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## A New Secularism Is Appearing in Islam

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For decades, social scientists studying Islam discussed whether this second biggest religion of the world would go through the major transformation that the biggest one, Christianity, went through: secularization. Would Islam also lose its hegemony over public life, to become a mere one among various voices, not the dominant one, in Muslim societies?

Many Westerners gave a negative answer, thinking Islam is just too rigid and absolutist to secularize. Many Muslims also gave a negative answer, but proudly so: Our true faith would not go down the erroneous path of the godless West.

The rise of Islamism, a highly politicized interpretation of Islam, since the 1970s only seemed to confirm the same view: that “Islam is resistant to secularization,” as [Shadi Hamid](#), a prominent thinker on religion and politics, observed in his 2016 book, [Islamic Exceptionalism](#).

Yet nothing in human history is set in stone. And there are now signs of a new secular wave breeding in the Muslim world.

Some of those signs are captured by [Arab Barometer](#), a research network based at Princeton and the University of Michigan whose opinion surveys map a drift away from Islamism — and even Islam itself. The network’s pollsters recently found that in the last five years, in six pivotal Arab countries, “trust in Islamist parties” and “trust in religious leaders” have declined, as well as attendance in mosques.

Granted, the trend isn’t huge. Arabs who describe themselves as “not religious” were 8 percent of those polled in 2013, and have risen to only 13 percent in 2018. So some experts on the region, like [Hisham A. Hellyer](#), an Egyptian-British scholar, advises caution.

Yet others, like the Lebanese-born popular Middle East commentator [Karl Sharro](#), think there is really something going on. “It is true to a certain extent, and you can feel it in many places including the Gulf,” he said regarding the secular wave. “It’s the beginning of something that will take a long time.”

What is the cause? “It is mainly Islamist politics and some of the social and political manifestations of the Islamic awakening,” Mr. Sharro argued. These include, he said, “disappointment with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the shock of ISIS, fatigue with sectarian parties in Iraq and Lebanon, anger at the Islamist regime in Sudan.”

When you leave the Arab world and look at the two important powers nearby — Iran and Turkey — you can see the same trend, but on a bigger scale.

In Iran, the Islamic Republic has ruled for 40 years now, but it has failed in its zeal to re-Islamize society. “Instead, the opposite has happened,” the Middle East scholar Nader Hashemi has observed. “Most Iranians today aspire to live in a democratic, liberal and secular republic, not a religious state run by clerics.” Indeed, many have had enough of those clerics, and are bravely defying them in the streets.

In Turkey, my country, a softer but similar experiment has taken place in the past two decades. Under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey’s formerly marginalized Islamists have become the new ruling elite. This allowed them to make their faith more visible and assertive — but it is also a fig leaf for their insatiable lust for power. So, as the Turkey-born sociologist Mucahit Bilici has observed, “today Islamism in Turkey is associated in the public mind with corruption and injustice.” And many Turks detest it more than ever before.

The disillusionment is often only with Islamism as a political instrument, but it can turn against Islam, the religion, itself. In Turkey, the latter is manifested in a social trend among its youth that has become the talk of the day: the rise of “deism,” or belief in a God, but not religion. Pro-Erdogan Islamists are worried about this “big threat to Islam,” but perceive it, tragicomically, as yet another Western conspiracy, rather than their own accomplishment.

How far can this secular wave go? Only God knows, to offer a religious answer. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that this wave differs from the kind of secularism imposed on the Muslim world about a century ago, under authoritarian Westernizers like Ataturk of Turkey or Reza Shah of Iran. Theirs was a top-down revolution, imposed by the state and was widely perceived as inauthentic. This time, however, we are speaking of a bottom-up trend, coming from society, from people fed up with all the ugly things done in the name of religion.

That is why it reminds me of the beginnings of the Enlightenment, when Europeans, having seen the horrors of religious wars and persecution, developed the idea of political secularism, while also championing reason, freedom of thought, equality and tolerance.

Of course, those fine ideals can be compatible with Islam as well, as “Islamic modernists” have been arguing since the late 19th century. Moreover, Tunisia, a rare bright spot in the Arab world, suggests that there is hope in this moderate path.

But if Islamists and conservatives keep their old ways, they may face a radical version of the Enlightenment: fiercely anticlerical and decidedly antireligious, reminiscent of what turned France against a hegemonic Catholic Church.

Therefore, if Islamists and conservatives really care about the future of Islam rather than amassing power in its name, they should begin thinking about ending all the ugly things they have attached to that name — civil wars, authoritarian rule, hate-filled teaching.

Islam, at its core, has many virtues to inspire humanity — such as compassion, humility, honesty and charity. But they have been eclipsed for far too long for the sake of power and the dictates of bigotry.

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