MUSLIM IMAGINARIES AND IMAGINARY MUSLIMS

Placing Islam in Conversation with A Secular Age

Elizabeth A. Barre

ABSTRACT

This essay begins by exploring the extent to which the narrative of secularization presented in Charles Taylor’s A Secular Age might be complicated or otherwise challenged by taking account of parallel processes within Islamic thought and practice. It then considers whether Taylor’s argument might nevertheless be applicable to, or illuminative of, contemporary struggles with modernity in the Muslim world.

KEY WORDS: Charles Taylor, Christianity, Islam, secularism, modernity, humanism, individualism, nominalism, teleology

1. Introduction

One way to judge the importance of a book for a particular academic field is to survey the amount of attention it receives at professional meetings. Insofar as Charles Taylor’s recent work—brought together in A Secular Age—has been the subject of four AAR plenary addresses within the last three years, all of us in the field of religious ethics would do well to turn our attention to this phenomenon. Regardless of how we feel about the value of his project or the quality of his scholarship, the fact that it seems to have struck a chord within our field provides more than enough warrant for taking a closer look and continuing the conversation.

This is especially true for those of us working within the field of comparative religious ethics, and for two primary reasons. In the first place, this book is just as much about the nature and development of the modern moral order as it is about the ontology of the transcendent and the phenomenology of belief. He notes, for example, that “an important facet of the struggle between belief and unbelief, as well as the development of new forms of both, has been connected with ideals and counter-ideals of

Elizabeth Barre is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Marymount Manhattan College, after having previously held positions at Lake Forest College and Emory University. She is currently completing a project comparing recent Muslim debates about liberalism, democracy, and the separation of religion and politics to similar debates that arose within the Catholic tradition around the time of the Second Vatican Council. Elizabeth A. Barre, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, Marymount Manhattan College, 221 E 71st Street, New York, NY 10021, ebarre@mmm.edu

the moral order of society” (Taylor 2007, 419). Moreover, he contends that our modern predicament is the result of certain shifts in the way we imagine the relationship between the good life and various religious conceptions of the transcendent. In his attempt to explain the emergence of modern secularity, he argues that it was connected with “the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option...a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing” (Taylor 2007, 18).

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, an adequate appraisal of Taylor’s work seems to call for the specific insights of those who study religious ethics in a comparative mode. Despite Taylor’s focus on the history of the Christian West and his explicit protests to the contrary, the argument of A Secular Age—in both its descriptive and normative forms—is ultimately universal in its scope. This is clear not only because his claims about the transcendent would make little sense were they confined to a particular part of the world at a particular point in history, but because he himself betrays this universalism in numerous passages. Thus, for example, he has a persistent (and otherwise inexplicable) habit of following up his distinctly Christian arguments with what he considers to be analogous arguments in the Buddhist tradition (Taylor 2007, 17–18, 67, 151–52, 154, 513, 605, 623, 726, 780). Toward the end of the book, he is even more explicit, arguing that his “message comes out of a certain theology, but it could be heard with profit by everybody” (Taylor 2007, 743). Thus, what we appear to have in this work is an argument that offers both universal explanations and universal judgments about the religious-moral life on the basis of an (admittedly long and complex) history of one particular tradition.

This approach is bound to draw the attention of anyone with even a minor interest in comparison, but for two—somewhat opposed—reasons. On the one hand, some might be eager to use comparative tools to show that this argument—along with all others that seek to universalize the particular—is fundamentally flawed. Others, or perhaps the same scholars in more charitable moods, might be equally eager to use comparison to highlight the utility of Taylor’s narrative for helping us understand traditions not explicitly mentioned. In both cases, however, it is clear that comparative projects can offer a great deal to the ongoing discussions of Taylor’s work.

In this essay, I hope to begin both types of projects by placing Taylor’s work in conversation with the history of Islamic thought and practice. Like other traditions beyond the canon of Western philosophical thought, there is no doubt that Islam is beyond the main purview of Taylor’s argument. As he notes, “the story of what happened in the secularization of Western [and specifically Latin] Christendom” is already “so broad, and
so multi-faceted, that one could write several books this length and still not do justice to it” (Taylor 2007, 29). Thus, it is clear he never intended to “do justice” to the Islamic tradition within this work. Nevertheless, when the Islamic tradition is mentioned, Taylor reveals that he has at least thought about the issues to be addressed in this essay.

