

Political Islam and Foreign Policy in Europe and the United States

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This paper is about the epistemological underpinnings of European and American foreign policy toward political Islam. European and American approaches to political Islam rely upon commonly held secular assumptions about religion and politics that have significant effects on foreign policy in Europe and the United States. Secularist epistemology produces an understanding of “normal politics” that lends a particular coloring to the politics of Muslim-majority societies. These secularist understandings affect foreign policy in two ways: first, the appearance of Islam in politics is equated with fundamentalism and intolerance, and second, the forms and degrees of separation between Islam and politics that do exist in contemporary Muslim-majority societies either do not appear at all or appear as ill-fitting imitations of a Western secular ideal. Rather than a backlash against modernity or a return to tradition, political Islam is a modern language of politics that challenges and, at times, overturns fundamental assumptions about religion and politics embedded in Western forms of secularism.

Il s'agit bien d'aborder la question de fond: l'islam est-il compatible avec la laïcité? Mais alors, de quelle laïcité parlons-nous? ¹

-Olivier Roy, *Vers un Islam européen*, 11.

The attempt to understand Muslim traditions by insisting that in them religion and politics (two essences modern society tries to keep conceptually and practically apart) are coupled must, in my view, lead to failure.

-Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 28–29.

In *Rule of Experts*, Timothy Mitchell (2002:7) writes that, “the possibility of social science is based upon taking certain historical experiences of the West as the template for a universal knowledge.” This observation applies to the knowledge about political Islam generated by secularist epistemology in the field of international relations. The conceptions of secularism underlying social inquiry determine the kinds of questions that can be asked about secularism, religion, and

Author's note: I thank Jocelyne Cesari for her comments on an earlier version of this paper at our panel discussion “Islam in International Politics” at the 2006 APSA convention in Philadelphia. Thanks to Andreas Wenger, Victor Mauer, and Daniel Möckli for inviting me to present this paper at ETH Zurich in September 2006 at the conference “A Strained Partnership: European-American Relations and the Middle East from Suez to Iraq,” and especially to Dalia Dassa Kaye for her suggestions at our panel on “Current Issues.” The paper also benefited from discussions with graduate students at Northwestern in my “Politics of Religion in International Relations” seminar in 2005, and from the comments of three anonymous reviewers for *Foreign Policy Analysis*.

¹ “We need to ask the fundamental question: is Islam compatible with laicism? But then, of which laicism are we speaking?” (author's translation).

politicized religion (Asad 1996:11). As Hirschkind (1997:14) suggests, “greater recognition must be given to the way Western concepts (religion, political, secular, temporal) reflect specific historical developments, and cannot be applied as a set of universal categories or natural domains.”

This paper has two objectives. First, I analyze the terms through which political Islam is understood in contemporary International Relations. European and American understandings of political Islam rely upon commonly held secular definitions and assumptions about religion and politics. As a result, they do not consider the fundamental question that motivates the conceptual work of this essay: in what ways do assumptions about what religion is and how it relates to politics determine the kind of questions worth asking about “political Islam” and the kinds of answers one expects to find? I argue that secularist habits, dispositions and interpretive traditions are part of the cultural and normative foundation of the field of contemporary international relations. They are an implicit part of the ontology of this research tradition (White 2000:3). As a result, traditional forms of international relations require and assume a particular kind of religious subject that is produced through a series of practices that are at the core of modern secularist authority (Mahmood 2005:33).

Second, this paper explores the effects of these secularist understandings upon contemporary European and American foreign policy toward Islamic political actors and movements. I argue that one variation of these secularist dispositions contributes to a tendency, more prevalent in the foreign policies of the European Union and its member states, to attempt to engage and transform political Islamists both politically and economically. A second variation contributes to another tendency, more prominent in American foreign policy, to try to eliminate Islamist actors and movements by starving them both diplomatically and economically. As Gowers (2002:33) observes, this “engage” versus “strangle” policy dichotomy has led to transatlantic tensions:

The commonality of views that bound the United States and Europe together is fading. Since September 11, 2001, after a brief flurry of togetherness, they have been unmistakably drifting apart. The sense of a terrorist threat has initiated a profound transformation in U.S. foreign policy, but one that Europeans do not share and do not begin to understand. This misunderstanding is mutual. It affects all aspects of international relations, from mediation (of the lack of it) in the Middle East to cooperation (of the lack of it) in defense and from disruptions of trans-Atlantic trade to policy on weapons of mass destruction.

This paper explains these policy divergences and opens possibilities for new ways of thinking about and relating to political Islam. Secularist epistemology provides the terms through which crucial distinctions are made between public and private, religious and political and sacred and secular. These modes of apprehending political Islam have significant political consequences for foreign policy and international relations.

As to the scope of the argument, secularist epistemologies and their policy consequences do not map cleanly onto the foreign policy of a particular state or region. I do not want to suggest for example that EU policies never pursue a “starvation” policy toward Islamists nor that American policies never pursue a policy of engagement. What I am suggesting is that these two distinct approaches serve as useful heuristic devices in the attempt to understand the field out of which foreign policies toward political Islam are formulated and pursued differentially by different actors. There are of course exceptions and variations, including the possibility—even the probability—that any given policy stance

may represent and embody elements of both dispositions toward political Islam.

Second, when applying the framework developed here to any particular case, distinctions should be made between the policies of individual European states, each of which has its own internal and oftentimes conflicting approaches to religion and politics, including Islamic minorities, and the policies of the European Union, which may or may not reflect the position of any individual European state, leader or individual.² The degree to which the secularist approaches described in this paper have a hold upon any given individual, institution, state or transnational or international organization will vary considerably. For example, I am not suggesting that all Europeans are inveterate laicists but rather that laicism has a considerable organizing influence upon the ways in which many Europeans understand and relate to basic categorizations involving religion and politics. I am suggesting that most Europeans and Americans, perhaps unconsciously, perhaps less so, think, work, struggle against and live in and around variations of these two traditions of secularism. These secular attitudes, sensibilities and habits that sustain and shape them do not merely reflect social reality; they construct it.³ They provide what Bukovansky (2002:25) describes as “a set of parameters, focal points, or even points of contention around which political discourse revolves.” They also embody attitudes, sensibilities and habits that facilitate closure and agreement around particular cultural, political and legal settlements of the “separation” of church and state. Secularism, it turns out, is a powerful “pattern of political rule” (Asad 2006:219) with a significant role in generating the category of political Islam and setting the preconditions for particular kinds of policy toward Muslim-majority societies. To fail to acknowledge the politics of secularism is to miss out on a powerful set of assumptions and dispositions that animate contemporary politics, including foreign policy.

Political Islam: Background to the Concept

The term “political Islam” was coined in the 1970s to refer to what Denoex (2002:61) has described as the “rise of movements and ideologies drawing on Islamic referents—terms, symbols and events taken from the Islamic tradition—in order to articulate a distinctly political agenda.” For Ayubi (1992:ix) political Islam refers to “the doctrine and/or movement which contends that Islam possesses a theory of politics and the State.”⁴ Hefner (2005:18) describes a “resurgence of piety and public religious activity unprecedented in modern history” in the Muslim world during the 1970s and 1980s, emphasizing the diversity of commitments within this movement and distinguishing between public expressions of Muslim piety and identity and political Islam. Salvatore (1999:xxvi, n1) approaches political Islam as a “conceptual and symbolic construct, and never as an unproblematic description of a clear phenomenon.” As he argues (Salvatore 1999:xx), “the attribution to Islam of an inherently political dimension states the degree of the divergence of this religion from the assumed normality, and the degree of the divergence of the ‘Islamic’ polity from a normal concept and practice of politics.”

