

The Dialectic of Secularism and Religion: The Palestinian-Israeli Condition as a Model

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Introduction

This paper addresses the problem of the dialectic between and duality of secularism and religion. The reader should not expect a conclusive solution that would remove its dialectical actuality. There have been many scientific studies and ideological arguments that have addressed this dialectic without being able to end the controversy over this "conflict."

To start with, this paper engages with the concept of secularism from the perspective of Adel Daher in his book *The Philosophical Foundations of Secularism*. The choice of this framework is to consider the author's attempt to remove the concept of secularism from the system of power, to lay a foundation for secularism by using intellectual reason, and to promote it as a knowledge formation, regardless of it being a tool used by hegemonic powers for exploitation and control over their colonies. Daher attempts to answer the question as to whether it is possible to deal with such a problem, epistemologically, outside of the balance of dominant powers, or whether we have to necessarily deal with ideologies that exist behind the concepts that the capitalist, colonial powers disseminate in their alleged "modernity"? Daher reaches the conclusion that secularism is a logical necessity to enable humankind to manage its worldly affairs. Yet when using the expression "logical necessity," we negate the logic of the other or opposite option, thus breaking with the past, and with religion, as a "logical necessity" for a better life.

The question that is the focus of this paper, drawing on Daher's framework is: Does our adoption of Western secularism, in a "colonized Arab society," constitute a logical condition for our venturing into the era, surviving in the colonial situation, and being branded as modern? In answering this question, after an overview of Daher's argument, below, it may seem to the reader somewhat of a leap in addressing the Israeli colonial condition as a model. However, the choice of this historical experience in particular has a specificity that may serve to answer the question, since tangible experiences that exist historically represent material realities. The question of Zionism was evoked to illustrate the experience of creating an entity out of nothingness, its success in turning an idea into an existence. The emergence of the Zionist movement will be addressed, as well as its transformation from a stream of Judaism to a dominant colonial power, and its colonial role in the creation of dualistic national identities in the Israeli-Palestinian context. Ultimately, the path of transformation in the Zionism experience invalidates the "logical necessity" of secularism advocated by Daher in his book, for reasons that will be elucidated later.

Secularism for Adel Daher, and its relationship to religion and to Islam

In his analysis of the concept of secularism, Daher begins where Islamist intellectuals, like Mohammed Arkoun, Mohamed Amara and others, had left off. These intellectuals had demonstrated that secularism is a Western European product, which was necessary historically in the Western context, because of the dual religious/civil authority at the time, and cannot be applied to the Arab world (where Islam is the dominant religion), because Islam had not suffered historically from a duality in power. So briefly, there is no logical need for the solution used by the West against the “religious state,” i.e., secularism.

Yet in Daher’s historical account of the emergence of secularism, and its conceptual evolution due to historical circumstances, he insists on the importance of “importing” it and removing it from the ideological mill, in order to reach the crucial content of the concept of secularism. He continuously links secularism to Islam, with a semi-explicit suggestion that Islam is the only religion that “links itself,” or that “its adherents link,” to the state and politics, and that this is the ideology always defended by Islamists against calls for secularization. In the process of identification of concepts, one must analyze two aspects; the first pertains to the link between the concepts to specific conditions, in light of certain historical or cultural contexts ; even if these conditions help produce the concept in those particular circumstances, this does not mean that they are essential or necessary. The second is that searching for the apparent characteristics of the concept (i.e. secularism) means searching for the purpose for which the concept is employed. Thus, the Islamist understanding of secularism, that it is specific to the West where the church controlled religious affairs, is in conflict with the analysis of the concept, since different historical circumstances (the domination of the church in the West) do not constitute a fundamental condition for the concept of secularism. Daher believes that the pervasive principle of secularism is getting rid of the control of religious institutions, no matter what they are.

Daher attempts to disprove and analyze the argument that humans cannot manage the affairs of their world without divine guidance, in isolation from the “Islamic” argument, as he calls it, in an attempt to prove his secular argument in a manner that does not show any bias. Yet he later devotes chapters of his book to Islam and secularism, to discuss the Islamists argument, which, as he believes, requires viewing Islam necessarily as a negation of secularism.

In his interpretation of the Islamists’ argument, Daher believes that the basis of it is that Islam inherently imposes a stance that rejects secularism for Muslims. Hassan Al-Banna’s argument that “Islam is a religion and a state” does not describe the various historical relationship between Islam and politics, but establishes the existence of a crucial relationship between them. The centrality of this relationship suggests that the state is part of Islam. Yet some Al-Azhar scholars believe that Al-Banna’s statement constitutes an insufficient proposition due to the use of the word “and.” Al-Banna’s statement later became a slogan for most “Islamic awakening” movements, until the relationship between Islam and politics became established for them as a logical, conceptual

relationship. Here Daher says clearly that Muslims cannot adopt Al-Banna's statement, because of discrepancies in logic that would necessarily lead him to reconsider the relationship as one that cannot exceed being a historic or objective relationship.

