

Mapping Post-Secular Islamic Liberation Theology¹

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Abstract

This article argues that the post-secular turn is the new social analysis that shapes the politics of the impoverished² in Islamic liberation theology. In this article, I suggest that, given the essentialism and determinism characterizing much of the contemporary studies of religion and secularism, a direct articulation of a post-secular approach from an Islamic liberation theology perspective is both inevitable and necessary. Such an approach can offer new meaning for both religion and secularism by engaging with the hegemony of secularism in relation to the state and society to envision a politics of the impoverished.

Keywords: Islamic liberation theology, post-secularism, Islam, Ali Shari`ati, Asghar Ali Engineer

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² The article uses the term ‘impoverized’, although at a superficial glance it is merely the British English variant of ‘impoverished’, which usually denotes a temporary condition of being poor, usually caused by recent circumstances. The term is spelled with a ‘z’ not so much because it is the American version, but the pronunciation denotes that the poor are not merely a social category, but exists as a product of an economic system that systematically produces the condition of poverty. By using ‘impoverized’ rather than ‘the poor’ or the ‘impoverished’, the agency of that economic system is foregrounded to highlight a process of impoverization.

Introduction

In much of the mainstream media and among several scholars, the idea of religion being a source of conflict is the default one, and the occasional religious call to peace is intrinsically regarded as something new and praiseworthy (Mitchell 2016:20). Others, equally essentialist in their reification, insist that ‘real religion’ is inevitably and invariably peaceful (Khan 2004:80). Both groups, however, will often argue that a bulwark against religion being weaponized for violent purposes – particularly and increasingly when it comes to Muslims – is secularism, along with the presumption that it is inherently peaceful. The idea that secularism – supposedly the sphere of reason, on its own and without its historical nemesis, religion, or the sphere of faith – can be solely responsible for ‘retaining’ civilization and is increasingly challenged from different angles, all mainly falling under the rubric of ‘post-secularism’ or ‘the post-secular turn’.

This article argues that the post-secular turn can also inform the politics of the impoverished in Islamic liberation theology. The article further argues that, given the essentialism and determinism prevalent in the contemporary analysis of religion and secularism – given its birth in the bosom of the Christian Western civilization, a direct articulation of a post-secular approach – is necessary from an Islamic liberation theology perspective. A post-secular Islamic liberation theology provides new meaning for both religion and secularism by engaging with the hegemony of secularism in relation to the state and society to envision a politics of the impoverished.

Liberation theology has two core elements: 1) The preferential option for the impoverished and the marginalized, and 2) a social analysis based on historical contexts (Petrella 2005:3). Both are nodal points based on the changing historical context of the impoverished, marginalized, and oppressed (Petrella 2005:3). Along with all other expressions of liberation theology in various religious traditions such as Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity, Islamic liberation theology is not a particularly mainstream tendency among Muslims, although there has been a significant number of scholars and organizations that describe themselves in these terms. Farid Esack (1997:83) has defined it as follows:

A theology of liberation...is one that works towards freeing religion from social, political and religious structures and ideas based on un-

critical obedience and the freedom of all people from all forms of injustice and exploitation including those of race, gender, class and religion. Liberation theology tries to achieve its objective through a process that is participatory and liberatory...It is formulated by, and in solidarity with, those whose socio-political liberation it seeks and whose personal liberation becomes real through their participation in this process. Furthermore, an Islamic liberation theology derives its inspiration from the Qur'an and the struggles of all the Prophets whose encounters with different forms of oppressions (*ẓulumāt*) are narrated therein. It does so by engaging the Qur'an and the examples of the Prophets in a process of shared and ongoing theological reflection for ever-increasing liberative praxis.

This article argues that the post-secular turn is a relatively new and necessarily historical context of social analysis of Islamic liberation theology. One of the main tasks of Islamic liberation theology is to inquire about the relation between Islamic liberation theology and other theories, strategies, tools of and approaches to liberation including decolonial theories, postcolonial studies, critical Muslim studies, and Islamic feminism studies to explore convergences to advance the preferential option for the marginalized. Unexplored dimensions of post-secularism are evident in the works on Islamic liberation theology, and the article wishes to foreground it. This tendency is best exemplified in the works of two of its early pioneers in the Global South and whose relevant work the article draws upon in framing the arguments, Ali Shari`ati and Asghar Ali Engineer.

Ali Shari`ati Mazinani (November 23, 1933 to June 18, 1977) was an Iranian sociologist trained in Paris, specializing in the sociology of religion. He is regarded by many as the most esteemed organic intellectual among Muslims of the 20th century (cf. Saffari 2017:27), particularly in Iran, where his ideas may have contributed little to what finally constituted the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic. Shari`ati inspired a generation of young Muslims throughout the world to be critical towards both the powerful structures of religion as well as the invasive and corrosive nature of imperialism (Waine & Kamali 2017:309).

Asghar Ali Engineer (March 10, 1939 to May 14, 2013) was a prominent Indian organic intellectual, well known for his commitment to communal harmony and peace, and the first scholar to use the term 'Islamic libera-

tion theology'. The socio-political context of his contribution to Islamic liberation theology is the debates in India about the subaltern politics which challenged dominant concepts of citizenship, community, the public sphere, and secularism. Engineer, who published copiously and whose work was widely read across the globe, deals extensively with the question of women's rights and inter-religious relationships in India³.

