *American Political Science Review* 88:1, 1994, pp. 169-181.

[vii] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, London, 2006, p. 151.

[viii] Michael Sandel, 'Religious Liberty: Freedom of Choice or Freedom of Conscience, in *Secularism and Its Critics*, ed. R. Bhargava, Oxford, 1998, pp. 85-93.

[ix] Kevin McDonald, *Global Movements: Action and Culture*, Oxford, 2006.

[x] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA, 2007.

[xi] Stefano Bianca and Philip Jodidio, ed., *Cairo: Revitalising a Historic Metropolis,* Turin, 2004.

[xii] See http://www.akdn.org/agency/aktc_hcsp_cairo.html#contact

[xiii] See Kenneth Frampton, ed., *Modernity and Community: Architecture in the Islamic World*, London, 2001.

[xiv] See, *inter alia*, D. Fairchild Ruggles, *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes*, Philadelphia, 2007; Emma Clark, *The Art of the Islamic Garden*, Ramsbury, UK, 2004.

[xv] Witold Rybczynski, *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and North America in the Nineteenth Century*, New York, 1999; Malcolm Miles, 'Utopias of Mud? Hassan Fathy and Alternative Modernisms', *Space and Culture*, 9, 2006, pp. 115-139.