² For empirical studies of the evolving legal frameworks for accommodating Muslim religious practices in several European countries see Potz and Wieshaider 2004.

³ An extended discussion of this subject appears in Chapter Two, “Varieties of Secularism” in Hurd 2007.

⁴ Zubaida divides the Islamist movement into “conservative Islam” (Saudi establishment); “radical Islam” (more violent appropriations of Islam associated with Sayyid Qutb and his followers); and “political Islam” (affiliated with nationalist and leftist projects advocating “ideas and programmes of socio-political transformation based on Islam”). Zubaida 2000.

Hefner and Salvatore are onto something important when they identify the diversity of commitments within these movements and the extent to which political Islam is often presumed to diverge from normal politics.⁵ Political Islam is often interpreted monolithically by secular analysts as epiphenomenal, as a divergence and/or infringement upon neutral secular public space, as a throwback to premodern forms of Muslim political order, or as a combination of all of these features. Widely held interpretive and evaluative frameworks about Islam and politics form the cultural and religious backdrop out of which Europeans and Americans understand and engage with political Islam.

Two sets of secularist assumptions are operative in this cultural backdrop. In the first, which I describe as laicism, political Islam appears as a superficial expression of more fundamental economic and political interests and an infringement of irrational forms of religion upon would-be secular public life in Muslim-majority societies. It threatens democratic public order and marks a step toward theocracy. In the second, which I call Judeo-Christian secularism, political Islam appears as an undemocratic commingling of Islam and politics that stands in sharp distinction to the modern (Christian or Judeo-Christian) separation of church and state (Hurd 2004). Distinctions between religious and political authority are not only historically absent from Muslim-majority societies but are unthinkable due to fixed characteristics of the Islamic religion.

In both of these interpretive traditions, each of which is described at length below, political Islam appears as a refusal to acknowledge the privileged status of the private sphere and a transgression of secularist categories of public and private.⁶

The problem with this understanding of political Islam is, as Connolly (1999:22) argues, that it adopts as “neutral terms of analysis several concepts and themes that became authoritative only through the hegemony of [particular forms of] Western secularism.” Euro-American secularist epistemologies have produced particular understandings of political Islam, at the same time that, to follow Euben’s (1999:xiv) formulation, they “conceal their ‘mechanisms of production’ within claims of objectivity resulting in images which say less about what [‘political Islam’] ‘really is’ than about the ways in which [secularist] assumptions derived from Western history and experiences...produce our understandings of [it].” In other words, secularist epistemology and secularist authority rely upon and produce a kind of religious subject and understanding of normal politics that lends a particular coloring to theopolitical practices in Muslim-majority societies. The effect of this production of religious subjectivity is that individuals inhabited by these secularist assumptions often equate the appearance of “Islamic” religion in “politics” with terrorism, fundamentalism, and intolerance.⁷

These “framing effects” have not gone unnoticed. In his account of the New Islamist movement in Egypt, Raymond Baker (2003:4) for example alludes to a Western tendency to frame political Islam in negative terms. As Baker (2003:4) argues, “there are no sound scholarly reasons for the critical gap in the Western understanding of Islam...language barriers and cultural differences have meant that these important aspects of mainstream Islam that flow from New Islamist interpretations have been largely ignored in the West.” Fawaz Gerges (1999:6) has remarked that, “the underlying cultural values of Americans play a major role in shaping most policy makers’ perceptions of Islamists.”⁸ My argument builds upon

⁵ On the diversity of these movements, see Beinin and Stork 1997; which includes a discussion of political Islam as a form of popular culture, and Burgat (2003:xiv) for the argument that Islamism is the reincarnation of Arab nationalism “clothed in indigenous imagery.”

⁶ For a related argument regarding the alleged refusal of the Iranian hostage takers of 1979 to acknowledge the sanctity of the Western private sphere see McAlister (2001:220).

⁷ On this equation see further Burgat 2005.

⁸ For a critique of Western approaches to political Islam see Burke 2006.

the undeveloped intuitions of Baker and Gerges to suggest that European and American forms of secularism are important contributors to these “cultural differences” and “cultural values” identified but not explained by these authors. Although the causalities are complex, secularist epistemology contributes in crucial ways to the constitution of these otherwise inexplicable cultural barriers.

These secularist evaluations of political Islam have significant policy consequences in international relations. First, in secular analyses forms of politics identified as Islamist appear almost exclusively in a transgressive and/or regressive capacity, and tend to be equated and conflated with fundamentalism. As van der Veer and Lehmann (1999:3), citing Lawrence (1989) observe, “when religion manifests itself politically...it is conceptualized as fundamentalism...It is almost always interpreted as a negative social force directed against science, rationality, secularism—in short, against modernity.” Himmelfarb (2002:76) for example associates Islamic fundamentalism with “disagreeable images of female subjugation and abuse, religious intolerance and persecution, despotic governments and caste systems, child labor and illiteracy, and other unsavory practices that are hardly consonant with the vision of a universal ‘moral community.’” She hastens to associate political Islam with the transgression of universal norms in part because, as Asad (1999:191) observes, “from the point of view of secularism, religion has the option either of confining itself to private belief and worship or of engaging in public talk that makes no demands on life.” Because the forms of politics identified by secularists as political Islam do not conform to either of these requirements, secularist epistemology engenders a tendency to automatically associate them with dogmatism and fanaticism (Lynch 2000:741–759). Political Islam is defined *a priori* as a threat to the privileged status of the private sphere and as a step toward theocracy. This presumptive transgression is often linked rhetorically to the alleged Muslim proclivity for terrorism and totalitarianism, both of which also refuse to honor the privileged status of the private sphere (McAlister 2001:220).

A second policy consequence of Euro-American secularist epistemology is that the forms and degrees of separation between public and private, sacred and secular, Islam and politics that *do* exist in contemporary Muslim-majority societies either do not appear at all, or appear as ill-fitting imitations of a Western secular ideal. On the one hand, attempts to negotiate secular modalities of differentiation between religion and politics in these societies are depicted as “derivative discourses” of a more successful and authentic Western secular ideal. Political Islam, on the other hand, especially since the end of the Cold War, is depicted in oppositional terms vis-à-vis these derivative secularist discourses and the West more generally. As an illustration consider the following observation by Samuel (Huntington 1997:178–179):

What, however, if Turkey redefined itself? At some point, Turkey could be ready to give up its frustrating and humiliating role as a beggar pleading for membership in the West and to resume its much more impressive and elevated historical role as the principal Islamic interlocutor and antagonist of the West...Turkey, in effect, could “do a South Africa”: abandoning secularism as alien to its being as South Africa abandoned apartheid and thereby changing itself from a pariah state in its civilization to the leading state of that civilization.

Secularism, in this reading, is a Western practice that Turkey has only weakly imitated in a beggarly fashion since 1923. Turkey’s choice is either to continue begging for admittance into a Western club to which it can never fully conform or to revert to its previous position as an “Islamic” interlocutor and antagonist of

the West, which appear to be synonymous in this account.⁹ Legitimate negotiations over the terms in which religion is defined both in Turkey and outside of it, and the terms in which religion actually enters public life in Turkey, that take place under the heading of political Islam are automatically occluded as a result. There is no room for indigenous Islamic forms and traditions of negotiating the secular/religious divide that are not posited by definition as “antagonistic.” There is no room for Turkey to redefine itself on terms that do not conform to Huntington’s rigid secular/religious divide. My point is that not all forms of politics that sail under the flag of political Islam can be positioned in either oppositional or derivative terms vis-à-vis the various forms of politics that predominate in Europe and the United States. They need to be understood in their own terms and in the context of the particular and contested cultures, histories and forms of subjectivity out of which they have evolved.

