

The Arab Awakening, Nationalist and Secular Discourse, and the “Modernity” of Elitist Thought

[THEME I]

Culture and its Relationship to Change

CULTURE MIGHT be said to be the sum total of the moral traits and social values that impact the individual from birth. According to Burhan Ghalioun, a vital culture is one that will only add new elements to its existing store of knowledge or imagination if they are compatible with well-established previous experiences. These new elements are then adapted and assimilated into the culture’s existing moral, intellectual and religious nexus.

As for the process by which cultures are formed, Bennabi holds that the type of culture that comes into existence in a given time and place is determined by the way in which the people concerned view the world. So, for example, a culture of tyranny can only emerge from the mindset of a tyrant bent on hegemony. Conversely, a culture of dialogue and cooperation will only emerge from a mentality that has been shaped by the values of communication and altruism. Hence, culture is the fundamental expression of a community’s overall character, and the basic condition for the community’s survival as a distinctive historical entity.

No Ummah can develop autonomy, inward strength, clear vision, and a fundamental set of norms until it has succeeded in establishing a stable source of authority that is deeply rooted in its historical experience. No community can validly base its activity or its existence – still less a renewal movement – on a source of authority derived from

someone else's history or culture, particularly if the other culture is one by which the community concerned has been enslaved or marginalized.

Ghalioun notes that some peoples whose states have been destroyed and their economies shattered by colonialism, or whose economies have been replaced with capitalist systems that are completely incompatible with their situations and needs, have resorted to culture as a means of resistance, and that after decades of such nonviolent opposition, have been able to reestablish themselves as new states. What this goes to show is that even radical changes in political and economic systems have been unable to defeat peoples who have managed to preserve their cultures, that is, their distinctive ideologies and values and their unique ways of symbolizing reality.

[THEME 2]

*Nationalist Thought – Way Stations Along the
Path of Revision and Correction*

When seeking to evaluate and correct nationalist thought, we have to begin by going back to its very beginnings, at which time nationalist thought expressed itself in secular terms. During the latter part of the Ottoman era (the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), Christian and Muslim minorities sought to protect themselves from Turkification, which was taking place not on a religious basis, but on a secular one. Albert Hourani reminds us that in the days of the Young Turk Revolution at the turn of the twentieth century, Turkey was dominated by a secular atmosphere in which the political currents of the day favored the notion of separating the religious sphere from the political. Christian Arabs were quicker than their Muslim counterparts to develop nationalist sentiments and to openly declare their nationalist sympathies. It was likewise Christian Arabs who spearheaded the formation of secret Arab organizations such as the “Secret Beirut Society” in 1885, which was critical of Ottoman rule, at the instigation of some students at the American Protestant College (later the American University in Beirut). This was followed in 1881 by the

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formation of another secret organization which dubbed itself the Society for the Preservation of Arab Rights, whose members were drawn from the Arab intelligentsia in Damascus, Beirut, and Tripoli in northern Lebanon, and which called for Christian-Muslim unity within an Arab nationalist framework.

With the spread of globalist Socialist thought in Europe and elsewhere, this trend came in contact with Arab nationalist thought, which adopted Socialism for itself, viewing it as a solution to problems in the Arab world. Unfortunately for the Arabs, however, following the defeat and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire between 1908 and 1922, the Arab countries fell into the hands of two other colonial empires – those of Britain and France – which divided up the Arab world and annexed each Arab sub-region to a colonial power center in Europe.

The emergence of Arab nationalist thought as a distinct intellectual and political movement independent of reformist thought led some to conclude that the creation of a modern state based on a constitutional and legal ethic would not be possible under the aegis of a religious authority or doctrine, and that nationalist policies could develop and thrive within a nationalist state. Given this perspective, it was believed that nationalist consciousness needed to be nurtured as over against religious consciousness. On this theme, influential Arab nationalist thinker Constantin Zureiq (1908-2000) wrote saying, “Our basic problem today is that we have no creed, and without a doctrine it will not be possible for us to subject our individual desires and cravings to an institution founded upon principle.”

