

Secularity in the Premodern Islamic World

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Sometime between April and September 1300, in a small town in Īlkhānid, Iran, the aristocrat turned Sufi master ‘Alā al-Dawla al-Simnāni wrote the Arabic treatise *al-Wārid al-shārid al-ṭārid shubhat al-mārid* (*The inspiration refuting the rebel’s sophistry*), ostensibly to refute the philosophical method. In it he wrote:

The sovereignty of every sovereign (*salṭanat kull sulṭān*) proceeds from His authority (*ḥukm*) and the justice (*‘adl*) of every king proceeds from His justice (*‘adl*). He installed them as vicegerents (*khalīfa*) among His creatures for the well-being of affairs in the mundane world (*li ṣalāḥ umūr ‘ālam al-shahāda*) according to His wisdom (*ḥikma*); and by means of His wisdom He does what He wishes and decides what He wants!¹

At first glance, the description of kingship in this passage may appear to be a typical premodern construction, one that establishes a direct connection between kingship and the Divine, wherein sovereignty is guaranteed by Divine command, and the justice of kings refracts Divine justice. The sovereignty of God is total and absolute: He wills what He wishes, and neither are there limits on His will, nor is He accountable to another party. However, the latter half of the passage upends the opening as it stipulates that God has installed kings as His representatives on earth not on account of any religious scruple, nor for the furtherance of His religion, but instead to promote the well-being of His creatures in mundane affairs. Unlike God, kings are accountable for their actions. If a 14th-century Sufi master, echoing a famous Qur’anic passage, sanctifies kings as God’s representatives on

1 Giovanni Maria Martini, *‘Alā al-Dawla al-Simnāni between Spiritual Authority and Political Power: A Persian Lord and Intellectual in the Heart of the Īlkhānate, with a Critical Edition and Translation of al-Wārid al-šārid al-ṭārid šubhat al-mārid and a Critical Edition of its Persian version Zayn al-mu’taqad li-zayn al-mu’taqid* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 414.

If a 14th-century Sufi master sanctifies kings as God's representatives on earth, then what was the place of religion in the social order, and in political life?

earth, to rule justly and with an eye to the well-being of His subjects, then what was the place of religion in the social order, and how did religion make its presence felt in political life?

The absoluteness of Simnānī's sovereignty echoes Jean Bodin's 16th-century definition, held as the original articulation of sovereignty as a political concept in the history of European political thought. Like Bodin's sovereign prince, the king in Simnānī's order is bound by the rules of God. Both sovereignties, Bodin's and Simnānī's, are delimited by the unlimited sovereignty of God. Although not an overtly political treatise dedicated to the study of sovereignty, Simnānī's language exhibits a clear demarcation between sovereignty (*salṭana*) and the king (*sulṭān*) and as such introduces a number of questions. Can it be read to point to a language of political thought in the pre-modern Islamic world that exhibits a conceptual taxonomy – even if not used with perfect consistency? Does it acknowledge a distinct sphere for political activity separate from other spheres of human society, and finally, does it reflect a conscious attempt to discuss and categorise the study of politics? Beyond this, why is divine sovereignty considered a newcomer on the Islamic scene, inspired to a large extent by contact with the West?² Attempts at addressing these and attendant questions are entangled in present-day concerns, and in the perpetual assertion of 'tradition' at the centre of political life in the Islamic world.

The tension between religious and secular articulations of power, or politics and religion, is the cornerstone of premodern political language throughout the globe. In the case of premodern Japan, Christoph Kleine has shown that "concepts of societal differentiation were primarily focused on relationship between religious and political institutions"³. A cursory examination of medieval and early modern

2 Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "The Sovereignty of God in Modern Islamic Thought," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 25, no. 3 (2015); Florian Zemmin, "How (Not) to Take Secularity Beyond the Modern West: Reflections from Islamic Sociology," *Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities"* 9 (Leipzig University, 2019), and to a lesser extent, Andrew F. March, "Genealogies of Sovereignty in Islamic Political Thought," *Social Research* 80, no. 1 (2013).