Political Islam is neither a backlash against modernization, nor an epiphenomenal expression of more fundamental material interests, nor an attempt to revivify anachronistic local tradition, though each of these factors may be operative to some extent. Political Islam is a modern language of politics that challenges, sometimes works completely outside of, and (occasionally) overturns fundamental assumptions about religion and politics that are embedded in the forms of Western secularism that emerged out of Latin Christendom. These forms of secularism are themselves social and historical constructs (Hurd 2004, 2007). The secularist settlement, as Connolly (1999:6) argues, is a “division of labor that fell out of that historic compromise within predominantly Christian states” that “provided fragile protection against sectarian conflict and intolerance for a few centuries.” However, he continues, it also “spawned practices of public life too dogmatic and terse to sustain the creative tension needed between democratic governance and critical responsiveness to the politics of becoming. And the destructive orientations it supported to non-Christian countries left a lot to be desired too.” The impact of these destructive orientations is felt today in Western representations of political Islam.

This is not to deny that there are forms of Islamism, such as those espoused by Khomeini and his followers in post-revolutionary Iran, the Armed Islamic Group (French acronym GIA) in Algeria, the National Islamic Front (NIF) in Sudan, the Taliban in Afghanistan and Al-Qaeda globally, that *are* transgressive or regressive by almost any standard of judgment. (The extent to which al-Qaeda can be legitimately associated with any version of Islamic tradition is questionable, however, because the group adamantly rejects the authority of all established Islamic authorities. According to Carapico (2005), members of “Al-Qaeda...do not respect or abide by Islamic law as understood by those who know what it is about. They are reactionary nihilist-anarchists with no positive vision or program: even the goal of an ‘Islamic state’ per se is more imputed than articulated.”) These parties and movements, however categorized, threaten the status of almost any conceptualization of a private sphere and any attempt to democratically negotiate the relationship between religion and politics, and deserve condemnation. With regard to such cases, I agree with Lee’s description (Arkoun 1994:x) of Algerian historian Mohammed Arkoun’s position that such that “the tyranny of faith in militant Islam is no more acceptable than the tyranny of reason.” Yet these extreme forms of Islamist politics are the exception rather than the rule (Ayooob 2004:5). As Carapico (2005) concludes, “there is no evidence of a mass following or widespread public support in North Africa, the Levant or the Arabian Peninsula for a group calling itself al-Qaeda, much less al-Qaeda in Europe...al-Qaeda is not representative of Islamism and its

⁹ On the cultural and religious politics surrounding European opposition to Turkish accession to the European Union see Hurd 2006.

pronouncements are not consonant with those of any major Islamist party.” My point is that not *all* forms of what secularist authority designates as political Islam pose this kind of threat. There is more going on than is suggested by authoritative secularist categorizations. As LeVine and Salvatore (2005:51) argue, “the vocabulary of social science (in turn influenced by the grammar of theories of civil society) cannot completely capture the rich and complex idiom of these movements.” Political Islam raises important questions about the foundational principles of collective life, including secularist collective life. The shift of many Islamist movements in recent years away from radical politics and toward a more cultural orientation does not attest to the “failure of Islamism” as Olivier Roy (1992) suggests. Instead, as Göle (2002:174) has shown, the result of this shift is that “instead of disappearing as a reference, Islam penetrates even more into the social fiber and imaginary, thereby raising new political questions, questions not addressed solely to Muslims but concerning the foundational principles of collective life in general.”

In sum, most varieties of political Islam operate outside both the epistemological and explanatory confines of secularist tradition and secularist international relations theory. By failing to conform to the categories available to international relations theorists for understanding religion and politics, these forms of politics pose a challenge the epistemological assumptions of the academics and foreign policy-makers who have been immersed in these secularist traditions.¹⁰ The rise of different trajectories of political Islam provides an opportunity to revisit these assumptions and to rethink the policy recommendations that follow from them.¹¹ The next two sections focus on two trajectories of secularism, laicism and Judeo-Christian secularism, and their consequences for foreign policy.

Laicism, Political Islam, Foreign Policy

Political scientists are socialized in the tenets of classical liberalism with its emphasis on the benefits of a strict separation of religion and politics. This is laicism. Laicism is a form of political authority that is particularly influential in contemporary European foreign policy. It is most powerful when it appears as the natural order that emerges when there is no ideology present,¹² (Connolly 1999:23). Laicism denominates itself as public, neutral and value-free, and denominates religion as its private, affective and value-laden counterpart. The public sphere is the domain of reason, objectivity, deliberation and justice; and the private the domain of subjectivity, transcendence, effeminacy and affect. Laicism warns against religion in the public sphere and construes it as unnatural, undemocratic and even theocratic. Religion is assigned a fixed place out of this sphere; it is to be excluded from the spheres of power and authority in modern societies as well as from political analyses of these spheres. The relationship between religion and politics is thus subject to a set of rules considered to be universally applicable regardless of cultural, historical or political circumstance.

Laicist representations of political Islam correspond to what Daniel (2000:327), in his discussion of Christian-Islamic relations in the nineteenth century, describes as “the two extremes of administrative pragmatism and

¹⁰ As Burgat (2003:xv) confirms, “It is also impossible to interpret Islamism with recourse to nothing other than the dominant terminology used by Western social science to do so.”

¹¹ An example is Mahmood (2005:192), who concludes that “in order to understand Islamism’s enmeshment within, and challenges to, assumptions at the core of the secular-liberal imaginary, one must turn not to the usual spaces of political struggle (such as the state, the economy, and the law) but to arguments about what constitutes a proper way of living ethically in a world where such questions were thought to have become obsolete.”

¹² McAlister argues that, “the specific politics of women in the United States was presented as the gender order that emerged when there was no ideology present.” McAlister 2001:232.

missionary fanaticism.” In the former, political Islam is represented as an epiphenomenal expression of more fundamental structural, material or psychological interests. The Islamic resurgence is seen as “a product of socioeconomic and political woes; it is locally rooted (Gerges 1999:30). Roger Owen, Graham Fuller, Fred Halliday, Bassam Tibi, and, in some of his writings, John Esposito, adopt variations of this approach. Owen (2004:156) describes political Islam as a response to “the perceived failures of the secular developmentalist ideologies and strategies which had been used to legitimate most newly independent regimes.”¹³ Fuller (2002:51) argues that, “most regimes see almost any form of political Islam as a threat, since it embodies a major challenge to their unpopular, failing and illegitimate presidents-for-life or isolated monarchs.” Halliday (2005:122) attributes the rise of political Islam to “a general rejection of the secular modernity associated with radical nationalist politics and with the modernizing state;” and Tibi (2000:857) argues that, “the foremost issue related to the pertinence of politicized religion for IR is exactly the ‘revolt against the West’ directed against the existing secular order.” Esposito (1997:2) stresses that, “the failures of increasingly discredited secular forms of nationalism...strengthened new voices who appealed to an Islamic alternative...” Political Islam is portrayed as a backlash against modernity in general and unjust domestic economic and political conditions in particular.

