The Islamic Secular by Sherman A. Jackson (review)

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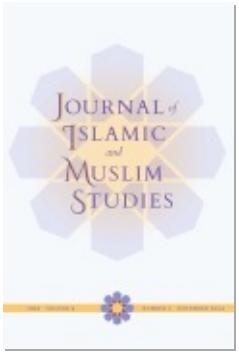

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Nevertheless, Rehman's work is a groundbreaking study of *al-Ijaba*. Her work offers a critical assessment of the process of hadith canonization in Sunni Islam, exploring how it excluded female voices and privileged male perspectives. She offers a new way of looking at hadith by broadening the canon to include conflicting traditions in hadith books previously deemed non-canonical. Rehman ultimately presents a pathway for a systematic and methodological feminist engagement with the Sunni hadith corpus.

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The Islamic Secular

Sherman A. Jackson
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Can the "secular" ever be "Islamic?" Sherman Jackson's *The Islamic Secular* is a profound exploration of a deeply misunderstood concept: the relationship between Islam and the secular. In an intellectual landscape often dominated by binaries, such as secularism versus religion, and tradition versus modernity, Jackson masterfully demonstrates that these categories fail to account for Islam's unique historical and intellectual heritage. Equally impressive is Jackson's ability to contextualize his argument within broader debates on secularism and its relationship to religion and the state. He criticizes both Western triumphalist narratives that see secularism as the inevitable endpoint of human progress and Islamic apologetic responses that reject the secular as inherently anti-religious. Instead, Jackson charts a middle path, calling for a reclamation of the Islamic intellectual tradition's inherent pluralism and adaptability. His overall argument appears to be that the term "Islamic" encompasses a much broader scope than the Sharia-based understanding of Islam. Consequently, non-Sharia (*ghayr shar'ī*) elements such as language, *adab*, architecture, and more are not outside the realm of Islam.[1] This should be evident to anyone familiar with the vast scope

of nonmodern Islam. However, when one considers how Islamists define Islam as a "complete code of life," the significance of this perspective becomes clear. This is because Islamists and similar groups (e.g., Salafis or fundamentalists) subject that definition to the totalizing gaze of the Sharia, effectively equating Islam with the Sharia itself.[2] This reductionist approach is deeply problematic, as shown by movements like the Taliban. Additionally, Jackson's concept of the "Islamic Secular" holds significant relevance for debates within the Islamic world, particularly between secularists (left-leaning intellectuals) and Islamists (right-leaning intellectuals). These groups often grapple with the proper role of "religion" in the public sphere, as evidenced in contexts like Bangladesh and Syria following the overthrow of secular regimes.

That said, let me first outline Jackson's main arguments before critically engaging with some of the book's central claims. *The Islamic Secular* explores how Islam has historically and conceptually engaged with what might be called "the secular." It argues that Islamic legal history demonstrates an inherent capacity to navigate the sacred and the profane without adopting Western notions of secularism. Jackson challenges the universal applicability of Western secularism, highlighting its historical roots in the specific experiences of European Christendom.

The book reframes the secular not as inherently anti-religious but as a realm of human reasoning and agency distinct from the Sharia. Jackson examines examples from Islamic legal literature, illustrating how scholars recognized the limits of their interpretations and the provisional nature of *fiqh*. Building on this foundation, the book addresses the challenges Muslims face in reconciling their faith with modernity, particularly when it comes to "the modern state." It critiques both the outright rejection of the secular by some Muslims and the uncritical acceptance of Western secular models. Finally, Jackson proposes that the concept of the Islamic Secular offers a framework for fostering pluralism and coexistence in diverse societies.[3] Throughout the book, Jackson thoughtfully and critically engages with a range of thinkers, including Talal Asad, Shahab Ahmed, Wael Hallaq, Abdullahi An-Na'im, Andrew March, Johann Hamann, Max Weber, John Rawls, and Alasdair MacIntyre. Overall, *The Islamic Secular* left me contemplating many pressing issues concerning the contemporary reality of Islam.

The first question that arises regarding Jackson's thesis is whether Islam can truly absorb and assimilate the secular into its worldview if, by a "secular attitude," we understand a metaphysics that implies the following: (1) acting as if God does not exist in matters of law, ethics, politics, and economics, and (2) the state having no interest in promoting the moral and spiritual health of its citizens, maintaining neutrality instead. While it is well-known that there are many contrasting definitions of the secular and that Muslims are not obliged

to accept the premises outlined above, secular countries, including the United States, which has an unofficial civil religion in the background, seem, by and large, to operate according to these principles (albeit with some exceptions). The larger question, then, is whether an "Islamized" secular would inherently contradict the most basic premise of secularism: that it stands in opposition to the "religious."

