Katerina Dalacoura August 14th, 2018

The Muslim Brotherhood as a product of a secular age

Estimated reading time: 4 minutes

Referring to the Muslim Brotherhood as at least partly secular may seem strange. Islamist organisations, after all, want Islam to permeate public and private life. Yet the Brotherhood only emerged in a rapidly modernising sovereign Egypt in which functional differentiation of state institutions had occurred. Drawing on this understanding of secularity as proposed by Charles Taylor, ***Katerina Dalacoura*** *presents the Muslim Brotherhood as a secular phenomenon.*

By Yuli Weeks for VOA [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the wider Islamist movement of which it is an instance, are in many ways a secular phenomenon. If we define "secularity" not only as the weakening of religious belief, but also as the idea that faith becomes one option among others; and "secularization" as the process of institutional and functional differentiation of modern state structures and the resultant marginalization of religious authority, then the Brotherhood, similarly to other Islamist entities, can be seen as a product of modernity and the "secular age." This transpires in two ways. First, for the Brotherhood, "Islam" is an identifiable set of beliefs that can be actively implemented and used as guidelines to reform society. Second, the parameters of the political order it proposes are defined by the context of the secular, modern nation-state.

Charles Taylor's book, *A Secular Age*, focuses on the Western world. It argues that secularity consists of three aspects. The first, "secularity 1," refers to "common institutions and practices—most obviously, but not only, the state." The modern state is free from the connection with faith or God, churches are separate from political structures, and religion or its absence is largely a private matter. Public spaces have been "emptied of God, or any reference to ultimate reality." Furthermore, Taylor argues, "the considerations we act on are internal to the

'rationality' of each sphere—maximum gain within the economy, the greatest benefit to the greatest number in the political area, and so on." This emptying of religion from autonomous social spheres is compatible, however, with the majority of people still believing in God, as demonstrated by the example of the United States.

The second meaning of secularity, according to Taylor, is "the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church." This is what people most think about when they define our times as secular. However, secularity must also be understood in a third sense, secularity 3, which focuses on conditions of belief. "The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and, indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace." The United States is not secularized in the second sense—because levels of religiosity remain high—but it is secularized in the third. Taylor's book focuses on secularity in the third sense. It traces the evolution of Western societies from a situation where it was virtually impossible not to believe in God (where belief was the "default option") to one where "faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others."

Taylor states that, outside of the West, "almost all other contemporary societies (e.g. Islamic countries, India, Africa)"—and people in the rest of human history—do not live in a secular age. When he discusses secularity in the third sense, of belief being one option among many, he writes that "clear contrast cases today would be the majority of Muslim societies, or the milieu in which the vast majority of Indians live." Taylor also writes that, though he focuses on the West, this is a world of "multiple modernities." Secularity, like other features of modernity, finds different expressions in different civilizations.

I would like to argue, however, using the example of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, that the differences between Western and non-Western settings are not really as stark as Taylor suggests and that "Islamic countries" or "Muslim societies" (as Taylor calls them) have commonalities in their religious experience with Western societies.

Taylor argues that a "purely self-sufficient humanism," in which human beings are "at the top of the order," became an option in the West in the period of modern secularity (p. 18). In the West, there was a gradual sorting out in experience "by which it became possible to relate to certain realities as purely 'natural'," and disintricate them from the transcendent; whereby it eventually became possible to see the immediate surroundings of our lives as existing on this 'natural' plane." This sorting out was compatible with belief in God and was even "accompanied by a more conscious and zealous dedication to God." Taylor writes: "It has often been noted how secularization went along with an intensification of religious faith." During the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Europe, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, religion became a matter of intense personal decision.

This resonates with developments in modern Egyptian history and with the history of the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt has a long history of modernization—and secularization in the sense of the expansion of state institutions—from the nineteenth century onwards. The Brotherhood's establishment in 1928 by Hassan al Banna occurred within the context of that ongoing process. The movement's popularity in the 1930s and 1940s can also be seen as an outcome of intensification of religious faith, at least in some segments of the Egyptian population. The Brotherhood's appeal increased after the 1970s, following a period in Egyptian history—in the 1950s and 1960s—when Egyptian and Arab nationalisms were enthusiastically adhered to.

Taylor links the rise of humanism with "the urge to Reform"—in the sense of "a drive to make over the whole society to higher standards."

He argues that a "buffered identity, impervious to the enchanted cosmos," developed among important elites in Latin Christendom. Society gradually came to be conceived as made up of individuals. What he calls "the Great Disembedding" involved a new self-understanding of our social existence, which gave "unprecedented primacy to the individual." In earlier societies there had been an inability to imagine the self outside a particular context, whereas now the abstract question of emigrating or changing religion is possible (this is what "disembedding" refers to). Taylor argues that the emergence of the humanist alternative set in motion "something like a nova effect, spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options." Originally confined to elites, the nova effect becomes generalized and in the second half of the twentieth century there arises in Western societies a generalized culture of "authenticity" or expressive individualism. The "buffered self" is at the center of this: having a boundary between inside (thought) and outside (nature, the physical) "comes about through the replacement of a cosmos of spirits and forces by a mechanistic universe" and gives us "a sense of power, of capacity, in being able to order our world and ourselves."

