Islamic Political Identity in Turkey. By M. Hakan Yavuz. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 342 pp. $32.11 (paper).

Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt. By Hussein Ali Agrama. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. 288 pp. $27.50 (paper).

Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity. By Talal Asad. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. 280 pp. $18.92 (paper).

Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech. By Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood. New York: Fordham University Press, 2nd Revised edition, 2013. 176 pp. $16.20 (paper).

The Woes of Secularism

How relevant is secularism for the modern Middle East? The problem is that many studies take it for granted that secularism, simply defined as the separation of religion from state and politics, is a key component for the success and well being of the modern nation-state. It is as if without the state openly declaring itself secular, as the Turkish Republic did in its formative period in 1923–1927, the nation and its institutions would be faced with relentless religious struggles. Education, law, and even the economy, would share the burden of a society with core religious values, where the state itself is enmeshed in the struggle. For others, the borderline between the religious and the secular is, in this early twenty-first century, pretty much flexible, without the clear borderlines that the secularists would like us to believe. And still for others, religion cannot be contained through an open declaration of the secular nature of the state: even Turkey, which for over a decade has been under the guidance of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), is "going back" to its Islamic roots. In sum, the importance of religion cannot be denied.

Notwithstanding such diversity of opinions, studies on religion and secularism share common shortcomings, namely, that secularism tends to be isolated on its own as a sign of modernity and progress, or lack thereof. When we think, for example, of Turkey as the prime example where state secularism was constitutionally adopted, the conditions that made such declaration possible tend to be overlooked: namely, that there was in the 1920s and later a class configuration that was "hegemonic" in its structure. Most countries in the Middle East, beginning with influential players like Iran and Egypt, came to modernity with a large class of big landowners, the same groups that were immensely influential in politics and the economy. By contrast Turkey's élite class structure was polyvalent, composed in large part of military and civilian officers that had to be repatriated "home" from the Arab provinces and elsewhere when the Ottoman Empire was in full decline. Consequently, there was an intelligentsia, led

by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (who would become Turkey's first president and founding figure), in the top echelons of society with enough expertise to develop solutions to the formation of the new Republic. The heterogeneous nature of these groups pushed for the creation of a political space that was portrayed as "secular," in the precise sense that state and politics should be set free from religious discourse. In practice, however, secularism was no more than a secularization of Sunni Islam, whereby minorities we brutally marginalized, a process that began with the Armenian genocide in 1915–16, and the relentless bloody attempts to integrate Kurdish nationalism within the framework of Turkish nationalism.

According to M. Hakan Yavuz, a key factor in the "return" of political Islam is the solidification of class structure around the bourgeoisie. Initially, the predominantly one-party system in the 1930s and 1940s fostered the creation of an entrepreneurial bourgeois class that was acting under state protection, hence was *stricto sensu* a "state bourgeoisie" (Yavuz 87). It was indeed the emergence of an independent "Islamic bourgeoisie" that finally posed a threat to the hegemonic Kemalist political and military establishment. In fact, Turkey has witnessed the growth of an entrepreneurial spirit that has had a profound impact on Islamic identity and challenged state secularism (Yavuz 96–97). What is important in Yavuz's approach, and herein he differs from other scholars of "political Islam," is that he offers for his study on secularism and Islamist political formations a class analysis: the more the economic system seems to have opened up to markets and liberalized, the more the country has clustered around an entrepreneurial class with a hardworking "Protestant ethic" that would hesitate to repress its core Islamic values. Hence the success of an "Islamist" party like the AKP, which presents itself as promoting an Islam within the framework of Turkish secularism. But as the June 2015 parliamentary elections have amply demonstrated, the AKP's leadership in society is beginning to fade away, pushing the country at large in another war with the Kurds inside and outside Turkey's borders, which could be dangerously mortal in an already inflamed region.

The "return" to Islam did not go, however, without problems, in particular in the 1990s and later. A case in point is the problem of the "Islamic scarf," which affects the attire of women in public spaces and institutions. Consider, for example, what happened in Turkey in 1998, amid the 1997 military coup that banned "Islamist" parties of the likes of the Refah and Fazilet, which brought down the populist government of the Refah leader and then-prime minister Necmettin Erbakan. In 1998 the Constitutional Court (CC) took aim at redefining secularism in theory and practice in light of what it saw as "serious transgressions" from the practitioners of the banned Islamist parties. Before handing down its decision, the CC redefined secularism as "the way of life," and the only officially sanctioned "regulator of political, social and cultural life of the society." The central goal of Kemalism was defined as being a political, social, and cultural system "free of any religious influence or presence." Religion, for the CC, "only can be tolerated in the private conscience of an individual, and any externalization or reflection of religiosity in the public domain is defined as an antisecular act against the principles of Kemalist secularism." The CC decision also alludes to "the different nature of secularism in

Turkey on the basis of *the unique characteristics of Islam* and the sociohistorical context of Turkey." Indeed, the court defined religion in opposition to secularism and argued that "religion regulates the inner aspect of the individual whereas secularism regulates the outer aspect of the individual." (Yavuz 247)

To understand the radical nature of such statements in the context of Middle Eastern societies and cultures we need to compare notes with Egypt. Egypt became autonomous from the Ottoman yoke since the botched French expedition in 1798–1801. Its first independent ruler Mehmed Ali (r. 1805–49) attempted to modernize Egypt by "secularizing" education and law. In practice, however, the system rested simultaneously on newly instituted courts, laws, and regulations, whose origins were Napoleonic, but where the Islamic sharīʿa and fiqh (the schools of jurisprudence based on the holy law) maintained their influence.