This article argues that the articulation of a critical post-secular approach from the perspective of Islamic liberation theology is important, given the need to critique the structuralist understanding of subjectivity dominant in contemporary studies of the politics of religion and secularism. Post-secularism identifies religion as a category within the dominant power of secularism which has the discursive power to define religion. For example, Charles Taylor (2007:770) argues that modern secularism emerged as a modification, not of but within the Western Christian tradition. With regards to a non-Western context, Partha Chatterjee (1992:148) holds that the dominant force of Indian secularism and discourses around it are primarily high-caste Hindu in orientation. Both these arguments take secularism as a category of a dominant religion that has maintained its power through a historical discursive process. This differs from the claim that secularism is really another type of religion or the mask of dominant religion. Both these examples show how secularism speaks from a place of power in defining and arranging religion (Nongbri 2013:4). A post-secular perspective understands religion and secularism as inseparable phenomena that cannot be referred to in isolation, as they dynamically change each other without respectively clinging to a universal essence (Nongbri 2013:5). Moreover, the rise of liberation theology around the globe from the late 1960s was significant in the overall development of what scholars call the 'return of religion', and the subsequent crisis of secularism all around the world (Staudigl & Alvis 2016:590).

Talal Asad (2003:23-24) points out that the term 'secularism' acquired its current meaning during the mid-19th-century debates on atheism when English freethinkers developed the term to avoid the unhelpful charge of atheism. The term 'secular' was used in medieval times to signify a domain of life and meaning outside the church. Ovamir Anjum (2017:ix) elabo-

³ Engineer's writings were usually very poorly edited, and I do not wish to consistently draw attention to this. Readers may assume that any errors of spelling, style, or grammar wherever he is cited, reflect the original contents.

rates on this, ‘Today, this word can have one of at least two meanings: either a neutral one to describe that which is not deemed sacred or *immediately* religiously normative without connoting opposition to it, such as when we refer to scientific or technical education as secular education or secular pursuit’. However, as Joan Scott (2018:1-2) argues, immediately after the clash of civilization thesis presented by Samuel Huntington (1927-2008) and after the Cold War, the meaning of secularism signified a triumph of enlightenment over religion, this changing in meaning towards an essentially positive alternative – not to all religions, but more specifically to Islam.

Recent studies on Islam and secularism largely concur that the political doctrine of secularism and the sociological understanding of secularization were not the dominant trends in the Islamic past and present (Abbasi 2020:185). However, the epistemological divide and separation of secular and religious as a distinct form of power relations continues to carry a particular significance in various Islamic societies (Abbasi 2020:185). Sherman Jackson (2017:2) argues that the epistemological foregrounding of the secular over the religious was not part of what he calls the ‘Islamic understanding of secular’. He further argues that the Shar`iah (the Islamic legal dispensation) limits the realms of both the ‘religious’ (*din*) as well as that of the ‘secular’ (*dunya*) within Islam (Jackson 2017:22-23).

The focus of this article, however, is the hegemony of secularism in defining the relation between religion and secularism when conceptualizing Islamic liberation theology. The post-secular Islamic liberation theology, this article argues, is part of an attempt to build broader political assemblages of movements of oppressed subjectivities that cut across the boundaries of religion and secularism. There are three sections in the article. The first discusses the problem of contemporary understandings of religion and secularism from a post-secular studies perspective. Here, the first section examines the epistemological foregrounding of secularism in the work of Jürgen Habermas and problematizes it to develop a critical position on both religion and secularism. The second section shows the affinity between post-secularism and Islamic liberation theology through the works of Shari`ati and Engineer to demonstrate the convergence and divergence between Islamic liberation theology and post-secularism. The second section further explores theoretical strategies and attempt to show the common political praxis in which the criticism of religion and secularism emerged. In the third section, the discursive construction of a post-secular Islamic liberation theology is further concretely

expanded, using three categories: Critique, essentialism, and subjectivity. These three categories are critically developed around the problematization of secularism and religion. This, in turn, leads to an articulation of a social analysis based on a post-secular Islamic liberation theology.

Post-Secularism: The New Politics of Religion and Secularism

The term ‘post-secularism’ was popularized by Habermas at the beginning of the 21st century (Modood 2014:15). Habermas’ position of post-secularism enabled an understanding of the role of religion in secular citizenship in the context of European crises concerning the relation between science, politics, religion, and technological development in Western societies (Habermas 2008:126). However, the Habermasian position ‘defines the post-secular turn in the narrowest possible Eurocentric terms, and it universalizes a specific brand and historical manifestation of secularism’ (Braidotti, Blaagaard, De Graauw, & Midden 2014:2). For Habermas, post-secularism is a reflexive understanding of both secular and religious citizens to transcend their inherent limitations in a society (Habermas 2008:126). He retains the epistemological hegemony of secularism in his notion of post-secularism. However, the political criticism of secularism was established well before Habermas, although the term ‘post-secularism’ was not used to represent it. One example of this is the new politics of the critique of secularism from a social movement perspective in the Indian context, which has already started in the 1980s, as is evident in the works of Engineer (1984:9). It is evident that the critiques of secularism were present in the Indian public sphere even if not explicitly named as post-secularism (Nandy 2007:107).