In the view of Sati al-Husri, as Islam spread given the tolerant nature of the religion, which grants people the freedom not to embrace Islamic doctrine against their will, large portions of the populations of the new territories were Arabized without converting to Islam. The recitation and memorization of the Qur’an also helped to preserve the Arabic language, and protected it from giving way in the face of both political disintegration and intellectual stagnation, and the spread of local dialects.

However, the Arab nationalist movement failed to achieve its goal of uniting the Arab community, and developing the Arab-Muslim community’s resources. This suggests that the neglect of the religious

factor and the choice of liberalist, secular, or Socialist models of thought and action caused the Arab nationalist current to retreat into small elite circles that became increasingly isolated and inward as time went by, especially with the growing obsolescence of the flimsy theses of secularism, which had been cut off from the spiritual resources that had once kept Arab society powerful and effective.

Also of relevance here is the notion that all unification experiments must conform to a single western-style pattern, and when this pattern was applied to Arab unification experiments, Arab unity was presented to the regimes and peoples of the region as being based on the assumption that leadership and control would be assigned to a particular geographical center from the start without first going through any sort of trial process, election, or prior consultation.

Similarly, the idea of an 'inspired leader' or 'hero' had the effect of shifting the ideal of unity from the realm of concrete reality to that of mythology. This is at total odds with "the culture of unity" in which revival and advancement are the concern and responsibility of an entire generation. By laying the burden of achieving unity on a single person, we entrench a mindset of dependency, subordination and disregard for material causes and effects. In order to free ourselves from the stultifying myth of "the heroic leader," determined efforts must be made to achieve the highest possible level of cooperation, coordination, complementarity and integration among the various Arab regions.

In cases in which nationalist currents have assumed political power, political power has tended to become their sole concern. As a consequence, such nationalist currents have stagnated at the level of local power, carried away by the temptation simply to adapt to the status quo. In situations such as these, nationalist currents have lost their creative, pioneering spirit and their zeal for true unity. Instead of their undertaking a critical review of their political experiment, two equally unfortunate tendencies have tended to emerge. The first is the tendency to concentrate power in their own hands to the point where others are excluded from the political process; and the second is to become infatuated with others' theories to the point where they lose sight of their own convictions and perspectives.

It may be for this reason that Khair El-Din Haseeb, Chairman of the

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Board of Trustees of the Centre for Arab Unity Studies, has called for a 'new nationalist movement' within the framework of 'a new Arab civilizational enterprise' that avoids all of the aforementioned drawbacks. Similarly, Maan Bashur has suggested that we replace the word 'nationalist' with the word 'unitary,' since the actual goal of the movement is to achieve Arab unity. By using the term 'unitary' rather than 'nationalist,' we may reduce negative reactions on the part of those who see nationalism as a kind of racism or bigotry. At the same time, we help to emphasize the fact that the task of this political current is not to affirm personal or sectarian aims but, rather, to pursue a strategic course toward unity.

Al-Afghani viewed national consciousness (*al-ʿaṣabiyyah*) as necessary for a group's survival and cohesion. He stated:

What we refer to as fanaticism or bigotry (*al-taʿaṣṣub*) grows out of a sense of tribal identity and cohesion (*al-ʿaṣabiyyah*), derived from the word *ʿaṣabah*, which refers to the men of a clan who protect the clan from harm and defend its rights.

Regarding the Muslim Brotherhood's position on nationalist, Arab and Islamic unity, Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949) offered a clarification that more or less sums up the most important foundations of the nationalist trend. According to al-Banna, it is Muslims' duty to do everything in their power to serve their country and to offer all the good they can to the community of which they are a part. In so doing, however, they should give first priority to near relations and neighbors. This last-stated principle was so important in al-Banna's view, in fact, that he considered it impermissible to distribute one's zakah contributions to anyone located beyond the minimum distance one must travel in order to be permitted to shorten one's prayers unless it was in response to a dire necessity. In al-Banna's view, the more Arabism distances itself from secularism, the closer it is to Islam, and the closer it draws to secularism, the further it is from Islam. In a similar vein, Egyptian jurist Tariq al-Bishri (born 1933) holds that the only way to reconcile secularism with Islam is to disregard certain aspects of their respective definitions and implications.