3 Christoph Kleine, "Japan before 1800," in *Companion to the Study of Secularity*, ed. HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities" (Leipzig University 2018), 1. www.multiple-secularities.de/publications/companion/css_kleine_japan-before-1800.pdf.

writings on the organisation of politics and techniques of good rule in the Islamic world will produce endless instances in support of an almost identical conception of premodern secularity, as exemplified in Simnānī's treatise. The same holds for sovereignty, which Bodin himself claimed "was a feature of all political communities, although its precise character had never been fully understood".⁴ Yet, the paradigm of a privileged and uniquely European mode of modernity persists along with a host of related harbingers and notional sustainers: the Enlightenment, continuity with past thought, secular politics and the rule of law. Attempts to move beyond such binaries have met with little success. Among the more debated is a 1988 study by Reinhard Schulze, where he suggests an autochthonous Islamic Enlightenment in the 18th century. Schulze's claim "threatened the sacred heart of Western modernity"⁵, and thus elicited numerous criticisms. Albrecht Hofheinz has attempted to deflect the criticisms raised at Schulze's hypothesis, arguing that for the most part, such defensively tautological arguments can merely explain Europe's success by Europe's success. A serious reconsideration of premodern Islamic history reveals stark similarities in the ideational and socio-cultural realms that taken collectively, make untenable a comfy connection between the cultural and intellectual spheres and historical and economic developments, a linkage that frames all modern narratives of European singularity. If prudent rule and prioritising the common good as the end goal of political life are found in the premodern past around the globe, then how can the current prevailing explanations of the success of Europe and the failure of Muslim polities in establishing democratic norms and rule of law, and pursuing the welfare of their citizenry take note of this?

It is in response to this and similar gaps in the explanations of the evolution of social and political thought that the utility of secularity as a concept is brought to the fore. Accounts of the fusion of politics and religion as the norm of Islamic *modus operandi* – and the

Similarities in the ideational and socio-cultural realms undermine modern narratives of European singularity

Prudent rule and prioritising the common good are globally held end goals of political life in the premodern past

4 Richard Bourke, "Introduction," in *Popular Sovereignty in Historical Perspective*, ed. Richard Bourke and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 2.

5 Albrecht Hofheinz, "The Islamic Eighteenth Century: A View from the Edge," in *Islam in der Moderne, Moderne im Islam: Eine Festschrift für Reinhard Schulze, zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Florian Zemmin, Johannes Stephan and Monica Corrado (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

cause of its aversion to modern democratic institutions – begin with Muhammad, prophet and self-designated *ḥakam* (judge) in the early 7th century, and end with the pervasive growth of Islamist politics since the late 19th century. In the interim, the medieval Islamic distinction between the domain of religion and that of politics remained akin to “that which [was] obtained in medieval Europe, in which God kept His sword in one institution and His book in another”⁶. But the incremental privatisation of religion that began in Europe in the 12th century, and the subsequent secularisation of the political order, never gained ground in the Islamic world. As a result, whereas secularism authors the common good in the modern West and religion belongs to the realm of private interests that must be regulated to protect the good of society, in the Islamic world, where the public domain continues to be God’s.⁷

Such confident assertions become problematic if we approach the question from a different angle, shifting our gaze away from secularism and from the differences between the modern history of the West and that of the Islamic world. Returning instead to Simnānī’s 14th-century words cited at the outset, not only is sovereignty segregated from kingship, as mentioned earlier, but stable rule, while reflecting divine qualities, is contingent upon government’s ability to procure the common good. It is, in other words, a wholly political and *secular* affair. In fact, an expression of the knots and bolts of divine engagement with the political order frames the customary overture in most medieval and early modern political treatises penned in the Islamic world.