Post-secularism studies on secularism and religion tend to focus on its historical, critical, and political genealogies. Prior attempts to understand it, though, took place purely at a conceptual level (McLennan 2010:5). The common thread that unites various previous attempts to study secularism is that the critique becomes an essential elevation of secularism without the confines of power rather than a critical position on secularism engaged in historical discourse and the ‘common sense’ of a given society, history, or

politics (Brown 2009:10)⁴. Post-secularism studies point out how secularism has evaded critical scrutiny in the contexts of exclusions and otherization of religion, especially minority religions, faiths, and political spiritualities (Scott 2018:4).

The question of positioning secularism as an ostensibly progressive, liberatory force in relation to religion, warrants unpacking because of the dominant position of its secularism in defining religion (Asad 2003:2). Asad (2003:1-2) argues that the problem of secularism as a political doctrine is not that it is Western in origin. The separation or division of religious from secular is thus not unique to Western history. The medieval empires of the Islamic world practiced this separation for its own reason (Asad 2003:1-2): ‘What is distinctive about “secularism” is that it presupposes new concepts of “religion”, “ethics”, and “politics”, and new imperatives associated with them’ (Asad 2003:2). More often, those who oppose secularism on essentialist grounds miss the point that the problem of the secular as an epistemology is in its construction of what religion is, as their positions on secularism succumb to the essentialist premise of the secularism it opposes. It is here where the power of secularism as a political doctrine is located. The novelty of a post-secular position is that it does not divide secularism and religion into two watertight compartments. It also does not place one above the other (Asad 2003:22). Critical inquiry into the inevitably intertwined history of secularism and religion focuses on a social analysis based on post-secularism (Asad 2003:22).

To illustrate the contingent history of secularism and religion, one can consider several ‘histories of origin’ of secularism in India, considered by many as one of the more successful examples of non-Western/postcolonial secularism without Eurocentric baggage (Sayyid 2014:39)⁵. The multiple interpretations of origins make a singular definition of Indian secularism im-

⁴ Brown (2009:10) argues that it is very difficult to have a natural relation between secularism and critique. The post-secular argument is that the relation between secularism and critique should be regarded from another perspective of critique.

⁵ Salman Sayyid (2014:39) argues that most often the valorization of Indian secularism is a political tool to confirm the validity of secularism as a universal phenomenon. This position further entrenches the idea of secularism as not inherent to the West, obscuring its epistemological location to discipline the religious ‘other’ – particularly and increasingly, although not exclusively – the Indian Muslim minority.

possible. Amartya Sen (2006:17-18) argues that the ethos of secularism was present in South Asia since the times of emperors such as Ashoka (304-232 BCE) and then Akbar (1556-1605 CE). He further argues that the principles of secularism that existed in the Mughal Empire – especially under the rule of Akbar – were triggered by the spirit of Indian secularism. Ashis Nandy (2007:107-111), however, differs with this nationalist historiography of secularism and argues that Indian secularism was a colonial, political invention and cultural, imperialist imposition over the plurality of cultures, traditions, spiritualities, and religions that existed in India before British colonialism. Romila Thapar (2016:18) agrees with Nandy’s critique of counter-historiography of secularism as being foreign and colonial, but argues for its relevance in the context of its adoption by the Indian masses to strengthen popular sovereignty and postcolonial democracy after the British rule. Thapar (2016:19) assumes that the so-called Indian culture has had no issues with borrowing foreign ideas and experiences, and that is its ability to accept foreign ideas to form a unique blend of syncretism, which makes India unique.

The question of the relevance of talking about the ‘origins’ of secularism or the definition of secularism in a given context needs to be rethought from a post-secular perspective. The essence of a concept outside of political discourse cannot be completely known (Laclau 2007:545). Instead, the post-secular attempt seeks to understand the interrelation between religion and secularism and how they have dynamically changed in their discursive moments (Asad 2003:5-6). Secularism and religion need to be regarded as discourses with different meanings in different historical and political contexts, with distinctive political effects. Neither secularism nor religion can be reduced to ‘left-wing’ or ‘right-wing’, ‘progressive’ or ‘reactionary’ without signifying the particular context of the political discourse it articulates. With this understanding of post-secularism, we need to look closer at the narratives the normative secularism has constructed about religion and the world to engage its (secularism’s) discursive power.

In its critique of secular power, Islamic liberation theology converges with post-secularism studies, mainly by complicating the binary of religion and secularism (McLennan 2010:4). The power of secularism becomes hegemonic in the sense that it becomes normalized by repressing its contingent and historical articulation, and presents itself as an obvious and uncompromising certainty (Scott 2018:4). One of the political implications of post-secularism studies is that it unpacks the notion of power that works as the

usually ‘hidden truth’ of secularism (Scott 2018:7). Post-secular studies argue that the relation between secularism and religion is primarily one of power⁶. This is the point where Islamic liberation theology and much of post-secularism strategies converge.