The First Assumption

In his deconstruction of the Islamists' argument, Daher resorts to assumptions to prove validity or invalidity. For example, the assumption that the relationship of Islam to politics is a historic relationship, which means that the historical circumstances under which Islam grew required the establishment of a state to ingrain religion. Consequently the material or objective circumstances that Islam lived through necessitated its move towards politics, and not specifically the nature of Islam's religious doctrine. Thus Daher believes that if not for those circumstances, Islam would have not been different from Christianity in relation to politics. This assumption implies that if these objective conditions were what linked Islam to politics, then the lapse of those conditions would negate its relationship with politics, since that is not part of the nature of Islam as a religion.

The Second Assumption

As for the relationship of Islam to politics being a conceptual relationship, this suggests that this relationship is included in the core of religious teachings in Islam. This signifies that the Muslims' belief in the teachings of Islam necessarily compels them, regardless of historical or objective circumstances under which they live, to establish their Islamic state to fulfill their doctrine, as that would be a religious obligation. Daher views the problem here in considering the establishment of the Islamic state at the heart of the doctrine of Muslims,

The question posed by Daher here is: Could God, whose nature is assigned by Islam, be a being who can order people to establish their state on certain bases, and not others, regardless of their temporal and spatial conditions? To address this question, the author analyzes the idea that the relationship between Islam and politics is a conceptual and not a historical relationship. He says that the theorists of the Islamic awakening, who propose such an idea, must not only prove that it does not contradict the doctrinal essence of Islam, but also that this essence logically requires this relationship to politics.

Daher uses analytic methods of logic that resemble mathematical formulae, aiming to achieve a result he calls logical. Despite the accuracy of his analysis, or success in using the logical method of persuasion apart from any historical circumstances, or any hidden ideological balances, he implies that separation of state from religion is a logical necessity. He also suggests that the link with the past and with religious and cultural heritage does not imply success at all, and that salvation, progress and advancement is "logically" achieved by adopting Western secularism which redeemed the West from the curse of church authority.

This may lead us to wonder whether secularism represents the way of salvation. And

even if it had, at a particular historical moment and in a particular context, brought salvation to a particular group, will it necessarily be the sole salvation today? Will history prove that success is the destiny of secular regimes? And if they were sometimes successful, will success be theirs alone? In this regard, the paper touches on the Zionist experience--this movement that has managed unjustly to create a state out of nothingness and unjustly, despite the blatant contradiction in its essence between secularism and religion. Conversely, the path of transformation in the Palestinian context, despite its political lack of adherence to religion, has seen the actual existence and right to exist transformed via an opposite vector to an idea.

Zionism between Secularism and Religion

The emergence of the Zionist movement was a reaction to the conflict related to the integration of European Jews into a social contract, namely, the claim of Judaism to a nation for Jews only, in an attempt to overcome anti-Semitism and not to confront it. Hence Zionism's goal was not to change anti-Semites, but to change the Jews by converting them from a religious denomination to a nationality, and from a sacred group to a modern nation. While Zionism negates the state of religious sectarianism, it finds itself negating the secularism of Jewish individuals who are led by secularism towards integration. Zionism, then, is a negation of both secularism and religiosity. And since it negates the two poles of this dialectic, its abstract idea bears in itself a contradiction, for when it negates secularism it becomes a religion, and when it negates religiosity, it becomes secular. Those who consider the Zionist movement as an abstract ideology find that it was a current within Judaism, which calls for the reformulation of Judaism, and when Zionism won, Judaism became a current in Zionism.

To transform Judaism to a nation, the idea needed a state, yet in European thought, and also Zionism, the idea of the nation was associated ultimately with the idea of sovereignty of the state. The intellectual proponents of Zionism did not busy themselves in searching for theoretical proofs to support the nationalism of Jews, but they started to build the Jewish nation in practice, and presented their plan for the state. At the time, Orthodox Judaism was the antithesis to Zionism, which was also a minority movement within Jewish groups and its opposite was the contemporary reaction towards the brutality of early capitalism, as exemplified by the critiques offered by European socialism and communism. The first conflict took place in Judaism with the Jewish religious establishment, whose minority religious world was threatened by Zionism as a whole. In addition, there was a challenge to its cultural hegemony as a sacred denomination that did not see salvation in history, but in a miraculous event that exists outside of history, where divinity intervenes via the arrival of the Messiah. The second conflict also took place between two different ideas of salvation, yet both approaches searched for salvation in history and not outside it.