The opening to the 12th-century *Fāršnāma* (the anonymous author is conventionally referred to as Ibn al-Balkhī) is one among hundreds of such examples:

When God chooses from among His servants a noble person and places in his grasp the reigns of kingship (*mulk*) and sovereignty (*pādishāhī*) and gives him to the dominion and protection of the world, the greatest favor which He can show towards that king in particular and the world in general is to incline the aspirations of the king of the time towards knowledge and justice, because all virtues are contained in these two excellent qualities.⁸

6 Patricia Crone, *God’s Rule, Government and Islam: Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 393–96.

7 Crone, *God’s Rule*, 393–96.

8 Ibn al-Balkhī, *Fāršnāma*, ed. G. Le Strange and R. A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1921), 1.

The Persian word *pādishāhi*, incidentally, is an apt translation of the Arabic *salṭanat* used in Simnānī's text. The cornerstone of the king's sovereignty comprises two God-given and secular qualities, knowledge and justice. The same construct is found in iterations of the wheel of fortune trope, wherein God selects kings, but it is their own propensity for justice that assures longevity in office. In Nizām al-Mulk's (d. 1092) *Siyar al-mulūk*, God chooses a king in every age and time, endows him with the well-being of the world and His servants, and instills in him sufficient majesty for his subjects to want his reign to continue. The prominent vizier suggests that while the selection of the king is a divine prerogative, it is the wisdom of the king that protects kingship.⁹ The same view is held by Al-Ghazzālī (d. 1111), Islam's preeminent medieval theologian, who wrote on the relationship between kings and their subjects in unambiguous terms. Every man who has received the gift of religion from God must obey and cherish kings, for their kingship is granted by God, and it is given by Him to whom He wills. God's favour is manifested in a long reign, and the rule of the unjust sultan will be short, for the Prophet has said that sovereignty (*mulk*) will endure even when there is unbelief, but not when there is injustice.¹⁰

In these and countless similar passages from premodern Islamic meditations on power, God's sovereignty is legal fiction that spawns political rule, for while the selection of the king can be conceived as strictly a divine prerogative, the craft of ruling is an altogether human affair.¹¹ Although good kings are *ipso facto* pious, their success in this world is measured not by their piety but by their ability to rule with wisdom and discernment. These latter traits are acquired skills and not innate virtues, and are purveyed by others, usually well-chosen counsellors. A king's demise is brought about by bad judgment and not by fortune. The imbricated nature of religion and kingship in premodern Islamic political thought points not to the latter's reliance on the former,

Cornerstone of the king's sovereignty comprises God-given and secular qualities: knowledge and justice

God's sovereignty is legal fiction that spawns political rule

9 Nizām al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, tr. and ed. Hubert Darke (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960, 2nd ed. 1978), 9–11; and for more on reason as the guarantor of good rule, see Nequín Yavari, *Advice for the Sultan: Prophetic Voices and Secular Politics in Medieval Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 81–94.

10 Abū Hāmid Muhammad al-Ghazālī, *Naṣīhat al-mulūk*, ed. Jalal al-Din Huma'i (Tehran: Anjuman Athar Milli, 1972), 82.

11 Compare with March, "Genealogies of Sovereignty?"

Imbricated nature of religion and kingship in premodern Islamic political thought upholds strong secular rule

Al-Fārābī: the relationship between *madīna* and *milla* is the purview of the philosophy of society

as much as to its very opposite, that is strong secular rule. It also emphatically bounds them as two functionally differentiated and autonomous spheres that share valences of interdependence. This is seen in al-Māwardī's (d. 1058) influential treatise on governance, which specifies the job of a ruler as safeguarding religion (*ḥirāsa al-milla*) and the proper administration of the community's affairs (*siyāsa al-'umma*); or on another occasion, safeguarding religion (*ḥirāsa al-dīn*) and the administration of the mundane world (*siyāsa al-dunyā*).¹²