Between Islamic Liberation Theology and Post-Secularism

In the early 1970s, Shari`ati⁷ held that a simplistic secularist position that seeks to erase the role of religion in the life of the impoverished, does not sit well with the complex genealogy of the revolutionary praxis of the impoverished in different parts of the world (Shari`ati 2006:28). Shari`ati reinterpreted the secular anti-colonial categories prevalent in the works of Franz Fanon (who died in 1961) and reconstructed them as a language of Muslim political subjectivity in the context of the Iranian revolution (Leube 2018:165)⁸. The reconstruction of the history of religion in Shari`ati’s works argues that the antagonism to religion does not emerge primarily from non-believers or anti-

⁶ Post-secular studies have attempted to classify themselves in several ways. Religion and secularism and their interdependencies are just one part of a larger question. Colonialism, capitalism, nationalism, race, and gender frameworks of critiquing secularism are well-developed areas of inquiry (Lloyd 2016:1-18). However, the secular is primarily defined in opposition to religion, and hence there is a deeper enquiry into secularism and how it defines religion. This is what distinguishes post-secular studies as a field of enquiry. The notion of religion as the worst manifestation of society as regressive and as a perversion, was established through secular epistemology.

⁷ Andrew Burgess (2006:x) argues that Shari`ati’s approach to religion has more in common with Latin American liberation theology, while his approach to the historiography of religion is more particularly in line with the works produced by Enrique Dussel (cf. Burgess 2006:x).

⁸ There were three letters sent between Fanon and Shari`ati, though he published a few articles under Fanon’s editorship at *al-Mujāhid*, the journal of the Algerian *Front de Libération Nationale (National Liberation Front)* (Leube 2018:159). While Fanon does not endorse the role of religion in politics in the way Shari`ati does, in a letter to Shari`ati, Fanon was optimistic about the idea that Islam, or at least Shari`ati’s approach to it as practiced in the Algerian anti-colonial struggle, will converge in the larger liberation of oppressed humanity, with his secular anti-colonial interpretation of liberation (Fanon 2018:668-669).

religious secularists, as many of the clerics claimed. This antagonism rather emerged from the oppressor class, which cuts across the sphere of both religion and the secular (Shari`ati 2006:32). However, this proto-post-secular view of the role religion and anti-religion play in Shari`ati's work is often dismissed by a section of Iranian secularists as another apology for the ideological power of the elite religious classes in controlling the impoverished and working-class (Shari`ati 2006:32). Morteza Hashemi (2017:213) argues that the sociology of Shari`ati was post-secular because he used the language of religion to enthuse a social movement as compared to traditional sociologists who limit themselves to theorizing social movements. Shari`ati produced a sociology which combined secular and religious idioms to build a revolutionary mass movement in the context of Iran (Hashemi 2017:213). He challenged the presumed neutrality of secularism by foregrounding the language of the religion of the oppressed to speak back to the structure of power and hegemony which prevailed in Iran (Hashemi 2017:213).

Contrary to the position of Islamic liberation theologians such as Shari`ati, some secularists had an essentialist expectation that all religions would fade away soon and the growth of capitalism and modernism would eventually replace the regressive presence of religion by inaugurating a new immanent perspective of secular life. On the contrary, as Brown (2014:109) argues, the presence of religion in the lives of impoverished people living in huge slums all over the industrialized world, is proof that the Western and modernist rendition of secularism as global future is wrong.

Currently, many of the global impoverished across the Global South find sanctuary in religion after the heightened antagonistic developments of capitalist modernism (Brown 2014:109). Historically, globalization and capitalist expansion fueled religious convictions rather than weakening them. Globalization appeared to have unwittingly produced something of its opposite (Brown 2014:110). Religion functions as a response to the market rationality of globalization (Brown 2014:110). The earlier expectation was that secularization is an inescapable fate of the expansion of capitalism around the globe. Against this secular expectation, even the so-called European liberal democratic states are removing the mask of secularism, proudly exhibiting their religious face by placing the conflict of religion and secularism to a new phase in the history of Europe (Roy 2020:6). Brown (2014:110) argues that a normative position of modern secularism does not help in analyzing the existential role of religion in the life of the impoverished who are suffering under

the new capitalist regime. Brown (2014:110) conceptualizes a new kind of secularism that goes beyond the separation of the church and politics. Secularism, Brown argues, is a power relation that defines what secularism and religion are a) in public as well as private life, b) as a politics of governmentality, and c) through the power of modern subjectivity (Brown 2014:110).

The implication here is that the emergence of post-secular studies has a close affinity with Islamic liberation theology in criticizing an essentialist understanding of both religion and secularism with special reference to the preferential option for the impoverished and their politics. This convergence happens first by enabling a new conceptualization of critique in understanding religion and secularism; second, by moving beyond essentialism in prevailing critical attempts to conceptualize religion and secularism; and third, by forming new post-secular subjectivities beyond the structuralist understanding of religion and secularism.