Once again, there are echoes of such developments in the history of the Egyptian Brotherhood, a movement that aimed to reform society starting with the individual. The Brotherhood emerged from within a wider tradition of Salafi modernism, which coalesced around the figures of Jamal ad Din al Afghani and Muhammad Abduh in the Middle East of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Salafism advocated returning to the origins of Islam by eliminating the popular, false accretions and superstitions that had accumulated over the centuries, and had undermined the purity of its message. Reforming Islam, the objective of the movement, would be realized if the believer, singly or collectively, took charge of the situation and steered Islam away from corrupt popular practices and towards a reformed understanding. For Hassan al Banna, before the reform of society and the institution of an

Islamic state could be attained, the individual would have to be reformed. Reforming Islam would be achieved by returning to the "fundamentals" of the religion (the Koran and the Hadith) and to a pristine early history of the time of the Prophet Muhammad, which was to be revered and emulated as an ideal. Muslims joined the movement as a result of choice, and personal choice at that. The Brotherhood—like most Islamist movements in the Middle East—was not the product of traditional settings, and it is typically stronger in urban rather than rural areas. Brotherhood members have been, very frequently, "born-again" Muslims (for want of a better term). They have actively embraced Islam and have taken the decision to put it in the center of their lives. In doing this, they have sometimes distanced themselves from their families and the older generation.

Let us now return to Taylor's definition of secularity and, specifically, his distinction between secularities 2 and 3. The very existence of the Muslim Brotherhood—since its inception and particularly since the 1970s—can be seen as evidence that Egypt is not a secular society. Most Egyptians (the Coptic minority as well as the Muslim majority) believe in God, and atheists are few. But things have not always been this way. In the past few decades, The Brotherhood has been the beneficiary of increased levels of religiosity in Egypt, which indicates that belief has become one option among others. More importantly, this increased religiosity has involved the (re)adoption of faith as a result of a conscious personal decision and the active pursuit of religious obligations. This is not dissimilar to the Western experience of secularity, as Taylor describes it.

Our next focus is Taylor's definition of secularity as "relegating God and religion to the margins of the various public spheres" (secularity 1). Many have argued that in the Middle East such marginalization has clearly not occurred. This is not only a physical observation—the widespread existence and use of religious worship spaces—but more

crucially refers to the continuing relevance of and appeal to supernatural authority and religious belief in all walks of life. One frequent explanation for this phenomenon is that in the Middle East there is no differentiation between religion and politics because Islam, being an inherently political religion, does not allow for it.

However, such views about the Middle East can be contested. With the gradual introduction of the nation-state in the post-nineteenth century Middle East, a new set of pervasive, if not all-powerful, structures of authority came into being. They entailed the secularization of social, educational, cultural and political structures in the sense that religious authorities were cut off from these areas of life, which they had previously dominated. Furthermore, secularization occurred because the modern nation-state vested itself with the sovereign right to legislate, further wresting authority away from religious authorities in the legal sphere.

In sum, there are many similarities between the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Western experience of secularity and secularization as described by Taylor. The Brotherhood emerged in the context of the modern Egyptian state in the 1920s and, since then, its political project and worldview have been shaped by secular state structures. In its drive to reform Islam, the movement placed the individual at center stage. The Brotherhood is the product of a wave of Islamic revivalism that is characteristic of modernity and, in many ways, is integrally linked to secularism, as it has been in the Western experience.

Referring to the West, Taylor argues that it is impossible to define the idea of “secularization” exactly. The concept may be challenged by asking questions such as: has religion declined as much as it appears to have? Did it occupy that much space in the past? Did a past golden age of religion exist? What is religion? If we define it as the search for the spiritual, it is arguably as present as ever. Even in the age of faith, not everyone was devout. However, Taylor writes that most of us agree

that "something that deserves this title [secularization] has taken place in our civilization." He maintains that the secularization thesis can resist most of the above questions and challenges though trying to understand exactly what happened "helps us refine our account."

If the Western experience of "secularity" and "secularization" is so varied that it is impossible for the terms to be precisely defined, beyond the West, "each case is different." However, the historical setting in which the Egyptian Brotherhood emerged and evolved, although not identical to the Western one described by Taylor, has considerable commonalities with it. This historical experience contains enough similar characteristics to allow for a common language and therefore the possibility of understanding, across regions and cultures. The implicit juxtaposition between "secular" and "Islamic" must be questioned. Islamist movements themselves are partly secular; they are products of modernity and constitute a break with the traditional world, rather than its continuation.

Note: This article was originally published by The Immanent Frame.

Note: For more on this topic, read Dr Dalacoura's recent paper 'Islamism, secularization, secularity: the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as a phenomenon of a secular age' here.

About the author

Katerina Dalacoura is Associate Professor in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. In 2015-16, she was British Academy Mid-Career Fellow. Her work has centered on the intersection of Islamism and international human rights norms. She has worked on human rights, democracy and democracy promotion, in the Middle East, particularly in the context of Western policies in the region. Her latest research focuses on the role of culture and civilization in