Jackson offers a good response to this critique in his book. He argues that the flaw in the above reasoning lies in equating the "secular" with what he describes as the "Western" secular, a notion he explicitly states is not the foundation of the Islamic Secular. The core argument of the book is that Islam possesses its own notion of the "secular," distinct and separate from its Western counterpart. That said, Jackson's discussion of the secular can also be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to various attempts to Islamize "science" and "modern knowledge."[4] The real issue, however, lies with one's "metaphysical" stance. Our actions in the world are guided by a prior (and implicit) understanding of its nature and structure, and this understanding plays a crucial role in politics. If that understanding is shaped by a scientific worldview largely grounded in naturalism, particularly the "causal closure" of the physical world, then this has profound implications for how we approach political and ethical questions.[5]

Relatedly, *The Islamic Secular* offers a sharp critique of Hallaq's well-known thesis of the "Impossible State." Jackson argues that Hallaq's thesis overly depends on the Schmittian concept of the state, while neglecting other possible alternatives. For Jackson, the "Impossible State" is less impossible than Hallaq assumes (p. 376). Similarly, Jackson critiques An-Na'im's uncritical acceptance of secularism. As Jackson concludes, "it may be time for Muslims, secularists and Islamists alike, to abandon as their theoretical starting point: the assumption of full, zero-sum conflict or even antagonism as the default relationship between Islam-cum-sharīʿah and the state, especially given the expanse of the differentiated, *non-sharʿī*, Islamic Secular realm, where the state and religion, *in the proper, the religious sense*, do not necessarily come into mutual conflict" (p. 377).

However, even if one grants that Jackson's version of the Islamic state can adopt the necessary (Islamized) form and properties of the modern state through Islam's *ghayr sharʿī* apparatus, there are deeper structural issues, such as capitalism (and the entire economic system, including its conception of money, property rights, banking, credit creation, economic growth, exploitation of nature, etc.) and instrumental rationality, that are intrinsic to the modern state and the prevailing global order. The implications are immense, particularly as we stand on the brink of catastrophic environmental destruction due to climate change. Moreover, one cannot avoid addressing the nearly half a millennium of intellectual upheaval driven by mechanistic and secularizing conceptions of

nature, concepts that have effectively turned nature into a "resource" and "natural capital" which are largely responsible for the current crisis.

In my view, given the modern condition, it is science, rather than the state, that religion (specifically Islam) must engage with most critically. Science (i.e., the scientific worldview) has effectively become the "religion" of the modern world, with people routinely invoking its authority to address and sometimes justify fundamental questions about what is good, right, and real. While Jackson might argue that the Islamic Secular could, in principle, address these issues, especially by legitimizing the *ghayr sharʿī* dimension as equally "Islamic," the challenge of formulating specific policies remains a collective responsibility.

In other words, Jackson's argument is compelling when considering (Western) secularism and fundamentalist responses to it. However, the book offers little insight into the metaphysical foundations of both the Sharia and non-Sharia realms. That is, if we conceive of the Sharia as an institution, it makes sense to view it as part of the larger metaphysical institution of Islam. In this case, one could argue that the *ghayr sharʿī* represents the non-Sharia aspects of the broader institution.[6]

At any rate, Jackson's main point is that since an Islamic Secular already exists, it could encourage Muslims to think constructively and creatively about issues like science and art, areas typically considered "secular" pursuits. Yet, without underlying metaphysical principles to guide these endeavors, this framework risks indiscriminately adopting ideas ranging from surrealism to positivist science. The core challenge lies in defining what makes something *ghayr sharʿī* truly "Islamic." On this critical issue, Jackson seems to lack a definitive answer.

Jackson's criteria for something *ghayr sharʿī* to be considered "Islamic" appear to be: (1) a God-conscious orientation, and (2) alignment with the norms and values of the Muslim community. Together, these factors determine whether something is deemed "Islamic." He invites us to consider a modern example: a company that produces Barbie dolls might create a version featuring a hijab to cater to Muslim sensibilities or markets. However, such a doll would only be regarded as an "Islamic doll" if it gains acceptance and popularity within the Muslim community (p. 67).

To Jackson's credit, he acknowledges the challenges of such "subjective" criteria when he asks, "Are groups such as ISIS or the Nation of Islam to be considered Islamic, then, given that their God-consciousness, oppugnancy, and apparent desire to please the God of Islam (as so conceived) is beyond question?" (p. 71). He then draws a parallel to a Hadith: "If a judge (*ḥākim*) rules on the basis of his independent effort to arrive at the truth and 'hits the mark,' he receives two rewards. And if he exerts such effort and rules but misses the mark, he receives one reward." In Jackson's view, "both of these actions must

clearly be considered Islamic. In the case of the latter action, however, the effort is Islamic, while the result of this effort, the substance of the act itself, clearly is not" (p. 71).

Following this reasoning, ISIS would receive one "reward" for their "effort," while the "result" of their effort would not be considered Islamic. Needless to say, this conclusion is hardly acceptable.