The Relevance of Post-Secular Islamic Liberation Theology

The intersection and interaction of post-secularism and Islamic liberation theology is not a new phenomenon. Engineer, in fact, applied a non-binary view of secularism and religion⁹ from the eighties of the previous century. Although he did not offer a particularly nuanced or rigorous analysis due to his own essentialist approach, his views on religion and secularism should be appreciated for their historical and implicit formation of a type of post-secularism. Engineer's engagement with secularism and religion emerged through his praxis in the backdrop of violence between communities in post-colonial India. While he argued that both secular and religious forces play a definitive role in producing what he termed 'communal violence'¹⁰, he placed

⁹ Engineer's *On developing theory of communal riots* (Engineer 1984:3) can be considered as a basic structure of subsequent theoretical development of his work on communalism. His praxis is such that his analysis emerges from his capacity as a social activist, his grassroots knowledge, and his scholarly studies on the subject.

¹⁰ Engineer differentiates between religious violence and communal violence by looking at the role of religion in violence: '[O]ne must distinguish between religious violence – [located] in sectarian and doctrinaire differences – and communal violence – [located] in conflict over controlling political power and economic

them as secondary to the economic interest of the wealthy as the major force behind communal violence (Engineer 1984:10). To understand the ‘real nature’ of communal riots, Engineer argued for the combination of both ideological or macro factors, as well as local contextual variants or micro factors (Engineer 1984:11). The major beneficiaries of communal violence are the ruling classes in India who use religious and secular communal identities to secure their economic interests. Engineer’s basic premise on communalism and communal violence remained the same throughout his writing from the 1980s to the first decades of the 21st century.

In the early 1980s, Engineer rejected the dominant secular framework that religion had a monopoly in producing communal violence, stating that ‘[m]any good-intentioned secularists and rationalists...often make this mistake of holding religion as the main culprit in this [communal violence] matter’ (Engineer 1984:3). He argued that secular political parties also played a definitive role in producing communal violence in a postcolonial setting (Engineer 1984:3). There is a different articulation of secularism and religion in Engineer’s narratives. He views secularism as an instrument to maintain peace in social life and to promote a social ethic of non-violence (Engineer 1984:3). His position is that even though violence occurs between two communities whose identities are primarily articulated in religious terms, neither religion nor secularism is essentially responsible for it. According to him, it is the betrayal of both secular and religious values by primarily the economic elites and then, built upon that, by political interest which led to the structural reasons underpinning the violence between religions in India (Engineer 1984:8). Engineer’s insistence that the roots of what was always described as communal violence was inherently rooted in religio-cultural differences, but were driven by the mechanization of the economic elites, is also indicative of his awareness that poverty and its instrumentalization for social discord are the outcomes of processes engineered by the powerful.

resources between the elites of two communities’ (Engineer 1984:3). In the Indian context, the community groupings may vary according to the social organization based on caste, language, race, region, and gender. However, community formation in terms of religion, especially between Hindus and Muslims, is predominantly understood as communalism and the subsequent violence from that grouping is called ‘communal violence’ (Upadhyay & Robinson 2012:36).

To examine this a bit closer, we engage with Engineer's articulation of secularism and religion by examining his enunciation of communal violence. First, his rather essentialist framing of the power of secularism and religion means that he is unable to properly assess the direct role of religion and secularism in constructing communal violence in India. It also removes the power of ordinary people and their understanding of violence (Pandey 1992:40). Engineer constructs the economic interest of the elites as the primary cause of communal violence. Moreover, the essence of the secular nation and its citizen-subjects are to be saved from elitism (Pandey 1992:40). He, however, either ignores or is oblivious to the interconnected role of the power of religious subjectivities in producing a secular politics of violence (Pandey 1992:41). Engineer's limitation is, on the one hand, that he identifies religion and secularism as the visible causes of communal violence and, on the other hand, that they occupy an essentialist position outside the problem of power and subsequent violence. By displacing the question of power to another unnamed generality, power is thus ignored and perpetuated.

Engineer's praxis, however, does show that an Islamic liberation theology engagement with the question of secularism and religion emerges from the paradigm of political discourse. The problems of essentialism, the question of critique, and the politics of subjectivity demand serious consideration when one works towards a post-secular Islamic liberation theology. It is not to suggest that all differences between Islamic liberation theology and post-secularism can be eliminated, leading to some sort of unified meta-discourse, or a limitless fusion of post-secular Islamic liberation theology. What is more important in Islamic liberation theology is that it permits an intersection between Islamic liberation theology and post-secularism, and not a mere 'application' of either Islamic liberation theology or post-secularism one over another.

Three major categories determine the post-secular turn in Islamic liberation theology: Critique, essentialism, and subjectivity. These categories rotate around the problematization of secularism and religion to develop a direct articulation of a social analysis based on a post-secular Islamic liberation theology.