In a second variation of laicism, political Islam is represented as a threat to the scientific management of the modern public sphere that must be controlled. As Hirschkind (1997:12) describes this position, the term political Islam is adopted to identify “this seeming unprecedented irruption of Islamic religion into the secular domain of politics and thus to distinguish these practices from the forms of personal piety, belief, and ritual conventionally subsumed in Western scholarship under the unmarked category ‘Islam.’” In this view, political Islam is represented as “opposed to the principles of modern living and inconsistent with the game of modern politics, science and development, and therefore deservedly facing extinction” (Nandy 1990:140). It is a menacing departure from the norm of the separation of religion and politics, and harbors the potential to be irrational, dangerous and extremist. Political Islam is a refusal of the privileged status of the modern private sphere and a transgression against secular democratic categories of public and private.

Laicism is what Mahmood (2005:189) describes as an “evaluative stance”¹⁴ in which political Islam emerges as either a reaction against unfavorable political and economic conditions and/or a dangerous infringement upon modern secular discourse and institutions. In both cases, “the neologism ‘Islamism’...frames its object as an eruption of religion outside the supposedly ‘normal’ domain of private worship, and thus as a historical anomaly requiring explanation if not rectification.” Some approaches focus on explaining political Islam, whereas others are more concerned with rectifying it. These evaluative stances are politically significant because they are politically effective. Their importance, as Mahmood (2005:191) observes, “is not simply a question of ideological bias, but rather the way these critiques function within a vast number of institutional sites and practices aimed at transforming economic, political, and moral life in the Middle East—from international financial institutions to human rights associations to national and local administrative bureaucracies.” Framing political Islam

¹³ As Mahmood (2005:24) observes, “in this view, the project of restoring orthodox Islamic virtues crucially depends upon an oppositional stance toward what may be loosely defined as a modernist secular-liberal ethos—an ethos whose agents are often understood to be postcolonial Muslim regimes in cahoots with dominant Western powers.”

¹⁴ Mahmood (2005:189–190) uses this term in discussing the study of Muslim women and in particular “the assumptions triggered in the Western imagination [by this term] concerning Islam’s patriarchal and misogynist qualities.”

as either epiphenomenal or as a reactive infringement upon secular public space contributes to an insistence on the part of the international community that Muslim-majority states follow a laicist trajectory of development and modernization, with its emphasis on a particular form of separation between Islam and politics.

This set of assumptions is influential among contemporary European thinkers such as Gilles Kepel (2004:295), an influential French scholar of Islamism, who argues that the “separation of the secular and religious domains is the prerequisite for liberating the forces of reform in the Muslim world.” According to Kepel, Islam must be reconciled with modernity, meaning that the shortcomings of Islam in politics are to be remedied through the importation of Western-style democracy, the secularization of civil society and the separation of mosque and state. Political Islam is constitutionally ill equipped to contribute to public life in Muslim-majority societies.¹⁵

Laicist assumptions about political Islam, as discussed earlier, are not limited to Europeans and have also been influential among U.S. foreign policy-makers engaged with Muslim-majority societies. As Gerges (1999:231) argues:

Actual American policies toward Islamic movements and states reveal a deep residue of ambivalence, skepticism, and mistrust...the United States has not only supported its traditional friends—in their fight against Islamists—but has done little persuade them to open up the political field to existing, legitimate opposition forces.

Development and foreign assistance programs prioritize the privatization of religion in the name of modernization, development and democratization. This mentality peaked during the heyday of modernization theory in the 1950s and 1960s,¹⁶ and also stood behind the state imposition of a particular form of secularism (Kemalism), almost indiscriminately lauded in Western accounts, that accompanied the founding of the modern Turkish republic (Parla and Davison 2004).

At least three foreign policy consequences follow from laicist commitments and assumptions. First, the laicist framing of political Islam makes it difficult for oppositional politics cast in religious language to flourish in the public spheres of Muslim-majority societies. As Gerges (1999:3) observes, “a strain of skepticism exists within U.S. foreign policy-making circles regarding the compatibility between political Islam and democracy. U.S. discourse, replete with implicit references to Islamists’ political behavior, views revolutionary Islam as anti-democratic and autocratic.”¹⁷ Vali Nasr (1995:262) agrees: “as secularism is commonly viewed as a prerequisite for viable democracy, the rise in the fortunes of Islamic revivalism is viewed with alarm.” Yet, as Asad and others point out, given the structures of authority in these societies religious activists of any kind, extremist or not, have little choice but to engage state institutions and discourse: “Islamism’s preoccupation with state power is the result not of its commitment to nationalist ideas but of the modern nation-state’s enforced claim to constitute legitimate social identities” (Asad 1999:191). Following Asad, Mahmood (2005:193–194) contends that, “it is not that the pietists have ‘politicized’ the spiritual domain of Islam (as some scholars of Islamism claim) but that

¹⁵ On the influence of this kind of laicist thinking upon a decision by the European Court of Human Rights effectively denying Turkish medical student Leyla Sahin the right to wear a headscarf while studying at the University of Istanbul (see Hurd 2006:413–414).

¹⁶ For a triumphalist account of the potential of Western civilization see Emerson 1960; For a contrasting account, see Grovogui 1996.

¹⁷ For a statistical challenge to the alleged correlation between Islamic religious beliefs and autocracy see the survey findings in Inglehart 2003.

conditions of secular liberal modernity are such that for any world-making project (spiritual or otherwise) to succeed and be effective, it must engage with the all-encompassing institutions and structures of modern governance, whether it aspires to state power or not.¹⁸ Nonhegemonic articulations of Islamic political tradition must engage state structures in order to be effective in the public spheres of Muslim-majority societies, an outcome that is unacceptable to laicists yet, paradoxically, necessary for political engagement to occur.

A second consequence of the laicist framing of political Islam for foreign policy is that when negotiations between pietists and secularists do take place in Muslim-majority societies they are often depicted by laicists as either unnatural and ill-fitted approximations of laicist ideals, or as outright threats to these ideals. Tibi (2000:848) advances a version of the latter when he suggests that, “political Islam and its concept of order are based on hostile attitudes vis-à-vis the globalization of Western models and the universalization of their values; it revives worldviews not consonant with European concepts of world order.” In the former case, attempts to negotiate modalities of separation between religion and politics are perceived to be what Chatterjee and Brown, though from different perspectives, have described as “derivative discourses” of a more successful and authentic Western secular ideal.¹⁹ Secularism is thus “dichotomized between a noble Western invention and an ignoble non-Western imitation” (Marx 2003:viii). In both instances political Islam is depicted in oppositional terms vis-à-vis laicism or local approximations thereof. Yet as Norton has shown in his study of Shi’ism in Lebanon, this representation of political Islam is inaccurate: “the Shi’i resurgence in Lebanon has not been a simple reflection of Shi’ism’s supposed rejection of secular authority...History is replete with examples of accommodation, and most Lebanese Shi’a do not reject the legitimacy of all temporal states, though they find the Lebanese state, as it has functioned, illegitimate” (Norton in Sahliyeh, Norton 1990: 231–232; see also Deeb 2006).

A third policy implication of the laicist approach to political Islam is that it precludes effective engagement between European-style laicists and what Hefner (2005:298) has identified as moderate “civil Islamists” such as the Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia and the New Islamist movement in Egypt. Baker (2003:263) describes the latter as an influential moderate Islamist movement that emerged out of the Muslim Brotherhood roughly two decades ago:

Under authoritarian conditions, they have constituted themselves as a flexible and resilient “intellectual school,” neither attached to one particular movement nor an extension of official authority, yet nevertheless able to give coherence to their collective interpretive and practical work in a multitude of fields.