Intellectually, the Jewish state as conceived of by the Zionism of Herzl is devoid of religious symbols and myths. Herzl believed that the Zionist project was linked to a European colonial project, but the state is not an abstract settler state, and the activity

to establish it is not an ordinary colonial activity. Those implementing it proceeded by invoking an understanding of their project as a process of liberation and not colonization. Azmi Bishara refers to “The historical right, the re-formulation of Jewish history as a national history since the era of the First Temple, the establishment of a Jewish state as a re-building of the Jewish state, and the return of the Diaspora¹. Ilan Pappé states of the transformation that unfolded: “The Zionist movement is the most successful nationalist movement in history, because it was made to exist to create one people, yet it created two peoples.”

Since identity is formed through the definition of the “self” in relation to the often antithetical “other,” one cannot understand the evolution of the formulation of identity without engaging in understanding its relationship with the other. Colonialism contributes to the formation of national identity through both military and legal institutions, which constitute the general framework of nationalism, in which nascent [national] identity is nurtured. The production of culture and national identity in a colonial context has become a representation of the historical and cultural resources of the nation and its people. This pattern in generating and imagining national identities has been prevalent in countries that were colonized in Asia and Africa. The colonial institutions that were established for the administration of these countries maintained their original forms “post-colonially” after the departure of the colonial administration and its replacement by a “national” administration.²

The condition of Palestine is unique, since its historical experience is distinct, thus making it always singular. Darraj’s arguments emerged in the late 1980s to establish the origins of a Palestinian national identity via a cultural discourse that presented Palestinian cultural accomplishments, as illustrated by intellectual and literary documents, as well as historical evidence of Palestinian awareness of themselves as a national group, even before the materialization of the Zionist project on the land of Palestine.³ This suggests that the colonial condition does not create identity. The Palestinian narrative is the creation of the Palestinian national movement, in light of the regulation and formation of modern nationalisms.

This narrative of nationalism has been influenced by the genesis of nationalities in Europe, and accompanying European attitudes in the nineteenth century toward non-Europeans, especially Jews and Arabs. Given that nationalism often entails the transformation of the oral narrative to a written historical narrative, the formation of Palestinian national identity has followed this pattern through a secular narrative resting on three major components (the land, the people, and the historical narrative). The establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded on this narrative.

¹ Bishara, Azmi. “One Hundred Years of Zionism: from the Dialectic of Existence to the Dialectic of Essence”.

² Massad, Joseph. *Pan-Arab Nationalism*. (Columbia: Columbia University, 2001) p. 18.

³ Al-Sheikh, Abdul-Rahim. “The Joyfulness of Masters and the Dialectic of Slaves: Critical Approaches in “The Misery of Culture” and “The Memory of the Defeated”. *Al-Ayyam*. (2005)

Darraj says that the culture of the Palestinian victim is derived from the Zionist culture of the executioner,⁴ since the Palestinian narrative is linked politically, not existentially, to the formation of an antithetical identity, i.e., the Israeli identity, which was realized by the Zionist movement, which Pappé dubbed “the most successful nationalist movement in history.” Pappé argues that the Palestinians, who were defeated, emulated the victor. Many criticized this Palestinian sin when of impersonation that caused the “defeated” to imitate the victor. Yet Darraj views this as an issue greater than and different from sin, as he views the impersonation by the defeated of the victor’s role as an act of creation, as it transforms the victor into a supernatural creator. Darraj says: “Zionism, as it has imposed uprooting, warfare, death, and hope, seems like a second god to the Palestinian person. It limits his/her movement, and calls him/her by many names. If creation is the appellation, and the creator gives the created its name, then the Zionist created the Palestinian more than once: It created him/her once when it gave him/her the designation of a refugee and an “Israeli Arab,” and created him/her once again when calling him/her a saboteur, a terrorist and the enemy of peace”.

There is no doubt that the general logic of nationalism, which applied to the Palestinian condition, applies as well to the Israeli condition, despite the critical difference between the formation of the Zionist movement, as a national settler movement linked to a dominant European colonial project, and the Palestinian national movement, as an indigenous national liberation movement that opposed it. The notion of transforming the “idea” of a nation to “existence” lies in the affirmation of identity, or even the ability to create it. The Zionist movement succeeded in transforming its idea of nationhood into an actual existence via the establishment of the state and an end to exile, while the Palestinian national movement failed to transform the existence of the Palestinian people (and end to its *Shataat* [Diaspora]) into an idea, i.e., to a historical entity capable of entering into the global historical record as developed by European modernity. The Zionist project managed to transform in itself existence, yet Palestinian existence could not establish its own idea, which allowed the “Zionist idea” to overcome “Palestinian existence.” Ultimately, Zionism became an authority of state, and Zionist gangs transformed themselves into a “defense army.” While, on the other hand, the Palestinian case was manifested in the transformation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization institutions to the Palestinian National Authority, and the Palestinian Liberation Army was dissolved!