Critique: Hierarchy and Freedom

A post-secular Islamic liberation theology perspective espouses the right to critique both religion and secularism without reproducing the power it opposes. Such an approach rejects the binary approach to the religious and the secular as counterproductive in that it invariably ends up in the affirmation of one over the other. Given the normalization of secularism, the right to critique it is a political demand despite a commonsensical understanding that there are aspects of secularism that cannot be critiqued (Brown 2009:13). The criticism of post-secularism is distinct from internal critiques that are autobiographical in secular history, and the need to divorce the criticism of secularism from its own biography. Secularism cannot be the single objective point of critique, and instead needs to be subjected to critique. Furthermore, religion is not the burial ground of critique, but can also become a place for the articulation of critique (Ahmad 2017:16). This critique, we acknowledge, is often met with some suspicion when it is assumed that it is undertaken to enable the integration of religion and state or to politicize religion or both. Questions are raised by well-intentioned sceptics as to whether an attempt to bring religion ‘back’ to the forefront is dangerous or not, given that today’s contexts are different. However, the problems of power are not peculiar to religion. Questions of constraining plurality and questions of violence have just as checkered a history in secularism as they do in religion (Cavanaugh 2009:226). Both have complicated histories in terms of their engagement with politics. To relegate all problems to religion and all solutions to secularism is no longer tenable – if ever it was (Cavanaugh 2009:226).

To illustrate this, we consider the glib equation of religion with violence and secularism with peace. Routinely ignored or dismissed studies have consistently shown that the supposedly secular history of Europe has been just as – if not more – violent than its so-called religious history (Milton-Edwards 2011:187). Furthermore, in relation to what is considered religious – for example, ‘Islamic’ empires – there is hardly a comparison with the violence of secular history. Nazism, fascism, communism, liberal democracy – the so-called secular ideologies of Europe have a history of violence incomparable to violence in so-called ‘religious’ polities, and especially in Islamic governance systems (Cavanaugh 2009:113). This is not to say that Muslims are naturally non-violent, or that Muslim violence is devoid of Islamic influences, but rather to affirm that one cannot essentialize the Eurocentric and

Islamophobic historical correlation between Muslims and violence or any other group for that matter. William Cavanaugh (2009:6) argues that the essentialist understanding of the violence of religion is constructed by the politics of secularism itself¹¹. There is no exclusive history of violence by secularism or religion. It is in the hybridity of religion and the secular as a relation of power that Cavanaugh locates violence (Cavanaugh 2009:6). The hybridity of religion and secularism is a better way to make an understanding of violence in this world (Eagleton 2005:99). The freedom to critique secular power is a prerequisite for the politics of post-secularism from an Islamic liberation theology perspective.

Essentialism: Secular Left and Religious Right

Liberation from an Islamic liberation theology perspective is post-secular because it does not assume a non-antagonistic essence for either secularism or religion. The hegemony of secularism is protected by projecting itself as the pure source of power and by displacing the problems of secularism to religion. One of the problems requiring attention from a post-secular Islamic liberation theology is that of right-wing tendencies within religious movements. Presented in another way, does a critique of secularism assist the resurgence of religious right-wing¹² politics? This question, of course, emerges from the assumption of an inherent and essential virtue in secularism. From a post-secular Islamic liberation theology perspective, the critique of religious right-wing politics that comes from the affirmation of an essentialist secular-

¹¹ Cavanaugh (2009:226) also refers to the ideological function of what he calls the 'myth of religious violence' because it is 'part of the folklore of Western societies'. The hegemony of the West is behind the construction of religious violence in relation to secular violence which is based on the ideology of the nation-state: 'As such, it legitimates the direction of the citizen's ultimate loyalty to the nation-state and secures the nation-state's monopoly on legitimate violence' (Cavanaugh 2009:226).

¹² The terms 'right-wing' and 'left-wing' have a Eurocentric history. This article does not delve into the problematic of such categories because the analysis is focused on the anxiety of the secular left concerning the resurgence of religious right-wing politics. In other words, the use of the left/right binary in the context of this article is for the purpose of description and to address the problems of understanding commonsense and public reasoning.

ism, is problematic. The problem of secularism in the global context requires specific criticism on its own terms, without being reduced or displaced by the problem of the religious right-wing. By analyzing the two contexts of post-secularism debates in India and Iran – however briefly – the following section will tackle the problematic framing of an ‘essential’ religious right and secular left.

The Indian debate around secularism caused considerable anxiety among the secular left, as was also evident in the Iranian context in relation to the secular left’s claims that Shari`ati’s Islamic liberation theology was co-opted to produce a resurgence of the religious right-wing, particularly in the case of the Iranian revolution. In the Indian context, Sumeet Sarkar argues from a critical secular left position that secularism requires self-critique to enable and renew its politics of secularism and that the postcolonial Indian critique of secularism only serves to strengthen right-wing Hindu politics (Nigam 2006:155). He argues that what is required, is a ‘true’ commitment to secularism and democracy, especially to safeguard the rights of religious minorities in the face of a growing right-wing Hindu nationalism. Aditya Nigam (2006:170) argues otherwise by stating that the upper-caste Hindu right-wing critique of secularism needs not be intermixed with several other critiques of secularism, including critiques by anti-caste communities and other religious minorities. These critical discourses are different from those of the majoritarian Hindu right, as the socio-political position from which a critique emerges in part determines its goals and purposes.