When introducing the idea of the “social imaginary”—a phrase Taylor coins to capture the way societies “collectively imagine” their social life through specific ideas about the moral order and its relationship to the transcendent (Taylor 2007, 146)—Taylor argues that it is the social imaginary of the Muslim world that provides a unique and “clear contrast” to the imaginary of our present secular age (Taylor 2007, 3). Thus, he seems to believe that the moral discourse taking place throughout the contemporary Muslim world fits well within his model—as a sort of paradigmatic example of a non-modern, non-secular imaginary.

Even more significant is the fact that many of the normative concerns motivating Taylor’s entire project (concerns about sexual repression, religious violence, and respect for human rights) are often defined in terms of what is happening in the Muslim world (Taylor 2007, 685). Thus, he also seems to believe that his argument can and should speak to some of the most pressing problems facing contemporary Muslims today, as they too attempt to come to terms with secularism and modernity.

In the space remaining, I will explore whether each of these assumptions about Islamic thought and practice, and their relationship to Taylor’s larger project, are correct. I begin by summarizing the broad themes of A Secular Age, followed by a few quick comparisons meant to highlight the extent to which the Islamic story fits his model in the way he seems to think it might. In short, section three assesses the accuracy of his account by reading A Secular Age through a Muslim lens. I will then flip the analysis around to take a look at the social imaginary of the contemporary Muslim world through the lens of A Secular Age. It is in this fourth section that I explore the implications of Taylor’s argument for thinking about the coherence and future dynamics of contemporary Muslim ethics.

2. The Argument of A Secular Age

In his attempt to describe and “(partially) explain” the historical conditions for the possibility of our modern secular age, Taylor takes his readers on a long march through the theological history of the Christian West (Taylor 2007, 14). In the process, he introduces three “outrageously simplified” Weberian ideal-types to “mark the distinction between the different stages” of that history (Taylor 2007, 437). The first stage of what he refers to as his “potted plant history,” is the “Ancien Régime” of the
Christian Middle Ages (Taylor 2007, 437). The second “Age of Mobilization” covers a much wider swath of modern intellectual history stretching from the earliest drives to reform the Church in the fifteenth century to the “era after the Second World War” (Taylor 2007, 445). The third and final “Age of Authenticity” arrived on the scene during the social upheavals of the 1960s and is the ideal-type that continues to define the present “Secular Age” (Taylor 2007, 473). The bulk of the book goes on to explore the way each of these ages manifests a unique social imaginary. But, beyond simply describing these imaginaries and their historical relationship to one another, Taylor makes a number of significant normative judgments about these imaginaries that are also worth noting.

The imaginary of the Ancien Régime is praised for its commitment to nominalism, teleology, and a particular form of ethical dualism, but also chastised for its failure to recognize universal human rights or the value of immanent pleasure in daily life. These failures are particularly significant to Taylor because he believes they encouraged the reactionary “rage for order” and “reform” that ushered in the modern Age of Mobilization—an age that appears to have the least redemptive value in this story (Taylor 2007, 63).

Although he appreciates the extent to which the imaginary of the modern period seemed to encourage (if not require) a deep commitment to universal freedom and benevolence, the package remains—on the whole—problematic. Its list of failures includes (but is not limited to): a turn toward voluntarism and instrumental conceptions of the created order, the introduction of “code fetishism” in both its utilitarian and deontological forms, an unwarranted confidence in the independent ability of humans to live up to said codes, and a reinterpretation of the transcendent as the judge, rather than the source, of one’s moral life (Taylor 2007, 509, 707, 742). Finally, in a somewhat ironic twist, emphasizing the human ability (and consequent duty) to discipline and order both the world and our bodies led to a simultaneous “disembedding” from both the transcendent and the immanent into the liminal space of the Cartesian ego (Taylor 2007, 146).