As for al-Qaradawi, he objects to Arab nationalism because its proponents adhere to essential beliefs that are rejected by Islam. The most serious flaw in Arab nationalism, in al-Qaradawi's view, is the fact that its adherents view it as a 'doctrine' and even go so far as to place higher priority on the Arab nationalist bond than they do on religious bonds. Not only this, but they isolate religion from society and the state, calling for the state to be 'non-religious,' in doing which they fragment the Muslim Ummah.

Islam has given us a historical model for the assimilation and integration of minorities. When the Prophet of Islam heard that some of his followers had repudiated members of the Muslim community such as Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ, who was an Abyssinian, Ṣuhayb Ar-Rūmī, who was of Byzantine origin, and Salmān al-Fārisī ("Salmān the Persian") because they were not of Arab descent, he addressed the people, saying, "Arabness is not something you inherit from your father or your mother. Rather, it is derived from the language you speak. Whoever speaks Arabic is an Arab."

The circle of the Arab Ummah expanded thereafter to include all those who had been Arabized in terms of culture, way of thinking, belonging and loyalty on an equal footing with Arabs by blood. So, just as the Ummah broadened to include non-Muslim Arabs, it expanded to include people who were not of Arab descent but who had become 'Arabs' in a cultural sense. This process, based on the principle of what the Qur'an terms 'coming to know one another' (*al-ta'āraf*; cf. *Sūrah al-Hujurat*, 49:13, "O men! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another...") encompassed the inhabitants of Iraq, Persia, the Levant, Egypt and other regions, and involved a willingness to interact and learn from one another within the framework of a unity that neither repudiated nor ignored distinctions among individual members or subgroups.

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[THEME 3]

An Ever-ambiguous Rhetoric

I am often reminded of a similarity between secularism as it relates to contemporary Arab thought, and the doctrine of the Trinity as it relates to Christian thought. In both cases one encounters vagueness, confusion, and the inability to settle on a single, unequivocal position. Christians believe in the Trinity, but hate to be asked the question: “How can three be one?” Similarly, secularists insist that secularism is compatible with Islam while at the same time holding to an understanding of secularism that is not compatible with Islam in the least. Just as Christians respond to the question of ‘how three can be one?’ by offering flimsy, forced explanations, secularists faced with the question of how their beliefs are supported by Islamic teachings are evasive and highly selective in the evidence they cite in favor of their claims.

‘Secularism’ as term and concept

The English word ‘secularism’, which has counterparts in various European languages, is derived from the Latin *seculum*, meaning ‘age’, ‘era’, ‘generation’ or ‘century.’ In the Latin of the Middle Ages, the word *seculum* referred to the earthly realm as opposed to the realm of the Church, or the world of the spirit. The Oxford Dictionary provides numerous definitions of the word ‘secular.’ According to one such definition, ‘secular’ refers to that which belongs to the temporal, material, visible world or realm in contradistinction to the eternal, spiritual, and invisible realm.

The French term *laïcisme* refers to a system or philosophy that lends no importance to religion or the afterlife in the realm of public affairs, nor even in the private sphere. As for the term ‘secular’, it was used for the first time in the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, which is recognized by many historians as the precursor of the secular phenomenon in the West. In the beginning, the term ‘secularization’ was used to refer to the transfer of church properties to the State, a process which the Church viewed, not surprisingly, as illegal expropriation, but which was defended by French Enlightenment thinkers as necessary and beneficial.

The term appears to have first been used in a broader sense by George Holyoake (1817-1906), who described secularism in neutral terms as the possibility of reforming human beings' condition by material means without any mention of the issue of faith, whether positive or negative. Holyoake did not reject religion; rather, he simply disregarded it, and he established a secularist movement in defense of this perspective. Holyoake's philosophy was later summed up in the principle of 'separation of religion and state', that is, the disentanglement of religious doctrines from the warp and woof of public life, which remains one of the most widely used definitions both East and West.

Over time, the divorce of religion from the public sphere began affecting more and more areas of life. As Western sociologists observed and recorded such changes, they coined a variety of terms to describe them as though they were independent, unrelated developments without realizing that, in fact, what they were observing were different expressions of a single phenomenon. As a consequence, these terms multiplied and ramified, albeit within a common semantic field.