Shari`ati faced similar criticism when he critically engaged with both religious authoritarianism and the historical determinism of the secular left, mainly for failing to understand the role of culture and religion in the life of the oppressed masses in Iran (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004:509). Shari`ati argues that while the religious elites presented the culture of the ordinary people as stagnant, the secularists rejected the role of culture and religion in the life and cosmology of the oppressed to form an organic expression of social and political protest (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004:510). His articulation of Islamic liberation theology was a double critique of both the followers of secularism and of the religion with both subsequently attempting to reduce his influence by pushing him to opposite camps by selectively appropriating his legacy (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004:510). The secularists’ main criticism against Shari`ati was that he provided space for the later emergence of totalitarian tendencies in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004:510). However, this reading

does not do justice to the proto-post-secular Islamic liberation theology project of Shari`ati, a careful reading of which shows that he was critical to all forms of oppression, regardless of where it emanated (Byrd 2018:124). He was deeply cognizant of how both secularism and religion can be – and indeed were – invoked in support of systems of oppression and injustice.

Shari`ati's critics also ignore that there was a significant inadequacy in the ideological analysis of the Iranian secular leftists (Behrooz 2000:xiv). Maziar Behrooz (2000:xiv) argues that 'Marxism in Iran was defeated not through ideological crisis engulfing international communism, but due to its inability to understand the internal dynamics of the 1979 revolution in Iran'. Iranian leftists wanted to cut the head of the state without really engaging with the overwhelming consensus of the Iranian state society (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004:510). Thus, the Iranian secular left failed in developing a mass movement in their society by wrongly focusing on the contradictions of the state. On the other hand, the Islamic critical discourse, by following Shari`ati, engaged with mass mobilization to build a counter-hegemonic block and focused on the existing social relationships in Iran to mobilize the masses against the state. Ghamari-Tabrizi (2004:510) argues that, '[c]ontrary to the Marxist-Leninists' position, who were preoccupied with the question of state repressive coercion, Shari`ati's predicament was the question of mass consent and, in an Althusserian way, the ideological state apparatus'. This made the Islamic counter-hegemonic block more successful in resisting the Pahlavi regime than the secular left¹³.

After removing themselves from the historical context of Iran and failing to understand the significance of religion in the lives of the masses in Iran, secular leftists accused those refusing to follow their revolutionary line as problematic and regressive (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004:511). The deterministic view of society and politics reduced secular leftists in Iran to a marginal phenomenon. Shari`ati, on the other hand, became the primary inspiration behind the revolutionary moment, theorizing the problem of state-society relations in Iran by engaging with the logic of the grassroots (Bayat 1990:21). A proto-post-secular view of the role of religion and secularism in the works of Sha-

¹³ Asef Bayat (1990:30) argues that Shari`ati's powerful critique of Marxism did not provide a complete license for the ruling regime, which was established after the Iranian revolution, to do what they wanted. That regime appropriated Shari`ati's legacy as one of its tools to fight the internal dissidents (Bayat 1990:40).

ri`ati is central in his construction of a theory and praxis of Islamic liberation theology. His praxis is attuned to the grassroots of the Iranian society. That is how he became influential among the religious class, although he differed with them by combining a theory of religion with a sociology of secularism in his approach to the problem of the Iranian society and politics (Byrd 2018:123). This subversive assemblage of religious texts, secular literature, critical theories, folk stories, and urban cultural narrations in the public discourse of Shari`ati, made him popular among both religious communities and secular circles.

According to Sophia Arjana (2018:192), ‘Shari`ati’s Islamic ideology insisted on religious grounds that to be a good Muslim one must fight to overthrow the existing social order and condemned both secular radicals and conservative clerics within the religious establishment who might oppose his revolutionary plans’. His praxis was post-secular in orientation because he practiced a critique that questioned the role of both religion and secularism that helped to maintain hegemony as a form of hidden consensus of power among the oppressed, and domination as a form of naked violence of the ruling class.

Subjectivity: Structure and Discourse

A post-secular Islamic liberation theology maintains a critical Muslim subject-position¹⁴ that is in constant critical engagement with the powers of secu-

¹⁴ The distinction between a structural position and subject position is crucial here in understanding the politics of subjectivity in Islamic liberation theology. The relationship between a structural position and the subject position are not always correspondent (Smith 2012:61). This shows the mediation of the political discourse around the determination of a structural position from various subject positions (Smith 2012:61). Individuals are free agents and choose their life according to their wish without any consideration about whether their structural positioning in society is wrong (Smith 2012:61). However, no one experiences their structural position – class, gender, race, nation, region, religion, sex, etc. – without the mediation of political discourse (Smith 2012:61). It is a discourse which determines the subject position and its relationship to the structural position. The struggles between discourses are significant in giving an interpretative framework for a certain subject position (Smith 2012:61). The question is how can Islamic liberation theology develop a discourse on effective resistance where dif-

larism and religion by considering the historical context of oppression and marginalization within both the nominally Muslim and broader non-Muslim world. A critical theory of power argues that weak power is ‘visible’ and hence becomes easily visible by the greater power it wants to engage (Bourdieu 2001:35). Thus, power that acquires a normalizing capacity will hide from its own criticism by multiplying its role in various social fields. Secularism maintains its ‘enlightened’ and moral authority by transferring its limits and problems to religion through a greater power that is invisible (Asad 2003:191). Moreover, secular power is revealed in its ability to develop an idea of a monolithic religion as unchanging, as something that remains the same irrespective of space and time and essence (Asad 2003:200). Secularism enables the production of certain peculiar critiques of religion that it essentializes without having to talk about its own normalization, otherization, and exclusions (Strensky 2010:92). Secularism has become the dominant power because of its ability to evade criticism. It perpetuates its power through the process of normalization and by multiplying its role in the social field.