The second article of the Egyptian constitution which states that "Islam is the religion of the State, Arabic is its official language, and the principles of the Islamic sharia are the main source of law," is usually taken as indicative at how much Egyptian society and politics are embedded into the religious. The Syrian constitution carries a similar clause, except that the sharīʿa (the holy law) is substituted for fiqh, the various law schools (*madhāhib*) which represent different interpretations of the holy sharīʿa, based on the Qurʾān and ḥadīth (the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad).

The question, however, as raised by Hussein Ali Agrama in his *Questioning Secularism,* is, would such constitutional clauses make a country like Egypt more "religious" than "secular"? Does Egypt have a "secular" future? The anthropologist Talal Asad, Agrama's mentor, has differentiated between the concepts of the "secular" and "secularism," tracing the genealogy of the former to medieval Christianity, in its attempt to delineate a "profane" discursive field that would stand outside religion proper, while the latter is a nineteenth-century phenomenon on a par with nationalism and the nation-state, both of which require an ideology of integration into a "society" of autonomous individuals. European nations have thus gone through a process of secularization, which would imply implementing a doctrine of secularism as a discursive practice that would separate the domain of the modern state from that of the religious proper.

Agrama is frank that when he started his research on the Egyptian judiciary in the 1990s, he was not much into secularism per se. What seems to have changed his mind was the Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd case, the University of Cairo professor who was accused of apostasy in his writings regarding the interpretation of the Qurʾān and scriptures, and was ultimately forced to divorce his Muslim wife through an order that originated from a personal status court.

The problem, however, in the Abu Zayd case, was not simply that he did objectively externalize—in the form of published texts—what he may or may not have believed in regarding his interpretations of the Qurʾān and scriptures. Abu Zayd could have made the

rightful claim for his right of *ijtihād,* that of personal interpretation and reasoning, but, here again, the Court of Cassation, which has sustained the decision of the lower Appeals Court, made it clear that the entire text of the Qurʾān is not to be subjected to personal reasoning, except for verses that are not straight-forward and clear enough, or have no other verses to support them (Agrama 52). So, once more, the crucial matter, in the case of apostasy, is not one of "freedom of belief," but its externalization in an act (speech act or otherwise) that could be assessed and judged. Once externalized in publications, as Abu Zayd did in his numerous academic writings, the various courts found it legitimate to intervene, not, however, on the basis of freedom of belief. Belief is simply, for those secular and religious courts, the noumenal unknown, about which nothing could be stated, and regarding which the courts have nothing to say or judge.

Talal Asad, an astute genealogist in line with the likes of Nietzsche and Foucault, and Agrama's mentor, noted the following regarding the Abu Zayd case:

> Disbelief incurs no legal punishment; even the Qurʾān stipulates no worldly punishment for disbelief. In the classical law, punishment for apostasy is justified on the grounds of its political and social consequences, not of entertaining false doctrine itself. Put another way, insofar as the law concerns itself with disbelief, it is not a matter of its propositional untruth but of a solemn social relationship being openly repudiated ("being unfaithful"). Legally, apostasy (*ridda, kufr*) can therefore be established only on the basis of the functioning of external signs (including public speech or writing, publicly visible behavior), never on the basis of *inferred or forcibly extracted internal belief.* (in Asad et al. 36–7; emphasis added)

This internality and subjectivity of belief versus the externality and objectivity of religious behavior (e.g. blasphemy) operates perfectly well even within the strict confines of a secularist space of an Islamicate society like Turkey. Turkey went secular in 1924 during the formative period of the Turkish Republic, modeling its "laic" law, which separated state institutions from various religious powers, more after French *laïcité* (officially established in the 1905 French law on the Separation of the Churches and the State) than American secularism per se. If *laïque* in its original Greek meaning is that which "belongs to the people," in its later post-Revolution meaning, it would refer to that common political good, the body politic of the nation which should not be monopolized by clerical power; to "laicize" would then entail more radical measures than secularization proper. To elaborate, to laicize would not be limited to the removal of clerical power and symbols only, or the secularization of the state, as it would be more radical than that: namely, the banning of religious symbols (and symbolisms) from public institutions and public life. Hence a cross, which would symbolize Christian values, would be banned from the person who is wearing it in public, or at least within the confines of a public institution that preaches *laïcité.*

The point here is, what happens when the political space of a modern nation-state is *officially* declared secular, or better still, *laïque,* with all the French connotations of that term, which

Turkish Republicanism had wholeheartedly assumed and staunchly protected? Would such situation imply a complete "stagnation" of Egyptian secularism, which is not openly declared, but only negotiated piecemeal on every occasion, with or without a judicial verdict?