Furthermore, premodern thinkers themselves considered the science of politics in the light of an underlying overlap with religious discourse and the religious infrastructure of authority. Al-Fārābī's (d. 950) *Book of Religion*¹³ is a particularly celebrated specimen that establishes the relationship between the city (*madīna*) and religion (*milla*) as the proper subject matter for the philosophy of society (*falsafa madaniyya* in al-Fārābī's text). It crafts a highly differentiated account of the properly ordained society, in which citizens are guided towards individual perfection and happiness by emulating the normative order of natural organisms and the cosmos. Religion in this account is an instrument that may be used to guide individuals to civic virtues. In effect, al-Fārābī establishes a philosophy of religion based on both Aristotelian and Platonic political philosophy to study the establishment of revealed religions and societies founded by them.¹⁴

In his study on premodern (precolonial in his terminology) Islamic societies, Armando Salvatore has pointed to the soft distinctions that differentiated social norms – collectively represented in *adab* literature – from those enshrined in the sharia. Salvatore posits that the binary spheres of *adab* and sharia engaged

in a continuous mutual accommodation through which each could be conducted as the internal limit of the other: while devotion to the *shari'a* and its implementation require the civilizing restraint of *adab*, *adab* in turn cannot openly contravene *shari'a*.

12 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Māwardī, *Al-Aḥkām al-sultāniyya wa al-wilāya al-dīniyya*, ed. Aḥmad Mubarak al-Baghdādī (Kuwait: Dar Ibn Qutayba, 1989), 3, 22.

13 Abu Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Milla, wa nuṣūṣ ukhrā*, ed. Muḥsin Maḥdi (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1968).

14 Nadja Germann, "Al-Fārābī's Philosophy of Society and Religion," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/al-farabi-soc-rel/>; Muḥsin S. Maḥdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001).

Adab works developed “a non-religious (and in this sense secular) source of normativity of human conduct,” and although in conversation with *shar‘i* norms, they nevertheless “created non-religious or secular spaces, discourses and institutions”.¹⁵ However, he adds, religion was never banished from the social sphere, but rather continued operating in the background. Whether or not Salvatore’s sharia “operating in the background” may be considered another fiction, upheld to facilitate non-religious artistic and intellectual output, remains to be explored in future research.

Secularity – as distinct from secularisation – is gaining traction in academic circles. While as a concept, its purchase is thoroughly different in the premodern period, in modern sociological literature it has been defined as “institutionally as well as symbolically embedded forms and arrangements for distinguishing between religion and other societal areas, practices and interpretations.”¹⁶ In the context of premodern history, it is the multifarious overtures of religion to the conduct of politics, and the etiquette of the required concomitant concessions that have attracted scholarly attention. It is clear from the outset that an investigation focused on secularity does not seek to chart incremental secularisation, or the withdrawal of religion from the public sphere. Instead, it takes for granted that premodern political analysis does not distinguish between normative and empirical study of politics, that different national contexts conjunct in different ways with changing historical circumstances, and that national contexts themselves are very much defined by prevailing religious traditions. If the relationship between religious authority and political power is altered in the modern world, it is instigated by long term religious change, and authored differently in various religious traditions and across national divides.¹⁷

15 Armando Salvatore, “The Islamicate *Adab* Tradition vs. the Islamic *Shari‘a*, from Pre-Colonial to Colonial,” *Working Paper Series of the HCAS “Multiple Secularities: Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities”* 3 (Leipzig University, 2018); Charles-Henri de Fouchécour, *Moralita: Les notions morales dans la littérature persane du 3^e/9^e au 7^e/13^e siècle* (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1986).

16 Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchhardt, “Revisiting the Secular: Multiple Secularities and Pathways to Modernity,” *Working Paper Series of the HCAS “Multiple Secularities: Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities”* 2 (Leipzig University, 2017).