Framing political Islam as either epiphenomenal or as an infringement upon neutral public space eclipses the democratic potential of forms of Islamism pursued by the Egyptian New Islamists, the Turkish Justice and Development Party (JDP), Khatami’s reform movement in Iran, Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan and other

¹⁸ Hirschkind (1997:13) makes a similar point: “to the extent that the institutions enabling the cultivation of religious virtue become subsumed within (and transformed by) legal and administrative structures linked to the state, the (traditional) project of preserving those virtues will necessarily be ‘political’ if it is to succeed.” As King (1999:10) observes, “the very fact that ‘the mystical’ is seen as irrelevant to issues of social and political authority itself reflects contemporary, secularized notions of and attitudes toward power. The separation of the mystical from the political is itself a political decision!”

¹⁹ See Chatterjee (1993a:5) for the argument that post- and anti-colonial nationalism was never fully dominated by Western models of nationhood: “the most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but rather on a *difference* with the “modular” forms of the national society propagated by the modern West.” On the concept of a derivative discourse, see Chatterjee 1993b. On the argument that Islamic modernism is a derivative discourse, see Brown 2000.

similar movements. As Asad (1999:191) suggests, these instances of what Casanova describes as “deprivitized religion,” and others such as the 1992 elections in Algeria and the 1997 rise of the Welfare Party in Turkey, “are intolerable to secularists primarily because of the motives imputed to their opponents rather than to anything the latter have actually done. The motives signal the potential entry of religion into space already occupied by the secular.” In short, laicism in foreign policy contributes to the perception that a particular Western version of the separation of religion and politics offers the only viable path to democracy, a position described by Amartya Sen (in Nussbaum 2002:118): “The liberty that is increasingly taken in quick generalizations about the past literature of non-Western countries to justify authoritarian Asian governments seems to have its analogue in the equally rapid Western belief that thoughts about justice and democracy have flourished only in the West, with the presumption that the rest of the world would find it hard to keep up with the West.”

The term political Islam strives to encompass a range of different forms of politics, many of which exist beyond the reach of secularist epistemology. As LeVine and Salvatore (2005:47–48) argue, “there are concepts of the common good deployed by contemporary Muslim socio-religious movements that do not adhere to the dynamics or norms—and indeed, as we learn from Foucault, the techniques of power and subjectivity—of the main historical trajectories of European public spheres.” To recognize these forms of politics and come to terms with their effects requires acknowledging that the secularist traditions used to interpret them generate and rely upon particular and contestable ontological and epistemological assumptions. Secularist epistemology is not pre-given but is socially and historically constructed. Forms of politics associated with political Islam therefore pose not only a political challenge, but also and more fundamentally an epistemological and ontological challenge to European and American categorizations of religion and politics, and to Euro-American conceptualizations of secularization. As Asad (1999:192) concludes, “if the secularization thesis no longer carries the weight it once did, this is because the categories of politics and religion turn out to implicate each other more profoundly than we thought.”

Judeo-Christian Secularism, Political Islam, Foreign Policy

The implication of religion in politics described by Asad is evident in the second trajectory of secularism that has influenced Western, and particularly American, understandings of political Islam. In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt confessed privately that, “it is impossible to expect moral, intellectual and material well-being where Mohammedanism is supreme.”²⁰ Echoing these sentiments several decades later, Jeane Kirkpatrick observed that, “the Arab world is the only part of the world where I’ve been shaken in my conviction that if you let the people decide, they will make fundamentally rational decisions” (cited in Kramer 1993:37). Robert W. Merry, president and publisher of *Congressional Quarterly* and a former reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, argued in his 2005 book *Sands of Empire* that the inseparability of religion and politics is “etched in the cultural consciousness” of the world’s Muslims.²¹

Judeo-Christian secularism is a form of political authority that is particularly, though not exclusively, influential in contemporary American politics and foreign policy. It is an evaluative stance in which political Islam is seen as the

²⁰ Roosevelt to Spring Rice, 1 July 1907, in Morrison, *Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, 5:698-99, cited in Little 2002:15.

²¹ Cited in Secor 2005. Merry argues that the United States is waging a civilizational war against ‘Islam.’ See Merry 2005; Chapter 10, ‘The World of Islam.’ For critical and historical perspective on this allegation, see Marr 2006.

manifestation of a unique, culturally rooted and irrational commingling of religion and politics that differs fundamentally from the Judeo-Christian separationist approach to religion and state. In this view, there is a positive connection between the Islamic religion and the failure to modernize and secularize Muslim-majority societies.²² The potential for secularization is a consequence of intractable cultural and religious characteristics of particular communities. Muslim-majority societies are culturally and religiously unequipped or only weakly equipped to secularize in comparison to their Judeo-Christian counterparts. As a result, the religious/secular line is a fixed marker of civilizational difference. The forms of politics identified as political Islam, and specifically the unwelcome incursion of religion into public space, are seen as a natural, though regrettable, consequence of fixed differences between religions and civilizations. In its more extreme variations, this mode of framing political Islam leads to and lends credence to the assumption that “all forms of Islamism (from its more militant to its more quiescent) are...the products of a roving irrationality” (Mahmood 2005:199).

Judeo-Christian secularism relies upon the assumption that distinctions between religious and political authority are not only absent from the history of Muslim-majority societies, but are not expected to materialize in the future. As Lewis (1976:40) argues in an example of this thesis, “the identity of religion and government is indelibly stamped on the memories and awareness of the faithful from their own sacred writings, history and experience.” Harris (2004:110) suggests along similar lines that, “a future in which Islam and the West do not stand on the brink of mutual annihilation is a future in which most Muslims have learned to ignore most of their canon, just as most Christians have learned to do. Such a transformation is by no means guaranteed to occur, however, given the tenets of Islam.” Islamic civilizations, according to these authors, lack any indigenous form of secularism and reject the secularism imported from the West (see Lewis 1993, 1994, 2002). As Barber (1996:206) suggests, “Islam posits a world in which the Muslim religion and the Islamic state are cocreated and inseparable, and some observers argue it has less room for secularism than any other major world religion.” Lewis (1990:60) describes this scenario as a “clash of civilizations—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.” In *Islam and the West*, he argues that political and religious authorities have become increasingly separate in the West since the rise of secularism, and increasingly united in the Middle East since the rise of Islam in the seventh century C.E.:

Islam was...associated with the exercise of power from the very beginning...This association between religion and power, between community and polity, can...be seen in...the religious texts in which Muslims base their beliefs. One consequence is that in Islam religion is not, as it is in Christendom, one sector or segment of life regulating some matters and excluding others; it is concerned with the whole of life, not a limited but a total jurisdiction. (Lewis 1994:135–136)

This perspective also makes its way into European commentaries. Consider the following excerpt from a book review by A.C. Grayling of the *Financial Times*:

It is hard not to feel that one of many things the Palestinian philosopher Edward Said criticizes western observers for—namely, seeing Islamic civilization as frozen and backward-looking, falling behind the scientific, technologized, industrialized west because it is locked in an unprogressive medievalism—may be right after all. Explanations for this are uncomfortable to offer, but both Wheatcroft and

²² In a sophisticated and nuanced example of this position Buruma and Margalit (2004:128) argue that, “the main difference between contemporary Islam and Protestantism is not that the former is more political, but that it insists on a greater moral regulation of the public sphere by religious authority.”