Secularization in the Western world was a natural outcome of events there, and the extremity of the reaction against religion was commensurate with the extremity of the counter-reaction of the Church itself, which insisted on maintaining its monopoly on the way religion was interpreted, assumed the right to appoint or remove kings, ratified laws that served the Church's interests while rejecting those that did not, maintained vast land holdings, kept thousands of serfs while levying onerous taxes and duties; suppressed freedom of expression and creativity; and tolerated the spread of moral dissolution, addiction and perversion among the clergy to the point where historian Will Durant once observed that the military personnel of the day had morals more refined than those of the clergy.

Arab-Islamic societies were affected significantly by such developments, which impacted them through three principle channels: colonialism and the Orientalist and Christian evangelistic institutions that accompanied it; educational missions in which Arab Muslim students were sent to study in the West; and the establishment of Christian educational institutions in Arab-Islamic countries.

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There was an overwhelming desire in the East to keep pace with Western progress, and in this connection there were three basic orientations: those who called for complete, all-inclusive adoption of the Western model and a break with tradition; those who called for modernization by taking the same steps that had been taken by the West; and those who called for renewal and awakening from within the Arab-Islamic tradition, either through traditional means, or through means that could be suitably borrowed from the West.

Hence, definitions of the word 'secularization' came to differ depending on who was calling for it. The Arabic term *ilmāniyyah* was taken to be derived from the word *ilm*, or knowledge, while others pronounced it *almāniyyah*, as being derived from the word *ālam*, or world. 'Positive' concepts such as democracy, rationalism, enlightenment, and freedom also came to be associated with the term 'secularization' as a way of lending it greater legitimacy.

In the Arab world, secularism manifested itself as a materialist, atheistic current with a marked antipathy to religion. In response, Abd al-Wahhab al-Masiri once voiced his preference that the term *almāniyyah* be replaced with an expression such as *naz' al-qadāsah* (desacralization), which he viewed as more comprehensive and precise. Despite its widespread use, the term *almāniyyah* has continued to be a highly ambiguous, confusing term, and this for a number of reasons. For one thing, it was taken from a foreign lexicon and cultural context in which Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodoxy each offered a different definition of the term based on its own unique perspective and experience.

According to al-Masiri, when the natural sciences in the West were dissociated from Christian morals, they were divorced from all ethical values and were viewed instead from the perspective of the mathematical, scientific model as consisting of nothing but inert, quantifiable matter devoid of all inward significance. Therefore, as al-Masiri has suggested, it has become less fitting now to speak of global 'socialism', 'capitalism' or 'imperialism' than of a global 'consumerism.'

According to the late Moroccan scholar Idris al-Kittani (1858-1927), secularism as a political system would involve stripping the state of its religious character, closing down religious institutions,

abolishing courts that operate on the basis of Islamic law and replacing them with Western civil laws, abolishing religious instruction, and doing away with the Ministry of Religious Endowments and replacing it with a Directorate of Financial Development based on capitalist banking principles.

Examples of ambiguous secular interpretations

Despite all the difficulties associated with the term ‘secularism’, we hear calls from politicians and intellectuals alike to reduplicate others’ experiments with secularism in various parts of the Islamic world. However, it should be remembered that whereas the West, for the most part, has understood secularism to mean a separation between religious and non-religious authorities which allows each of them to function within its own jurisdiction, some Arab rulers have understood it to mean a war on religion and, rather than having the state stand next to religion, it has been built atop its ruins. This has at times even entailed drying up the sources of religious instruction, including Islamic kindergartens and Qur’anic schools for youngsters. Secularism is portrayed as a model of societal ‘liberation’ from ‘the ‘tyranny’ of religion and as the path to ‘advancement’ as it has been perceived in the West. However, this perspective reflects a disregard for the religious and historical reality of the Muslim community, which stands diametrically opposed to the latter’s experience on virtually every level.