17 Ashis Nandy, “The Twilight of Certitudes: Secularism, Hindu Nationalism, and Other Masks of Deculturation,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 22, no. 2 (1997); Jonathan Sheehan, “Enlightenment, Religion and the Enigma of Secularization:

Focusing on religious change rather than prolonging the quest for a non-existent secularisation, for example, will show that rather than torpor and decline, the 18th century witnessed the rise of Sufi reform movements, which spawned a reconfiguration of religiosity that extended beyond Sufi movements to the Islamic world at large.¹⁸ The influence of the new Sufi religiosity on contemporary expressions of Islam cannot be overstated. Examples include modern Islam's primary reliance on scripture (the Qur'an and Prophetic Tradition) at the expense of other normative texts that had come to establish a canon over the centuries; the emergence of the individual as the interpreter of Islamic authority, ending the 'ulama's historic monopoly on that front; access to new media for the dissemination of Islamic beliefs; and the prominence of Muhammad as a role model and a source of emulation for all individual Muslims, which has led to a growing internalisation of normative Islamic principles.¹⁹ None of the above can be read as indicative of secularisation; every single one can be taken to point to an autochthonous Islamic Enlightenment marked by a new piety that supplants the premodern order. In fact, the impregnable division of modern Islam into Sunni and Shi'i camps is itself a historical novelty, and an example of the modern conception of religious identity that arose in the wake of the Sufi reform movements.²⁰

Islamist politics itself is best understood as an instance of secularity – a changed conception of religion that offers a variety of new trajectories for encounters with the political sphere, as it plays out differently across Muslim nations. Considered in this manner, it will become clear that even the hijab – a wholly and explicitly 'religious' drama, and the single most explicit site and metaphor for piety – is a thoroughly secular affair, in the same way that Islamism, or the

Islamist politics itself is best understood as an instance of secularity

A Review Essay," *American Historical Review* 108, no. 4 (2003); Gert Pickel, "Secularization – an Empirically Consolidated Narrative in the Face of an Increasing Influence of Religion on Politics," *Politica & Societate. Revista de Sociologica Politica* 16, no. 36 (2017).

18 Nequín Yavari, "Shifting Modes of Piety in Early Modern Iran and the Persephone Zone," *Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities: Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities"* 10 (Leipzig University, 2019).

19 Hofheinz, "The Islamic Eighteenth Century."

20 Reinhard Schulze, "Islam and the Global History of Secularity," delivered at the conference on "Secularities – Patterns of Distinction, Paths of Differentiation," convened by the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities," Leipzig University, 4–6 October 2018.

Indian Bharatiya Janata Party are wholly modern secular developments.²¹ It may also help steer the study of modern Islamic history away from unsubstantiated and unverifiable assertions that attribute to Muslims a predilection for religion, an affinity for tradition that is subsequently brought to masquerade as an explanation for the appeal of Islamist politics.

Reading the past – the non-European past – through the lens of secularity will also pave the way for the inclusion of vast swathes of the world in contemporary discussions of global history. Because it establishes a dynamic relationship between religion and politics that changes as religion and the political change, and because it rests on deep-seated emic processes of differentiation, even for the modern period, secularity accommodates a meaningful comparison of premodern societies, allowing premodern Islamic debates on the subject to emerge as one of the building blocks of a global modernity. Secularity, in effect, is a disambiguation of secularism (or of democracy) as a good that is possessed, a social order that is theorised and achieved in certain areas of the globe while remaining a distant dream in others.²² Unlike its normative cousin, secularity maintains religion and politics as relational concepts shaped and experienced differently in different local settings, and historicises that relationship to forge a permanent dialogue between the past and the present, and refract a true history of the political in different quarters of the world at different times.

Focus on secularity undermines unverifiable assertions such as a Muslim predilection for religion or tradition that masquerade as an explanation for the appeal of Islamist politics

Secularity, in effect, is a disambiguation of secularism

21 Ilona Ryser and Janina Sorger-Rachidi, “Interview with Reinhard Schulze,” *Zeitschrift für junge Religionwissenschaft* 14 (2019); and Nandy, “The Twilight of Certitudes.”

22 Pierre Rosanvallon, “Democratic Universalism as a Historical Problem,” *Constellations* 16, no. 4 (2009).

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