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Tawḥīd al 'uluhiyya, Secularism, and Political Islam

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Abstract

In this paper, a particular aspect of the Islamic notion of *tawḥīd* is described and explored with regard to its consequences for Islam's relationship to secular society. It is argued that strains of Islam informed by the widespread, orthodox interpretation of this *tawḥīd al 'uluhiyya*, or "the oneness of creation's worship of God," cannot be coherently harmonized with the notion of a secular, political order wherein religion and the public sphere are strictly separated. On this basis, it is then argued that inclusion of non-secular political Islam within the framework of liberal democracy is likely a preferable development in the interests of minimizing future international and domestic conflict, and supporting autonomous popular rule in Islamic states.

Introduction

The vital importance of the notion of *tawḥīd* for Islam as a religious tradition can hardly be overstated. This concept denotes what is often held up as the very core of Islamic tradition, its basic idea of the divine. *Tawḥīd*'s literal meaning is that of "unification," the root verb contains a notion of an active fusing together into oneness and wholeness, and it accordingly serves to consolidate and explicate the monotheistic foundations of Islamic theism (Dictionary.com).

This article explores the implications for the possibilities and limitations of political Islam in a secular context, with regard to a certain aspect of the common Sunni tripartite notion of *tawḥīd*, which is known as *Tawḥīd al 'uluhiyya*, or "the oneness of creation's worship of God." It also sketches a few preliminary starting points for a constructive approach given the conclusions of the paper. The *al 'uluhiyya*-aspect of *tawḥīd* emphasizes that only God justly deserves religious devotion and adoration, but it also has a reciprocal

meaning in that all of creation by definition is fixed in a relationship to God, which is manifest in an all-embracing propensity towards righteous devotion (Pall: 20). *Tawhīd al 'uluhiyya* also stresses the universality of orthodox Islamic faith and holds that virtuous devotion is a default tendency within all unspoiled beings of creation.

My suggestion is that *tawhīd al 'uluhiyya*, approached in these orthodox terms, has obvious ramifications for political Islam, and thereby influences the possibilities of contemporary, politicized Islamic traditions to coalesce with traditional Western secularism, which relegates religion to a private sphere, separate from the public.

If we scrutinize this particular aspect of *tawhīd*, its specific meaning can be described as a form of intentional trust, a whole-hearted love and loyalty directed towards the divine. A direct consequence of this branch of *tawhīd* is that all devotion and love must be primarily concerned with God rather than anything else, thus forbidding explicit idolatry. Therein lies a political problem (Meier: xv). This is particularly obvious in a traditional and contemporarily influential salafi interpretation of *tawhīd*, which comprises a fourth branch,¹ *tawhīd al hakimiyya*, or “the oneness of God’s sovereignty/dominion,” generally understood as an expansion of *tawhīd al 'uluhiyya* (Meier: 50). A commonly accepted implication of this fourth extension of *tawhīd* is that all legitimate worldly powers must necessarily submit to God; this poses a problem for an explicitly secularized social order (Meier: xv). This salafi interpretation of *tawhīd al 'uluhiyya* can hardly be disregarded as contrived, considering that the extended significance of a completely unswerving devotion, a “whole-hearted love and loyalty,” always concerning the divine implies that any authority who, in the exercise of power, expressively refrains from submitting to the will of God and adopts perspectives and goals that cannot be equated with an endeavor to realize the divine will in the world, may straightforwardly be considered to have failed with regard to the correct and righteous devotion, the concern of *tawhīd al 'uluhiyya*. Even if we do not accept the stronger salafi perspective as a premise, which entails that any and all forms of society that do not in every respect submit to sharia are to be considered iniquitous, a more moderate understanding of *al 'uluhiyya* also seems to pose a serious problem for an explicitly secularist social order with a strict separation between private religiosity and the public sphere (Pall: 92).

Disinclination at the Roots of Islamic Monotheism

What this analysis of *tawhīd al 'uluhiyya* implies, is that one of the most fundamental tenets of Islamic theology, with profound repercussions for the dominant idea of God, tends to produce a certain animosity towards the Western form of secularized society – disregarding external or contingent factors. The Christian tradition, as a comparison, is indeed replete with staunch opposition to a secularization of the above kind, but there is little to nothing in its very image of God that obviously opposes a certain organization of society. Also, such undercurrents in the New Testament that may be considered to reflect a certain escapism, a tendency to emphasize the transcendent at the expense of immersion in the worldly affairs, has no direct counterpart in the Qur’an or the Hadiths, which more obviously stress righteous participation in the political order. This, in concert with *tawhīd al*

¹ The other two aspects of *tawhīd* are traditionally taken to be *-al Rubu'biyya*, or belief in the oneness (rather uniqueness) of God’s sovereignty; and *-al asma was-sifaat*, or the uniqueness of the attributes of God

'uluhiyya and its ramifications, seems to limit the possibilities for Islamic traditions to submit to any secularized social framework, at least to any greater extent.