The dominant secular position is that the ‘Muslim’ cannot be a category to organize politics due to the diversity of Muslims’ structural position in the form of class, nation, caste, race, region, gender, etc. and that there is no single structural position that constitutes ‘Muslim’ as a political entity (Sayyid 2014:8). The impossibility of naming Islamic politics as such is because of the plurality of social and political subject positions of Muslims that emanates from multiple structural positions – Muslims as understood through secularized categories, like class, caste, race, region, nation, gender, etc., to participate in politics by reducing their Muslimness to a secondary position. This is the reason why ‘Muslim’, as a singular subject position, is not possible. In short, Muslim/Islam cannot be a signifier through which political and social agency can be articulated (Sayyid 2014:7). Even if Muslims are attacked specifically for ‘being’ Muslims, autonomous Muslim politics is not possible because the reason for the attack against Muslims is not because they are Muslims, but there are underlying structures such as class or nationalism behind the attack against Muslims.

ferent subject positions can merge to form effective resistance based on political discourse? The task of promoting a new political discourse itself starts by analyzing the existing power relations.

However, the dominant secularist argument about terrorism essentializes terrorism and violence, reducing it to a peculiar Muslim matter motivated by Islam especially when committed by Muslim agents (Strensky 2010:146). In such an argument, there is an absence of any consideration of the internal differences and structures of power in the Muslim communities. It is in this context that critical approaches to how terrorism discourses erase differences between Muslims are relevant. On the other hand, when it comes to violence in the name of Islam by Muslims, the dominant secular position normalizes itself by avoiding all structural responsibility to secularism by blaming the religiosity of the Muslims (Strensky 2010:146). Phrased in a theological language, in contrast to the evil acts and deeds of Muslims, the normalizing power of the secular position takes responsibility for Muslim acts and deeds when it comes to the good acts and deeds of Muslims.

In summation, the argument is not that there are no constitutive splits in the formation of a Muslim subject position in relation to the various structural positions (Sayyid 2014:8). The question is that the plurality of Muslim political positions has any say in constructing differences such as class, gender, nation, etc. in the formation of Muslim subject positions (Sayyid 2014: 8). In other words, the specificity of the Muslim discursive tradition as hermeneutical framework plays a role in determining the politics of the Muslim discourse in a concrete context. A Muslim subject-position from a post-secular Islamic liberation theology perspective refers to the ensemble of the Muslim discursive tradition. Through this, a Muslim interprets and temporarily decides the structural positions within a social formation, beyond the binary of religion and secularism¹⁵.

Conclusion

Theories of secularization constitute the dominant norms of social analysis in understanding the relation between religion and secularism (Fox 2018:10). There are varieties of positions and variants of the secularization theory. It ranges from a gradual disappearance to a decline of religion from the public sphere and human life (Fox 2018:10). Though it is not directly connected,

¹⁵ Another example of this is an Islamic feminist position which prefers the signifier of gender in determining the Muslim subject position, which in and of itself is not the negation of Islamic politics.

functionalist understandings of religion compliment the secularization theory. Functionalist understandings of religion stress that religion is not the prime mover of society, but it is only a tool in the hands of non-religious prime actors of the society (Fox 2018:10). It explains religion away as a secondary factor (Fox 2018:20). The social and political elites with the collaboration of religious establishments use and manipulate religion to achieve secular or non-religious goals. This was one of the main concerns of Islamic liberation theologians like Engineer. The role of religion or Islam in the work of Engineer is rather utilitarian, and for that reason the power of secularism in determining and defining the role of religion is absent. Shari'ati's position was more complex in that he struggled to differentiate between the instrumental use of religion and the independent agency of religion in facilitating human actions towards a particular end – that is liberation.

Given the essentialism and determinism prevailing in the contemporary analysis of religion and secularism, the three major strategies in the frameworks of critique, essentialism, and subjectivity determine the articulation of a post-secular approach from an Islamic liberation theology perspective. The post-secular turn is the new social analysis that shapes the politics of the impoverished in Islamic liberation theology. The aim of the post-secular turn in Islamic liberation theology is not only to make a pluralistic space for religion in the public sphere – as we see in the works of post-secularism by questioning the authority and domination of secularism – but to reconstitute the role of religion as an option for the impoverished in the political constitution of the society. The recent turn in post-secular studies, however, only confines itself to making religion as one model of life world in the public sphere by challenging the hegemony of secularism. The aim of the post-secular turn in Islamic liberation theology is to give a new meaning to religion as the religion of the oppressed by engaging with the dominant power of secularism in the political constitution of the society.

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