I here offer two observations that point to the impossibility of carrying out the secularist enterprise in Islamic countries. The first is that the religious oppression of the medieval Church and its representatives is a phenomenon that has no counterpart in Islamic history with one of the principle forms of this being the shunning and persecution of scientists whose writings were seen as challenging official Church doctrine. Islam, by contrast, calls upon us to guarantee and protect human rights and freedoms, including the right to one’s own religious, political and academic beliefs and convictions. Islam sets down an authoritative philosophy and moral principles adherence to which makes it possible to establish the fairest, most enduring possible form of legislative organization to govern relations both within the Muslim community, and between the Muslim community and others. Arkoun observes:

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Far before Islamic societies did, Christian societies began attempting more lively, tangible historical experiments under the influence of rationalist and materialist modernism. The result was the emergence of a secular spiritual authority that stressed people's ability to achieve meaning and power by means of reason alone. Moreover, the debate that has been sparked by Islam's introduction to modernity is no different from that which was faced by Christianity beginning with the Renaissance (fourteenth and fifteenth centuries CE) and Reformation (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries CE).

The claim has been made that from its earliest beginnings, the Islamic caliphate was a civil, worldly institution whose decisions were made in an arena from which God was absent. God had been replaced on the scene of world events by human beings with their whims and caprices, virtues and vices. Support for this type of claim is found in the fact that the second, third and fourth caliphs were assassinated, and in the struggles and uprisings that took place during the early years of Islam. Such facts should come as no surprise, however, since divine commands must inevitably be translated into human action, and no such translation can take place without abrogation and change. None of the successive states that ruled Muslim lands was ever referred to as "an Islamic state". Rather, they were named after their leaders and founders. They were referred to, for example, as 'the Umayyad Caliphate,' 'the age of Harūn al-Rashīd', 'the Seljuk State', 'the Ottoman Empire', and so on. Hence, as Lebanese philosopher Ali Harb (born 1941) has noted, the various 'Islamic states' that have emerged in the course of history have, like other states, been associated with the realities of this tangible world, not with those of some other realm; with those who took over power, and not with the Islamic law upon which they were supposed to be based.

We might ask here: Was the Islamic revelation sent to human beings who were morally accountable as God's stewards on Earth, or to inhabitants of a realm devoid of all moral accountability or stewardship? Did the revelation come to call people to build, progress, and make choices conducive to righteousness and felicity in this world and the next? Or did it come to strip human beings of the concrete world

they know and cast them into a realm of abstract ideals, monasticism, and isolation?

It should be understood that when the caliphate is described as having been an earthly, civil institution, this is consistent with the law of Islam, which has been given to those who believe in its principles, who will abide by its decisive, non-negotiable commands and universal principles and use the knowledge and understanding at their disposal to interpret and apply its speculative, negotiable aspects, most of which have to do with matters pertaining to managing worldly affairs and societal organization. As for the possibility of people not abiding by this Law to start with, this is another issue altogether. It is meaningless to speak, as one writer has done, of God's being 'absent', since God's law is present just as it has been ever since it was revealed, and will continue to be present. People may interact with the law of Islam positively or negatively, thereby drawing either closer to God or farther away from Him. However, human involvement with God's revelation does not strip it of its divine qualities.

Furthermore, human beings are only asked to do what they are capable of. As we read in *Sūrah al-Taghābun*, 64:16, "Remain ... conscious of God as best you can,..." In the same vein, the Prophet once said, "If I command you to do something, do it to the best of your ability ..." The divine revelation has been bestowed on human beings in order for them to interact with it, not simply in order to exist in the realm of theories, abstractions and empty ideals. As for saying that none of the successive states that ruled Muslim lands in the past were actually Islamic in nature because these states were referred to not as "Islamic" but, rather, were named after their founders, this is like saying that Islam does not require the establishment of a state simply because the word 'state' (*dawlah*) occurs nowhere in the Qur'an, or because the Qur'an contains no explicit command to establish such an entity.

Strangely, this 'new interpretation' of secularism was once rejected out of hand, and even actively resisted, by other secular groups who argued that the Prophet's message and mission were intended to be purely spiritual, with no relevance to politics or public affairs. In this connection Ali Harb asks: What is *ijtihad* if not a rational exercise with a secularist, enlightened stamp? After all, through the formation of

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opinions, analogical reasoning and the drawing of conclusions based on relevant evidence, we reclaim the mind's rightful place and liberate it from slavish adherence to authority of the text. In Harb's view, there should be nothing to prevent us from recognizing *ijtihād* as an act of enlightened reasoning within the spacious, yet regulated space Islam provides.