In his book, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, Shlomo Sand presents the idea that there is no such thing as a pure Jewish nation, or a single Jewish people that can trace its ethnic and biological origins to a single root, as alleged by Zionist thought. There is the Jewish religion, with followers belonging to diverse and disparate nationalities, ethnicities, and geographies, and linked to one another through their affiliation with this religion, as is the case of Christians, Muslims, or others in history. The seed of the Zionist project germinated in the nineteenth century, and was influenced by German

⁴ Darraj, Faisal. *The Memory of the Defeated: Defeat and Zionism in the Palestinian Cultural Discourse*. (Beirut: Dar al-Aadaab, 2002). P. 36

nationalism and the emergence and rooting of the nationalist era in Europe. Zionism arose via its reproduction of the European experience by creating and inventing a Jewish nationality that did not exist from a historical and scientific perspective.

The above-mentioned facts constitute conclusive evidence that power is what is employs either the religious or secular perspective to establish the roots of its own hegemony. The Western colonial project has consistently been producing concepts, imposing them as facts, and excluding all that conflict with achieving its colonial objectives, whether this is called a true religion or an advanced secularism. Although the Zionist project represents an apparent colonial policy, and has sought to devour homelands and confiscate rights, yet Islam remains the “horrorifying” obsession which the hegemonic powers seek to remove from history and the world, to obliterate it and extract any measures of power it may have. The topic of dealing with Islam constitutes the opposite doorway to the Israeli condition as represented by the Zionist project, as the Palestinian condition assumes the antithetical and opposite position to Zionism.

What appears between the lines here is that the concept that needs to be sought and reinforced in this wheel of power that turns nonstop is “resistance.” For as the concept of secularism necessarily conjures up religion, also colonialism necessarily invokes resistance. One cannot deal with concepts imposed by the West merely to fit them into place (like a jigsaw puzzle) by colonized peoples; why would peoples languishing under occupation seek a place for the term “democracy,” or desert their religious and cultural heritage, and consequently their historical and intellectual traditions, to chase after a “liberal modernist secularism” in order to demonstrate their ascension from backwardness, while they are simultaneously and continuously being usurped in whatever is tempting to colonial powers? Here one could say that the “logical necessity” for such a context is to look inwards, i.e., to adherence to character, identity and selfhood, since the separation advocated by Western secularism is separation from one’s self, and an affirmation of cultural schizophrenia and consequently the schizophrenia of identity, which necessarily furthers the dissolution of the colonized in the shackles of Western and Israeli colonizers.

Conclusion

The Palestinian context represents a reality that is not easy to analyze in terms of considering where religion and secularism lie, yet the problem manifests itself in dealing with religion via the modern system, in the idea of the separation of religion from politics or state. Such an idea stems from the allegation by the West that Islam is a mechanism for resistance, and thus the logical necessity that Daher demands is a Western demand that accomplishes a colonial objective. It is an Orientalist entryway that advocates a modern liberalism that it is trying to root itself in an Arab-Islamic tradition, and it is presented as part of a framework that does not outwardly attempt to transgress the essence of religion, by arguing that the logical conclusion is one that the creator desires, since it acknowledges that humans have intellectual capacities that would necessarily lead him/her to such a result.

Yet this argument contains a trap or dilemma that only exacerbates a resignation that

has no remedy under the yoke of colonialism, because the attempt to portray the path to salvation as a logical necessity, as catching up with Western secularism, insists on absolute severance with religion and the past. The mere idea of severance with religion is extremely unjust, as it would be a retraction from religion as an epistemological foundation, so to speak, and not necessarily imply the adoption of the ideologies of Islamist groups and the Muslim Brotherhood. It also does not mean the adoption of the political agendas of movements that exploited religion, but a return to the Arab-Islamic cultural heritage and to many thinkers such as Ibn Rushd [Averroes] and Talal Asad. Those who allege that democracy can only be derived from secularism call for undermining the Islamic religious discourse in particular, and are manifested in corrupt regimes allied with the colonial powers, and clothed in secular cloaks. They only aim for the persistence of the colonial condition and the dogmatic dependence on the West and Israel. While claiming to have the propensity for democracy, they repress any Islamist movement that has activity in a public democratic space, since that would necessarily lead to the commencement of “resistance” to end the colonial condition.