This brings us to our contemporary Age of Authenticity. Like its predecessor, the moral order of this age is understood in fundamentally humanistic terms. Yet, the manner in which it imagines this humanism is both an extension of and reaction to the moral framework of the previous age. By extending the deistic humanism of the modern period to an exclusive humanism completely severed from the transcendent, our present age is thoroughly secular in all the ways Taylor finds problematic (Taylor 2007, 19, 27, 259, 562, 569). That said, he has no problem embracing the “expressive individualism” of our age that rages against the “excarnation” of the modern moral order (Taylor 2007, 288, 299, 473, 613–15, 751, 766). By re-emphasizing the importance of embodied
experience, this aspect of our imaginary provides new avenues to the transcendent.

Because Taylor often argues that these imaginaries “could not have arisen in any other way,” it is worthwhile to ask whether other imaginaries—in other parts of the world—developed in similar ways (Taylor 2007, 259). As noted above, Taylor seems to think the social imaginary of the Muslim world provides a “clear contrast” to our own imaginary in the contemporary West. Is he right about this? If so, which of the other two potted plants does the Muslim imaginary most resemble?

3. A Secular Age through a Muslim Lens

Although careful answers to these questions will require significant exceptions and caveats, it is useful to begin with the following observation: Of the three social imaginaries Taylor presents, the moral discourse of the contemporary Muslim world seems to have the most in common with the Age of Mobilization. Like the Protestant reformers in Taylor’s narrative, most contemporary Muslims are voluntarists who imagine the moral order in terms of the command of God (Hourani 1985; Kelsay 1994). Moreover, this vision has often led to precisely the sorts of “nomolatry” or “code fetishism” Taylor finds problematic in his Age of Mobilization. As is often discussed in Islamic Studies circles, Islamic political theology generally proposes forms of nomocracy, or the rule of law, as the ideal political structure (Nasr 2003; Feldman 2008).

That is to say, for most Muslims, the moral life is primarily, if not exclusively, about living in accord with the divine law, or shari’ah. Moreover, if there is anything the Qur’an makes clear, it is that Allah—like the God of the Protestant reformers—will hold each of us responsible for whether we have done so on an ultimate day of judgment (Rahman 2009, 14, 29, 46, 106, 116; Rahman 1979, 129; and Sells 2007). These similarities then lead to an equally intense drive to discipline and order both individual moral lives and the larger social world. We can see this dual-pronged commitment on display in discussions of the various “forms” or “modes” of jihad—a term which, in its general sense, implies nothing more than the duty to “struggle” in the path of God (Kelsay 1993, 34–36). Equally relevant is the fact that one of the most important religious-moral duties in Islam involves not simply being good and avoiding evil, but actually commanding and forbidding each in the lives of others (Cook 2000).

As in the case of Taylor’s reformers, all of this suggests that the primary (but by no means exclusive) focus of the moral life is fundamentally immanent. Morality is not necessarily about transcending the present worldly order to reach the divine, but rather transforming this
order to reflect the divine. In a line that could have come from the lips of Martin Luther, the Prophet Muhammad is said to have claimed that “there is no monkery in Islam.” Although it is always difficult to make generalizations about Muslim sexual ethics, this hadith (and many others) reveal that Islam—unlike its Christian counterpart—has often considered the “ordinary” and “immanent” good of sexual pleasure to be universally worthy of pursuit (Maghen 2004, 5).

In *A Secular Age*, this turn toward the immanent suggests and reinforces a deep optimism about the ability of humans to achieve the good with minimal help from above; this is also true in the Muslim case. Thus, for example, human dignity is tied to the fact that human beings have been created with a unique ability to serve as God’s “vicegerents” on this earth, struggling to achieve whatever he wills for humanity (Sachedina 2006; Abou El Fadl 2004). Moreover, many contemporary Muslims have explicitly rejected the Christian ideal of the atonement Taylor wants to champion, arguing that “religious ideologies as have put their whole emphasis on God’s love and self-sacrifice for the sake of His children have done little service to the moral maturity of man” (Rahman 2009, 9).