Secularist thinker Farag Foda (1946-1992) lamented the fact that with the death of the Prophet, 'the age of Islam came to an end, and the age of Muslims began.' In support of this affirmation, Foda focused selectively on anomalous, rare events on the basis of which he turned the history of Islam into a chronicle of wars, bloodshed, licentiousness and debauchery, his preferred 'authentic' sources being works such as Kamāl al-Dīn al-Dumayrī's *Ḥayāt al-Ḥayawān al-Kubrā*, al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj al-Dhahab*, and Taha Husayn's *Al-Fitnah al-Kubrā*. Foda's works represent some of the most baneful examples of secularist thought, especially in view of his weak grasp of Islamic juristic scholarship, the Qur'anic sciences and Islamic traditions by comparison with his knowledge of the West and its ways. As in the case of many other secularists, his hostility toward Islamic scholarly disciplines is based largely on ignorance.

Secularist thought thus suffers from a genuine, profound intellectual crisis that results from the wholesale, uncritical adoption of a concept that originated in an alien semantic environment without a clear understanding of how the concept functions either within its own milieu or within Eastern culture with its religious, historical, and social particularities. The confusion that marks secularist thought is reflected in the writings of Hichem Djait who, in the course of a single short passage, describes reform as taking place both "through and in religion" and "independently of it." Secularist thinkers are likewise confused about their method, since they are attempting to project a modern, contemporary thought system with its own concepts and terminology onto an old thought system which has no need to be brought into conformity with new concepts and terms but has, rather, the ability to generate its own terminology and to renew existing concepts from within its own ideational framework.

In Ghalioun's view, the problematic nature of secularism has not

been posed before within Arab-Islamic thought because ‘religious Islam’ had already laid its own foundation for the civil sphere by emphasizing its importance and legislating for it. Furthermore, it is ‘religious Islam’ itself that has given reason the most prominent role in guiding and shaping Muslim society. This is what *ijtihad* means, and this is how it was understood by the early Muslims who established the principle of rational reflection on the meanings of the Qur’an. Ghalioun also stresses that since the full implementation of the teachings of Islam as a religion can only be ensured through the establishment of a state, the state thus serves as a natural outgrowth and completion of the Muslim community and the communal spirit to which it gave rise.

In al-Jabiri’s view, the question of secularism in the Arab world is a bogus issue, because it expresses needs in terms that are incompatible with those very needs. The need for autonomy within the framework of a single national identity; the need for a democracy that respects minority rights; and the need for a rational approach to politics, are all genuine, objective needs, as well as being reasonable and necessary demands. However, they cease to be reasonable, necessary, or even legitimate when they are given expression by means of a confusing slogan or term such as ‘secularism.’ Ghalioun notes that the discussion of secularism in Arab-Islamic countries emerged not from an internal social struggle but, rather, from the fact that the notion of socialism had been adopted by a small, largely isolated elite which transformed it into a new ‘religion’ for a new class of society. At the same time, the socialist ideal became a new tool of social and political oppression which, in the hands of this elite class, was used against the majority of the population. Specifically, it served as an ‘ideology of justification’ by means of which a blow could be struck to basic freedoms – freedom of belief, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of political association – while at the same time making it possible to conceal the absence of these freedoms in day-to-day life.

To take a religion which is based largely on legislation that provides a foundation for society, and divorce it from social and political life is essentially a repudiation of this religion, which cannot be divided or broken into parts in an attempt to evade its teachings in various areas of life. As for criticism of particular applications of the religion that

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have proven harmful or unsuccessful, such criticism is mandated by the religion itself. In this connection, Shaykh Muhammad Abduh went so far as to say that separating religion from the state is not only undesirable; it is impossible. The reason for this, stated Abduh, is that the ruler must himself or herself belong to some religion. Each individual is an undivided whole, not two separate entities in contact with one another. The body and the spirit are indivisible, as are their functions. How, then, can we divide the earthly powers that govern these functions? A division of what God has given us into ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’ is misleading and groundless. It is as though someone were to accept the Qur’an’s command to “establish prayer...” without also accepting the adjoining command to “distribute the purifying alms (zakah)” in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:43.