What is noteworthy is that between Egypt, which would not adopt an open secularist stance, and Turkey where secularism is staunchly protected by the Constitution, there is that *common* view that belief in Islam rests on the duality between an internalized–subjective attitude which could be tolerated as such by the state authorities, versus a parallel attitude of belief which is externalized and rendered *visible* by the practitioners themselves. When belief remains subjective and internalized, hence unknown to state and judicial authorities, it constitutes the domain of the subject as self; the externalization of *religious* belief, however, once open to the public, could be subjected to state and judicial scrutiny. That is at least the logic behind the decisions taken by both the Egyptian supreme court in the case of Abu Zayd's alleged apostasy, and, roughly the same time, in the late 1990s, by the Turkish CC regarding the practices of members of Islamist parties. What is remarkable in both instances is, whether the system is openly based on sharīʿa law or secularist, it still operates within the duality of internality and externality of belief. Thus, when the Turkish CC claims that "religion regulates the inner aspect of the individual," one should cautiously add as a reminder that for a religion like Christianity such regulation of the inner life *must be externalized, controlled, and disciplined,* otherwise adherence to the faith would be meaningless. And when the same CC adds that "secularism regulates the *outer* aspect of the individual," it is Islamdom that regulates faith in terms of an internality that cannot be monitored and an externality that could be subject to judicial sanctions.

How is it possible then to document secularism in Egypt, not only because it remains undeclared as state policy, but because the Constitution openly acknowledges its debt to sharīʿa law? Should we read secularism in between the lines, pretending that we see "it" operating under certain circumstances, even though "it" remains without official acknowledgment? Agrama's solution to this methodological impasse is to object to any reading that would place Egypt either on one side or the other. His stance is that, of course, Egypt is a modern nation-state, which means subjecting individual citizens to the same political power irrespective of their religion. Agrama's démarche, by refusing to take a stance on this, seems set within a modernist paradigm that modernization is no simple matter and that "things are not what they appear on the surface." He therefore misses the opportunity to explore the difference between an *open* declaration of secularism, as is the case in Turkey, and one where it is *not* openly acknowledged, leaving sharīʿa law—at least in principle—the source of all law. But it is not enough, as Agrama does, to claim that although sharīʿa law remains the source, Egyptian law is by and large historically Napoleonic, so that even the sharīʿa must subject itself to some brand of secularism. Such claim would, indeed, not free us from raising the issue as to why Egypt did not *openly* adopt secularism as Turkey did. And would that have made any difference in the practices of law?

What is needed is more than a smart postmodernist playfulness. Class configuration and antagonism, the possibility of a hegemonic élite (in the sense of Antonio Gramsci) that governs civil society, and the stability of the hegemonic structure, are all factors that would play in favor of secularism. Thus, in the case of Turkey, what became the "ruling class" of the Turkish Republic in the wake of dismantlement of the Ottoman Empire was composed of an élitist configuration of men in the military, landowners, industrialists and financiers, intellectuals and independent artists, with much stronger *interclass* ties than any other country on the eastern Mediterranean. The ideology of secularism was primarily destined to weaken the bonds between the religious establishment and society, attempting to render them obsolete by neutralizing them through a secularist public space, which precisely would not have been possible were it not for the hegemonic structure.

Egypt, by contrast, lacked such hegemonic structure. Historically, the Wafd party, instituted in 1919 in the wake of the Versailles Peace Conference, created a "corporatist" culture that would absorb diverse groups, including representatives of the working class and trade unions. The corporatist culture implied a loose assortment of societal demands that would lose momentum with the gradual British withdrawal from the political scene. That was already visible amid the Anglo–Egyptian treaty in 1936, and by the 1940s the old establishment was in full crisis mode, divided between a weakened Wafd, on the one hand, embittered workers and trade unionists attempting to create their own autonomous working class system of representation on the other, and an unpopular monarchy. The 1952 Free Officers' revolution only capitalized on such crisis by instituting its own corporatist and populist political space, which is still present, in spite of the fall of the Mubarak régime in early 2011. In sum, at no point in Egyptian history of the last century was there a stable class configuration that would have opted for secularism as an official state policy. Unstable class configurations in Europe and developing countries would invariably lead to a mixture of corporatism, populism, and fascism, which tend to harness on the existing communal cultures rather than challenge them with a notion of a political "society."

Zouhair Ghazzal
Professor of historical and social sciences
Loyola University, Chicago