The problem with the "secular" is that it presupposes a clear notion of the "religious," which Jackson does not provide. What he can say at best is the following: "Islam as *dīn* consists of not one but two distinct yet mutually reinforcing registers of religiosity, one *sharʿī*, or religious, *in the proper, the religious, sense*, the other *non-sharʿī*, in effect, ultimately a religious secular" (p. 374). Of course, he notes that in the West, a process of differentiation led to separating religion from various domains, such as economics, science, and politics, that had been "liberated" from religious influence and declared non-religious. This separation was intended to allow these areas to function independently, free from any constraints or interference that religion might impose.

A related, though minor, point concerns Jackson's Ashʿarite-influenced nominalism, which forms the foundation of his theological stance (pp. 6–8). Jackson critiques a realist ontology because it implies a "fixed" and ordered cosmos, which, he argues, limits God's freedom. While I do not subscribe to nominalism, following Sufi metaphysics and later Islamic philosophy, one can adopt a dynamic and intelligible view of the universe. In this view, reality is not simply a collection of discrete entities or independent objects standing in opposition to the knowing subject. Rather, it is the interconnectedness of beings within a gradational plane of existence that both reveals an aspect of being (*wujūd*) and shapes the process of knowing. In this framework, the world is already filled with meaning and relationships, even at the level of sensory experience. As the Qur'ān says, "We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the Truth" (Q 42:53). In other words, one can speak of two books in which God reveals Himself: the Book of Revelation (i.e., the Qur'ān) and the Book of Nature, both of which mirror each other. However, the connection between the Book of Nature and the Book of Revelation runs deeper, as the verse also mentions the self (*nafs*), which is a key locus for *āyāt Allāh*, or the theater for divine self-disclosure. Therefore, in addition to the two books, I would also propose the Book of Selfhood, which serves as the mediating principle or consciousness between the Book of Revelation and the Book of Nature.

For me, the ideal position is neither unqualified realism nor nominalism. It is actually telling that Jackson, at one point, quotes al-Qarāfī, whose reference to human nature in determining good and evil highlights the significance of a realist ontology:

> What is meant by the "goodness" or "badness" of a thing is the degree to which it agrees or contradicts human nature (*al-ṭab'*), e.g., saving a drowning person or falsely accusing an innocent person; or (2) the degree to which it constitutes a virtue or a flaw, such as (when we say that) knowledge is good and ignorance is bad; or (3) the degree to which the act in question warrants praise or condemnation (read: reward or punishment) on religious grounds. The first two are rational (*'aqlī*) by unanimous consensus (*ijmā'*), while the third is juristic (*shar'ī*) (p. 225).

I agree with this perspective. In fact, Jackson frequently mentions how good and evil can be known through reason (*al-ḥusn wa al-qubḥ al-'aqlīyān*). The reference to human nature suggests that there is something within our intellect that allows us to recognize the nature of good and evil in the external world, without negating God's freedom to reward and punish. If the universe did not contain an intelligible order, how could "human nature," according to al-Qarāfī, make sense of the proposition that "falsely accusing an innocent person" is wrong? Yet, even in this context, God's mercy takes precedence over His wrath.

All of this points to the idea that Ash'arism only makes sense when we understand that God is infinite, and as such, we cannot fully grasp or limit the complexities of the divine nature and God's actions. However, this does not mean that the divine will is "arbitrary" or contradictory to the basic laws of logic. Before God is all-powerful, He is all-good and merciful, as the Qur'ān consistently affirms by treating the names "Allah" and "al-Rahman" as metaphysically synonymous.

These critical points aside, Sherman Jackson's *The Islamic Secular* is a groundbreaking contribution to contemporary Islamic thought and broader debates on religion, secularism, and modernity. It not only challenges Western-centric definitions of secularism but also empowers Muslims to reclaim their intellectual heritage in navigating the complexities of modern life. This book is essential reading for scholars of religious studies, Islamic law and society, political theory, and anyone interested in rethinking the boundaries of the sacred and secular.

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Studies, Religious Studies, The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Ethics, and Ancient Philosophy. *He has delivered lectures in many North American, European, Asian, and Middle Eastern universities. He is also a recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, including the prestigious Templeton Foundation Global Philosophy of Religion grant and the Title IV Grant, U.S. Department of Education.*

Endnotes

1. As he says: "Farmers, mathematicians, and poets cannot be taught their crafts by jurists nor by the sources of juristic law; nor can jurists sit in judgment over the substantive quality of their work" (374).

2. Although the terms "Islamist" or "fundamentalist" are not ideal, I am using them here in the absence of a more suitable alternative.

3. See Ch. 6 of the book in particular, where he deals with "Liberal Citizenship."

4. That is, similar to the concept of the Islamic secular, one might argue that an "Islamic science" already existed during Islam's classical age. Scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr have indeed made this argument, highlighting the challenges of assimilating modern science into the framework of Islamic science.

5. This question of the relation between political theory and ontology/metaphysics is evident from Hobbes to Rawls.

6. See Caner Dagli, *Metaphysical Institutions: Islam and the Modern Project* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014).

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