This inherent opposition is exemplified in the contemporary niqab (veil) debate. Cécile Laborde, in an often cited article on the French prohibition, discusses how an inevitable conflict has arisen between the French type of secularism, with its tendency to create a homogenous, religiously neutral citizen identity, and the importance the Muslim population generally ascribes to public expression of one's religious adherence (315-16). Laborde describes a form of absolute secularism, which strives towards a fundamental ideological conformism in which the citizenry submit to state power. She traces this back to post-revolutionary political hegemony that opposed the clerical influence of the *ancien régime*. With regard to the general cultural zeitgeist during the last decade, we may with little difficulty conclude that this particular strand of secularism is still very influential in liberal Western democracies (Nilsson: 175-87). Given our preceding analysis, this secularism, whose implicit demands extensively limit public religious expression, aggravates the situation.

Attempts to understand and explain conflicts between Islam and the secular order, which is often represented as the normative *weltanschauung* of Western society, has tended to focus on the purported unwillingness of Muslims to conform to what is regarded as a progressive and liberal tendency of Anglo-European political culture. In spite of such interpretations, there seems to be reason to approach this conflict as stemming from a fundamental inability of Islam to submit to and accept a certain type of totalitarian social order. This inability to submit may be linked to fundamental structural idiosyncrasies of the philosophical foundation of Islam, and may be open to clarification and further analysis by the philosophy of religion. Safet Bektovic points out a similar tension in his musings on Islamic philosophy and the postmodern. The conflict between humanism and theocentrism, he claims, have crystallized around interpretations of *tawhīd* (240-41). Perhaps this tension may be understood as an issue of the broader, categorical conflict between modernity and traditional religion, which would imply that a postmodern third way could very well be a viable solution. Still, Bektovic subscribes to the same problematic partisan discourse of progress mentioned above, which has inflamed the debate on the relation between Islam and secular worldviews. This is particularly obvious in that he stresses how the postmodern context necessarily must characterize Islamic self-understanding and exegesis if these are to be fruitful; he leaves no space for a meaningful separatism. Nevertheless, in relation to this conclusion he makes an important point, strengthening the thesis of this article: *tawhīd* is the main point of entry if far-reaching alterations of the value-structure of Islam is ever to take place. Furthermore, *tawhīd* in its traditional sense plays an important role in reproducing central values by virtue of its position in the theological sub-structure of Islam (240). In my view, this is evident in the Islamic perspective on, and ways of relating to, "worldly" power, which seems to be greatly influenced by the fundamental and change-resistant *tawhīd*.

To sum up, the tensions we in some respects witness between Islam and the pervasive, surrounding secular cultures, can be clarified to some extent by a philosophical analysis using conceptual foundations of the religious tradition. More extensive analyses of this type could possibly serve to enrich ongoing dialogue and help facilitate the integration of various views.

Explicit political Islam² is likely to become a more common element in previously predominantly secularized European states. A readily available, proportionately neutral philosophical analysis of the basic constituents of the Islamic value structure may favor a mutual understanding of the possibilities and limitations facing politicized Islam in today's global context.

Future Prospects

The fundamental rift between *tawhīd* and the secular order, by all accounts, hampers the ability of those strains of Islam influenced by the traditional interpretation of this concept to accommodate to social barriers between private religious practice and the public sphere. In today's global context an increasing number of Muslims identify with a traditional, conservative approach to Islam. An increasing conservative influence in the sprouting and fragile democratic states is replacing secular authoritarianism; the Arab Spring likely marks a point of no return, especially from the perspective of Western, post-Christian secularism that is present in many parts of the Middle East. An interesting and somewhat unexpected development in these nascent governmental systems is the fact that even the salafi, who for various reasons previously shunned involvement in the parliamentary process, now suddenly have shown cautious participation. We see possible development towards forms of democracy that are alien to traditional Western secularism, but fuse popular governance and deep-rooted religious sentiments that are almost unheard of within the framework of the Modern Project.

Secular Western powers are affected by these developments in two ways – internally, if the influence of various forms of political Islam asserts itself more profoundly in the future, and geopolitically, if the governmental makeup of key states in the Middle East increasingly reflect a liberal democratic path and a propensity towards confessional politics or *confessionalism* (Harb).