Fletcher imply a plausible one. *It is that the disjunction between religious and secular aspects of life in the west, and its openness to debate, self-questioning and change, is precisely what traditional Islam lacks.* As a result, it is in the west...that technological and industrial progress has occurred. And with this progress have come more flexible forms of social organization, leading (however fitfully) to the evolution of democracy and human rights. (Grayling 2003:5), emphasis added)

Judeo-Christian secularism is a tradition made up of beliefs, practices and dispositions that predisposes those influenced by it to see the Islamic “refusal” to honor the special status of the secular private sphere as confirmation of the hopelessness of Islamic civilization. As with laicism, not all policymakers are influenced in a determinative fashion by this set of dispositions, but many are, and to ignore this is to miss out on a fundamental and powerful set of assumptions that animate contemporary foreign policy in different ways at different times in both Europe and the United States. Barber, in a popular book widely read among policymakers, illustrates this view in his suggestion that “Islam...is relatively inhospitable to democracy and that inhospitality in turn nurtures conditions favorable to parochialism, antimodernism, exclusiveness, and hostility to ‘others’—the characteristics that constitute what I have called Jihad” (1996:205). In such accounts Islam and modernity are incommensurable worldviews that lead to the creation of incompatible social and political systems. Policy options are limited to either tense coexistence, violent confrontation or, in some cases, conversion.²³ Political Islam is defined *a priori* as a threat to democracy, the privileged status of the private sphere and a step toward theocracy. This presumptive transgression is often linked rhetorically to the alleged Muslim proclivity for terrorism and totalitarianism, both of which also refuse to honor the privileged status of the private sphere (see for example Pipes 1994:63, 1995). As with laicism, one consequence of this perspective on Islam and politics is that the forms and degrees of separation and accommodation between public and private, sacred and secular, religion and politics that *do* exist in contemporary Muslim-majority societies either do not appear at all or appear as unnatural and ill-fitted imitations of a superior yet unrealizable Western secular ideal.

An important distinction between laicism and Judeo-Christian secularism that should be noted is that in many variations of the latter Islam is posited as incompatible with *any* separation between politics and religion, whereas in the former it is not. For laicists, Muslim-majority societies can be “modernized” if, like Turkey, they follow in the footsteps of their secular Western role models and enforce the exclusion of religion from politics. This laicist assumption underlies the foreign policies of many European countries, as they seek to engage in diplomatic dialogue with political Islamists to lure them toward a European model of secularism and punish them economically and politically should they stray from this trajectory. An example is the French and Russian position advocating direct dialogue with Hamas after the Palestinian elections of January 2006. Lichfield (2006) contrasts this with the American position:

In conversations with officials from various countries, two positions, crudely speaking, emerge. The first, predictably more common among American and Israeli policy makers, says that outside powers should strangle Hamas so that it either moderates or dies. The other, which finds more favor with Europeans, says to keep as much aid flowing as possible, perhaps with incentives for good behavior and sanctions for bad.²⁴

²³ This explains in part the efforts of some North American evangelical Protestants to attempt to convert Muslims in Iraq to Christianity following the 2003 American invasion.

²⁴ Although the Russians have remained engaged, the ‘strangle’ and ‘engage’ positions have competed for primacy in most European countries since the election of Hamas.

Working out of the assumptions of Judeo-Christian secularism, the prospects for transformation of Hamas are less optimistic. This kind of thinking animates, at least in part, recent American policy that operates on the assumption that it is necessary to “stamp out” Muslim political actors (such as Hamas) because their potential to act democratically is by definition limited if not entirely absent. Any form of Muslim political identity, in extreme variations of this perspective, can be boiled down and equated eventually with political tyranny and terror.²⁵ Robert Satloff, executive director of the *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, exemplifies the tendency to equate Hamas’s Muslim identity with religious tyranny and terror:

There is widespread sympathy for the view that the empowerment of Hamas is a grave danger to U.S. interests. It is transforming the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a difficult, bloody, but theoretically resolvable nationalist conflict into an intractable, zero-sum religious war. Before our eyes, an Islamic Republic of Palestine is taking shape next door to Israel and on the borders of Israel’s two treaty partners, Jordan and Egypt. Islamist radicals of all stripes—from the mullahs in Tehran to the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia to the jihadists of al Qaeda—are cheering the triumph of Hamas as the greatest political achievement of the new century. Now that the radicals’ caliphate has a foothold at the gates of Jerusalem, all these bad actors can be expected to invest in the success of the Hamas experiment, each in its own nefarious way (Satloff 2006).²⁶

The claim that groups like Hamas cannot be engaged as rational political actors due to their religious commitments contributes to, without unilaterally determining, the American refusal to engage with Hamas despite the fact that they were democratically elected.

Political Islam as Discursive Tradition

Contrary to the assumptions underlying laicist and Judeo-Christian secularist understandings of Islam and politics, the relationship between public and private, sacred and secular and Islam and democracy in Muslim-majority societies is complex and contested. As Ayoub (2004:9) argues, “the distinction between temporal and religious affairs and the temporal authority’s de facto primacy over the religious establishment continued through the reign of the three great Sunni dynasties—the Umayyad, the Abbasid, and the Ottoman.” Halliday (1996:118) maintains that “a separation of religion and state, indeed a rejection of all worldly, political activity, is just as possible an interpretation of Islamic thinking as anything the Islamists now offer.” Ira Lapidus (1975:363–385) argues that a “fundamental differentiation” between state and religion has existed in Muslim societies since classical Umayyad and ‘Abbasid periods.²⁷ He argues that the integration of state and religious community has characterized only a small segment of Middle Eastern and other Muslim lineage or tribal societies (Lapidus 1996:24). Esposito notes that the relation between Muslim religious and temporal authorities, including Shi’i Islam in Iran, has been ambiguous. As he argues,

²⁵ On the history of this perspective in the United States, see Marr 2006.

²⁶ For a contrasting perspective, see Soros 2007.

²⁷ “Despite the origins of Islam and its own teachings about the relationship between religious and political life, Islamic society has evolved in un-Islamic ways. In fact, religious and political life developed distinct spheres of experience with independent values, leaders and organizations. From the middle of the tenth century effective control of the Arab-Muslim empire had passed into the hands of generals, administrators, governors, and local provincial lords; the Caliphs had lost all effective political power. Governments in Islamic lands were henceforth secular regimes—sultanates—in theory authorized by the Caliphs, but actually legitimized by the need for public order. Henceforth, Muslim states were fully differentiated political bodies without any intrinsic religious character, though they were officially loyal to Islam and committed to its defense” (Lapidus 1975:364).

“despite the popular Western image of Shi’i Islam as a religion of revolution and martyrdom, its relationship to the state in Iran throughout Islamic history has been diverse and multifaceted...the relationship of the *ulama* to the state in Iranian history varied from royal patronage to opposition, depending on the sociopolitical context (Esposito 1999:106).” There is disagreement over the proper relationship that should obtain between political and religious authorities in Muslim-majority societies, and a range of institutional arrangements have reflected this conflicted relationship historically. As Muhammad Asad (1961:22) argues, “the political ordinances of Qur’an and Sunnah...do not lay down any specific form of state: that is to say, the shari’ah does not prescribe any definite pattern to which an Islamic state must conform, nor does it elaborate in detail a constitutional theory.” The relationship between Islam and democracy and the extent to which Islamic law is equipped to serve as a blueprint for governance is also a subject of debate (Boroujerdi 1997; Lawrence 1998). As Hefner argues, “rather than an unchanging religious ideology established 1,400 years ago, Muslim politics...has been shaped by broad changes in the state and society, especially those related to mass education, urbanization, socioeconomic differentiation, and the popular desire for public participation” (Hefner 2001:509).