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, the Muslim imaginary also mirrors the Age of Mobilization in its willingness to admit of denominations within the larger religious-moral order. Although this commitment is less and less apparent in contemporary contexts, the classical tradition has long recognized and supported numerous schools of law as equally valid options for all believing Muslims. And, as with the Protestant denominations, these are not “divinely established bod[ies]...but something that [humans] have to create—not just at our whim, but to fulfill the plan of God” (Taylor 2007, 450).¹

If my comparisons are well drawn, the similarities between these two social imaginaries reveal that Taylor’s ideal types are actually quite successful at capturing certain “packages” of ideas that more often than not go hand-in-hand. Yet, a closer look reveals a number of equally important differences that can—indeed must—complicate his narrative.

In the first place, the Muslim version of the Age of Mobilization is not, like its Christian counterpart, a “uniquely modern” social imaginary. Insofar as many of these commitments seem to have materialized with the Prophet himself, there is a sense in which they predate their appearance in the West. If we are to take Taylor’s narrative at face value, contemporary Muslim reformers might be right to point out that the Reformation “sought to bring to Europe a religious and political dynamic that already existed in Islam” (Abou El Fadl 2005, 22). These chronological differences also challenge Taylor’s attempt to explain their appearance on the historical scene. As noted earlier, Taylor argues the Age of Mobilization is

¹ See also Abou El Fadl 2002, 6.
fundamentally a reaction to the oppressive hierarchy of the Ancien Régime. Yet, in the Muslim case, nothing remotely similar to the social imaginary of the Christian Middle Ages seems to have come before. In fact, pre-Islamic Arab ethics appears to have been even more oriented toward the immanent than its successor (Izutsu 2002; Peters 1994).

Even more interesting is the fact that we seem to be witnessing a move in the opposite direction (from a modern moral order to something closer to the Ancien Régime) in the contemporary Muslim world. Whereas the “denominational imaginary” was alive and well in both the early and medieval periods, we are beginning to see a move toward a conception of law that is both singular and hierarchical, much like the “natural law” of the Christian Middle Ages under which state and society were seen as one (Feldman 2008).

Of course, this claim also oversimplifies matters. For, at the same time Muslims seem to be moving toward a conception of morality as singular and unified, we are also seeing pieces of the contemporary Age of Authenticity make their way into the imaginary of this world. As Elizabeth Bucar’s work makes abundantly clear, a certain form of “expressive individualism” is alive and well in the myriad ways contemporary Muslim women choose to wear the hijab (Bucar 2008). Moreover, the wonders of satellite television have made it impossible for even the poorest Muslims to be unaware of exclusive humanism or other modes of disbelief. While Taylor is probably right to suggest these worldviews are not conceptualized as “real options” for most, it is hard to imagine how this awareness would not shape the phenomenology of their belief.

These differences do not necessarily challenge Taylor’s descriptions of Western intellectual history but they should make us pause to reconsider whether these imaginaries “couldn’t have arisen any other way.” This reconsideration might then allow us to think more clearly about how Taylor’s model can provide insight into the future of the Muslim social imaginary—something with which many of us (Taylor included) are greatly concerned.

4. Muslims through the Lens of A Secular Age

Given contemporary events in the Middle East (and beyond), it has become quite clear that Christianity is not the only moral tradition struggling to make sense of modernity and secularism. Indeed, some have argued that the rise of secularism in the modern world has created a more significant problem, with more violent consequences, for the Islamic tradition than it has for Christianity. Thus, it seems important to explore that to which Taylor’s analysis only gestures: how his narrative of secularization in the West might provide insight into the past, present, and future struggles of the Muslim world.
To begin a conversation about whether Taylor’s account is applicable to (or illuminative of) the social imaginary of the contemporary Muslim world, I will quickly address two sets of questions. First, what are the implications of Taylor’s normative argument for thinking about the moral tradition of contemporary Islam? What judgments might he make about the coherence of this tradition and how should we interpret those judgments? Second, how might his theoretical or historical argument speak to the future dynamics of this tradition? And what can those of us interested in proposals for reform learn from his account?

Given the similarities between the social imaginary of the Muslim world and that of Taylor’s least favorite ideal type, it is not surprising the social dynamics of this region are “very much on [his] mind today” (Taylor 2007, 685). For, almost all that distresses him about the Age of Mobilization is reappearing with a vengeance throughout the Middle East. As such, Taylor’s proposals for reform would most likely follow the same trajectory of those within *A Secular Age*: less voluntarism, more nominalism; less code fetishism, more teleology; less discrimination, more benevolence; less disembedding, more embodiment; and, ultimately, less immanence, more transcendence (or, more correctly, more transcendence *through* immanence).