The secular West may find itself in something of a dilemma, which has been discussed at length elsewhere (Hashemi; Glancy). If it endeavors to support the developments towards popular government in the Middle East and other regions, it is not unlikely that the West will find itself backing forms of Islamic democracy that are at odds with its own secular ideals. On the other hand, if the integrity of the secular order is prioritized at the cost of support of indigenous forms of popular government, this may well fuel continued instability, sectarianism, and political disorder in this troubled region.

Conclusions and Further Suggestions

If one assumes the importance of domestic and international political stability in the short term at the expense of the integrity of the secular order, my proposal for navigating the horns of the dilemma assumes the unconditional support of any and all developments towards popular government as its starting point. The inclusion of a liberal Islamic democracy of a non-secular type in many contexts ought to be accepted as the most viable political solution at hand, in spite of the adamant demands of traditional secularism. The

² This assumes a broad understanding of the concept, designating all organized political activity on a foundation of Islamic values.

possibility of such an acceptance seems to necessitate at least two important politico-theological developments. First of all, if forms of non-secular, Islamic democracy are to be justly accommodated within the politics of Western states, secular society will not only need to tolerate the presence of theological ethics in the political sphere, it will be forced to learn how to negotiate with it. Secondly, which follows from that prerequisite, some form of common and mutually intelligible discourse must be established to make negotiations between the two different types of politics possible.

One conceivable path towards establishing this type of discourse is to analyze and conceptually open up the presumably incompatible value structures of all conversation partners. The fundamental values that come into play in confessional politics must be explicated so that they may be accessed by secular groups, and where these values do not explicitly overlap, they must be translated to the greatest possible extent into a secular ethics. Conversely, secular ethics must be translated as amicably as possible through Islamic theology. An example of this move would be to assume the foundational notion of *tawhīd al 'uluhiyya* in a manner at least *prima facie* intelligible in relation to a secular ethics. This could, for instance, amount to the claim that “God demands an exclusive and righteous form of worship for creation’s sake, since human beings, by necessity due to the nature of God, are created to exist in this particular relationship to the divine as ground-of-being.” This claim is intelligible from the point of view of consequentialist ethics, and a non-theist may approach the “God talk” as equivalent to a claim of absolute or irreducible values (such as the maximum happiness principle). Conversely, a non-secular Islamic ethics may commend the idea of a common, species-transcendent “nature” of all living beings (as an extension of the notion of a human nature employed within post-humanist environmentalist ethics or ecofeminism (see Curry: 49-52), which provides all of creation with an inviolable value. The fact that the two parties will likely employ different detailed descriptions of the nature of the very source of the values which they actually agree upon can be rendered less problematic by a concerted attempt to meet each other halfway, in the complex depths of each other’s metaphysics.

With less than heroic efforts of a similar kind, any attempt at integrating non-secular Islamic democracy into the contemporary political structures in the West is likely to breed more conflict than cooperation. There are important obstacles to the preferred developments, many of which are found at the level of public opinion and political tradition, and thus largely inaccessible for philosophical endeavors in the short term. Even if it is possible to find common ground upon which political Islam and secular democracy may cooperate fruitfully, social and institutional inertia may well obstruct progress.

By undertaking the important work of opening avenues of communication between the value structures of Western secularism and liberal Islamism, we have the opportunity to lay the foundations for a more stable and compassionate political landscape in the face of the looming hardships of the coming decades. A vital element of such a reconciliation lies in the ability to communicate each position by the means of the conceptual framework of the other; the ethics at the base of secular democracy must somehow be made intelligible and (to a certain extent laudable) from a non-secular Islamic point of view. It is hard to see how such an effort can begin anywhere but by approaching the Islamic concept of God and thus working with the notion of *tawhīd* and, as suggested above, possibly connecting this

foundational Islamic notion with the secular ethics' perennial aim of human flourishing. Yet this linking must not aim at “demythologizing” either of the perspectives in Bultmann’s sense, subsuming one under the other, but rather at enabling the parties to speak through one another, at establishing a functional dialogue wherein both sides may retain their own unique contributions to the debate.

It will certainly be contested that these and similar suggestions, if put into practice, would undermine the integrity of the secular order, and therefore cannot be considered meaningful options. Two types of answers seem possible, one questioning the sacrosanct status of secularism, prioritizing other values if and when they come into conflict with that of preserving secularism. Another answer would be to show how the secular order is not actually threatened by an increased capacity to understand, relate to, and make use of the conceptual framework of a confessional politics, just as the introduction of mosques in European cityscape have not in and of themselves drastically altered the religious makeup of its denizens.

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