As suggested by the public presence of the New Islamists in Egypt, the Moroccan PJD (Parti pour la Justice et le Développement), the AKP in Turkey, the democratic coalition in Indonesia that toppled Soeharto in 1998 (which included according to Hefner (2005:273) “a wealth of activists and intellectuals” involved in an “effort to effect a foundational reorientation of Muslim politics”) the public and democratic negotiation of the relationship between religion and politics in Muslim-majority societies often takes place under the aegis of what is labeled by secularists as political Islam. Like secularism, political Islam is “a discursive tradition that connects variously with the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledge” (Asad 1996:7).²⁸ As Ayubi has shown, it is “not an old doctrine that is currently being resurrected, but rather a new doctrine that is in the process now of being invented” (Ayubi 1992:119). Political Islam is a diverse, contested and evolving set of languages of religion and politics involving “a general mobilization of people around cultural, political, and social issues that are presented and interpreted through an Islamic idiom” (White 2002:6; Yavuz 2003). As Eickelman and Piscatori (1996:4–5) argue, Muslim politics “relate to a widely shared, although not doctrinally defined, tradition of ideas and practice” involving “the competition and contest over both the interpretation of symbols and control of the institutions, formal and informal, that produce and sustain them.” As Ayubi argues, “apart from a moral code and few ‘fixations’ related to dress, penalties, and *hala/haram* foods, drinks and social practices, there is no well-defined comprehensive social-political-economic programme that can be described as ‘Islamic’” (Ayubi 1992:230). Islamic ideologies, as Brumberg (2002:111–12) concludes, are “shaped by and encapsulated within a *multitude* of ideal social, political, and cultural identities that can contradict as well as complement one another.”

This historical dynamism in the relationship between Islam and politics suggests that the spectrum of movements, identities, individuals and activities designated as Islamist are not the expression of deeper structural, psychological and/or material interests or the pathological side-effect of antiquated religious commitments that are fundamentally at odds with modernity. Political Islam is

²⁸ According to Asad (1996:14–15), “an Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present. Clearly, not everything Muslims say belongs to an Islamic discursive tradition. Nor is an Islamic tradition in this sense necessarily imitative of what was done in the past.”

not a reflection of a commitment to irrational theopolitics or simply an oppositional discourse reflecting economic and political malaise. It is a diverse and multi-faceted set of languages and discursive traditions in which moral and political order is negotiated and renegotiated in contemporary Muslim-majority societies. Like secularism, it is a powerful tradition of argumentation and a resource for collective legitimation. It is neither merely an oppositional discourse nor a nostalgic one, though elements of both may be present, just as they are in many forms of secularism. As Mahmood (2005:35) writes, “to read the activities of the mosque movement primarily in terms of the resistance it has posed to the logic of secular-liberal governance and its concomitant modes of sociability ignores an entire dimension of politics that remains poorly understood and under theorized within the literature on politics and agency”.

Secularist epistemology and secularist foreign policy miss these dimensions of politics precisely because political Islam works outside of the epistemological assumptions of the authoritative public settlements that emerged from Latin Christendom, including the formations of secularism discussed in this paper. Political Islam contests the terms through which secularist epistemology organizes religion and politics. It stands apart from the most fundamental epistemological and ontological assumptions of the secularist settlement as it evolved out of Latin Christendom, including the rationalist assumptions that serve as the foundation of modern European-inspired formations of collective life (Euben 2002:34).

Identifying the epistemological limits of secularism makes it possible to identify some forms of political Islam as critiques of Euro-American forms of secularism. As Asad (1999:191) argues, “the important point is what circumstances oblige Islamism to emerge publicly as a political discourse, and whether, and if so in what way, it challenges the deep structures of secularism.” Sayyid Qutb, as Euben shows, appears in this light as a dissenter from the epistemological and ontological foundations of the traditions of secularism that have come to organize public life in the West. Qutb criticized post-Enlightenment political theories that exclude religious authority from politics.²⁹ He argued that the European imposition of a division between faith and reason, or what Berman (2003) describes as the “liberal idea that religion should stay in one corner and secular life in another,” upon the Muslim peoples had resulted in their alienation and humiliation.³⁰ As Euben (1997:31) has shown, Qutb’s theory challenges secularism in a way that parallels internal Western reassessments of Enlightenment tradition. His critique of sovereignty, for example, stands as a “a rebuttal to the epistemological assumption that truths about the world—political or moral—can be reached by way of human faculties, and that knowledge of such truths can legitimate human mastery over nature and human nature, and the exclusion of divine authority from the public sphere” (Euben 1997:52).³¹

Establishing the epistemological limits of secularism also helps to explain why political Islam is perceived as more threatening to Western ways of life than political Christianity. The latter also challenges the secular public/private

²⁹ Qutb was the author of *Milestones* and *In the Shade of the Koran*, among other works. Berman describes the latter as “vast, vividly written, wise, broad, indignant, sometimes demented, bristly with hatred, medieval, modern, tolerant, intolerant, paranoid, cruel, urgent, cranky, tranquil, grave, poetic, leaned and analytic...a work large and solid enough to create its own shade” (Berman (2003:24–29).

³⁰ The Islamists and the Arab nationalists, though initially cooperative before and immediately following the 1952 Egyptian Revolution that overthrew King Farouk, went their separate ways not long afterwards. The most radical nationalists sought to elevate the Arabs over other ethnic groups, while the Islamists sought to resurrect the caliphate in the form of a theocracy based in a strict interpretation of Islamic law. Not long after the Revolution and following an assassination attempt alleged to be the work of the Muslim Brotherhood, Nasser began to repress the Islamists. Qutb spent most of the 1950s and 1960s imprisoned in difficult conditions.

³¹ Juergensmeyer (1993:175) makes a similar argument.

distinction on a variety of levels, often to a remarkable degree. Yet the reception of political Christianity in Western democracies differs from the reception of political Islam, as suggested by the fact that the term “political Christianity” is rarely if ever used despite the public role of Christianity in European and American politics and foreign policy (Kirkpatrick 2004). This is because Euro-American secularist traditions evolved out of Christianity and remain indebted to Christian traditions in significant ways. Even in many laicist trajectories of secularization, public Christianity is seen as a way station on the road to liberal democracy, if not a significant contributor to it. As Tocqueville (1969:293) famously observed, “for Americans the ideas of Christianity and liberty are so completely mingled that it is almost impossible to get them to conceive of one without the other...” It is often argued that Christian values (and since World War II Judeo-Christian values) serve as the basis of American national identity and the source of American political ideals. Islam, on the other hand, has a different history of negotiating the public/private distinction than does either Christianity or the secularism that it spawned. From a Christian/secularist perspective, Muslim negotiations of public and private therefore appear foreign, unnatural, or even nonexistent.