Whether we find these judgments illuminative will depend upon our own normative commitments, but even if we find them distasteful, Taylor’s account could still provide descriptive, explanatory, and ultimately predictive, insight. Thus, whatever concerns we have about the Muslim world (if we have any at all!), and whatever we would like to see achieved there, Taylor’s analysis might help us understand how to get from point A to point B (even if he would prefer point C).

To lay my own cards on the table, I consider codes (and the institutions that enforce them) to be profound social goods, and I am not especially anguished by our contemporary “loss of transcendence.” I am, however, very much interested in seeing something resembling Rawlsian liberalism replace the autocratic and theocratic regimes throughout much of the Muslim world. What, if anything, does Taylor’s account tell us about how this state of affairs might (or might not) become a reality?

If Taylor’s explanatory model is correct, and my description of the Muslim imaginary is accurate, we would expect to see a few things in the coming years. First, we would anticipate more Muslims adopting positions of providential deism, followed by a slide into exclusive humanism. That this is not going to happen anytime soon seems obvious, and I doubt Taylor would disagree. The important point is that Taylor’s account—as it stands—is not nuanced enough to distinguish the two cases, making it difficult to be truly illuminative. Similarly, Taylor’s model seems to assume that a theological affirmation of individual agency will lead to an “ethic of freedom” that provides the foundations for a government that
promotes nothing more than “the basic conditions of existence as free agents” (Taylor 2007, 166, 171). Yet, one of the most difficult tasks facing Muslim reformers today is drawing precisely this link. For reasons Taylor’s account cannot explain, the Muslim imaginary remains stubbornly committed to linking an ethic of freedom to a perfectionist model of the state.

Despite these specific limitations, there are at least three reasons A Secular Age remains useful for those of us interested in promoting certain forms of liberalism throughout the Muslim world. First, in his discussion of Augustine’s “rather low view of the state,” Taylor reminds us that opposition to a perfectionist state has rather deep theological roots within our culture (Taylor 2007, 122). Insofar as the moral dualism of the Ancien Régime seems to have no analogue in the Muslim tradition, Muslim allegiance to perfectionism should not surprise us. This is not to say Muslims will be unable to embrace limited government, but simply that they will have to do so for different—specifically Islamic—reasons.

Second, Taylor makes a fascinating argument about the relationship between so-called “denominational imaginaries” and the rise of disestablishment. By simply allowing for different “modes” of the religious-moral life, the medieval practice of demanding that “people be forcibly integrated” or “rightly connected with God against their will” no longer makes sense (Taylor 2007, 486). Thus, Muslim allegiance to a perfectionist state might be challenged by an appeal to their tradition of recognizing numerous schools of law as equally valid “options” (An-Na’im 2008).

Finally, in my mind, Taylor’s greatest contribution to this literature is to remind his readers that social imaginaries change most rapidly when arguments for reform arise from within the framework such reform hopes to challenge. Thus, in a particularly insightful passage, he notes that change depends upon the ideas and practices of the “old dispensation” being reinterpreted, and “older forms of legitimacy . . . [being] colonized—. . . with the new understandings of order” (Taylor 2007, 196).

5. Conclusion

Given the length of A Secular Age, and the respect its author has previously garnered within our field, it is perhaps unsurprising that the volume has received so much attention. Yet, it is surprising that so little of this attention has come from scholars working on similar issues in non-Western traditions. If Taylor’s argument both depends upon and entails certain universal moral claims (as I believe it does), these responses are particularly important and the present gap is especially embarrassing.

In light of this reality, the current essay (along with the other three published in this volume) was an attempt to fill a gap and, more
importantly, inspire others to carry the conversation further. By placing Taylor’s work in conversation with the history of Islamic thought and practice, I have been able to highlight numerous strengths and weaknesses in the narrative that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. My hope is that others will continue this project, pursuing the finer points of detail this review could not.

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