Conclusion

Writing about Islam and democracy in *Middle East Report* several years ago, Jillian Schwedler begins with an anecdote about a young candidate for parliament, Muhammad Zabara, in Yemen’s second post-unification parliamentary elections in 1997. Standing outside the polls on election day, Zabara, who wore a neatly pressed suit and tie with his short hair and mustache freshly trimmed, was approached by a team of Western election monitors. When asked whether he was a candidate he responded, in English, that he was the district’s candidate from the Yemeni reform group, a conservative Islamist party. “But Ahmad Razihi is the Islamist candidate for this district,” responded one of the monitors, “you don’t even look like an Islamist” (Schwedler 1998:25).³² In the short but suggestive article that follows, Schwedler (1998:26) argues that powerful negative images of Islam and Islamists have driven the debate over Islam and democracy in the West, distracting from the problem of authoritarianism in the region. Analyzing two powerful images that circulate in the West, the veiled voting Muslim woman and the threatening mob of bearded activists, Schwedler concludes that “because these dual images are so pervasive, large numbers of Islamists like Zabara—activists but not militants—are routinely overlooked.”

This paper has sought to explain the conditions of possibility that enable this “routine overlooking” of many of the actors and forms of politics that travel under the heading of Islamism. It has shown how and in what cultural and historical contexts particular definitions of “political Islam” become authorized as definitive, thereby generating, along with other foundational assumptions, the ground out of which certain kinds of foreign policy appear natural and advisable while others are ruled out. I have shown that there is an important political story to be told at this level of analysis. As Martha Nussbaum (2002:11) observes, “one of the greatest barriers to rational deliberation in politics is the unexamined feeling that one’s own preferences and ways are neutral and natural” (in Cohen and Nussbaum). For the election monitors in Yemen, their ways of framing Islamism and classifying Zabara seemed neutral and natural. In suggesting that we examine these ways and preferences, Nussbaum’s insight helps to explain what

³² As Burgat (2003:15) writes of foreign observers studying Islamists, “even when more direct contact with Islamist figures is sought, they are chosen for their exotic dress or the radicalism of their discourse, not for their communication skills.”

occurred in Schwedler's account. The traditions of secularism that have come to dominate European and American ways of organizing religion and politics are comprised largely of unexamined ways and preferences. They are considered to be neutral and natural starting points for defining, deliberating over, and responding to religion and religious actors of various kinds. As I have shown, they are neither neutral nor natural. They are political settlements and not uncontested dictates of public discourse (Connolly 1999:36). They are social and historical constructs. These settlements and constructs have significant implications for how Europeans and European settler colonies, including the United States, relate to the rest of the world.

Among many Europeans and Americans, albeit to differing degrees, the forms of secularism described in this paper are viewed as standard-bearers. Non-Western models of religion and politics are seen as attempts to either approximate Western forms of politics or react, often violently, against them. As Grovogui (1998:500–501) argues, “the vast majority of contemporary international theorists...have failed to recognize the validity of non-Western languages of politics and their intended moral orders as legitimate contexts for imagining the alternatives to the present moral order”. Many of the forms of politics designated by secularists as political Islam are such non-Western languages of politics. These languages of politics operate largely outside the epistemological confines of secularism and secularist international relations. They throw into disarray the fundamental terms through which secularism organizes religion and politics. In addition, as Ayoob (2004:10) points out, many of these movements seek to challenge Western hegemony in international relations, refusing to “accept the current distribution of power in the international system as either legitimate or permanent.” As a result of these combined epistemological and political challenges, secularist decision-makers are quick to attribute the Muslim “refusal” to acknowledge the special status of the secularist private sphere as a harbinger of despotism in Muslim-majority societies and a threatening challenge to the Western organization of the public/private divide. This leads to an indictment of the potential of Islamic tradition to contribute to the public life of Muslim-majority societies, making it difficult, if not impossible, for policymakers to imagine a nonhegemonic and nondogmatic role for Islam in public life, discourse and institutions.

This epistemological narrowing presents a major stumbling block for intellectuals and policymakers in Europe and the United States. As Foucault noted, “the problem of Islam as a political force is an essential one for our time and for years to come, and we cannot approach it with a modicum of intelligence if we start out from a position of hatred” (cited in Rée 2005). The quick ascription of threat to all forms of Islamist politics, exemplified in the quote from Satloff earlier, starts out from this position. It has the effect of empowering radicals who argue that the West aspires to global hegemony through a crusade against Islam, while silencing their rivals who are either ignored or quickly dismissed as fundamentalists. It fails to address the nuanced realities of contemporary politics in Muslim-majority countries, in which movements like Hezbollah and Hamas have gained a strong and legitimate political and cultural foothold that cannot be effortlessly washed away. As Tamimi observed after the Palestinian elections of 2006, “Hamas is not isolated at all; it has more windows open to it today than ever before” (Gaess 2006:27). Blanket ascriptions of threat and indiscriminate anti-Islamic rhetoric and policy strengthen the radical fringe elements of such groups and disenfranchise their moderate rivals. As Ottaway (2006) concludes in a recent report from the Carnegie Endowment, “No matter what the United States says or does, the Islamist parties will remain the strongest players in the politics of Arab countries. The only question is whether they will continue to manifest that strength by competing in elections, as they have done lately, or whether they will do so through violence.”

Three conclusions follow from this argument. First, European and American foreign policy decision makers need to think hard about definitions and their political consequences. Although they do contest many of the fundamental assumptions embedded in Western traditions of secularism, the modalities of politics designated by secularists as political Islam are not necessarily aberrant. Two related points follow from this observation. First, as Schwedler (1998:29) has argued, “the real question is not whether Islamists pose a threat, but what political agendas are served by continuing to paint Islamists as a monolithic, anti-democratic mob?” In other words, more research into the question of who benefits from the representation of political Islam as aberrant is needed. Second, the normative question of how any particular version of political Islam measures up vis-à-vis indices of democratization or pluralization must be determined on a case-by-case basis. As Ayoob (2004:1) argues, “no two Islamisms are alike because they are determined by the contexts in which they operate”. Although political Islam may appear in a transgressive or regressive capacity in some instances, it will not appear exclusively in that capacity.

Second, the forms and degrees of separation between Islam and politics that do exist in contemporary Muslim-majority societies are not ill-fitting imitations of a Western secular ideal. They are local modalities of separation and accommodation between religion and politics that may or may not have any relation to the forms of secularism that emerged from European Christendom. As Beinín and Stork (1997:7) argue, “we must move beyond the explication of texts and the biographies of intellectual figures to examine the local circumstances and historical particularities of each movement, which often turn out to be more substantial than a simple conception of ‘Islam’ in opposition to secular politics.” European-inspired modalities of secularism need not be eliminated or overcome in this process, but they do need to be “parochialized” in Chakrabarty’s (2000) sense of the term. By this I mean that they need to be understood as one instance among many possible alternative ways of negotiating religion and politics, rather than as universalizable templates that are inherently superior to non-Western modalities of separation and accommodation.

Finally, democratic modalities of separation and accommodation of religion and politics in Muslim-majority settings can be promulgated by those currently identified as Islamists. Political Islam cannot be automatically situated in oppositional terms vis-à-vis conventional secularist and other separationist discourses. It does not represent a monolithic threat to otherwise viable local variations of Western secularism or modernity.³³ Instead, it is a discursive tradition mobilized in different ways with differing consequences. Like the Euro-American forms of secularism described in this paper, political Islam is a diverse tradition of argumentation in which the relation between metaphysics, ethics and politics is deliberated, institutionalized, and, inexorably, contested.

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³³ As Burgat (2003:xvi) observes, “the values of modernity are much less renounced than rewritten in the terminology of the symbolic system of Islam.”

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