



The Impact of Liberalism, Secularism & Atheism On The American Mosque

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The Austro-American Sociologist of Religion, Peter Berger, is noted for coining the term and concept of “plausibility structure.” Basically, a plausibility structure is the overall sociocultural context within which a system of meaning, an institution or a set of beliefs acquires its status as “real,” “valuable,” “normal” or even “true”. Individuals who live in this sociocultural context are not likely to defy or flout these beliefs or institutions but to acquiesce to them, take them for granted and ultimately assimilate them as their own. This does not mean that every individual is a dedicated champion of the reigning beliefs, meanings or institutions. But the prevailing plausibility structure will contribute to one’s sense of identity, morality and reasonableness; and it will impose both a psychological and a social cost on going against established norms. No American president, for

example, regardless of his or her own actual beliefs, could proclaim a commitment to racial segregation, unequal pay for women or even atheism. And few American Muslims, again, regardless of their true understandings or commitments, would challenge the reigning paradigms of “human rights,” “free speech” or “separation between religion and state”.

Over the course of their tenure in America, Muslims appear to have only partially grasped the functional significance of plausibility structures. Early on, they harbored and expressed fears about assimilation and “imitating the ways of the unbelievers” (*man tashabbaha bi qawmin fa huwa minhum*: “whoever imitates a people effectively becomes one of them”). And, especially since 9/11, they have moved to assert more forcefully the need to become more rather than less politically involved. Neither of these attitudes, however, seem

to pay much attention to the broader socio-cultural 'eco-system' upon which the viability of Islam and Muslims in America ultimately depends. Instead, the general tendency is to double-down on efforts to build bigger and better religious institutions and establish more robust, effective and widely diffused regimes of religious education. At some point, however, if the eco-system upon which an organism depends degenerates to the point of threatening the organism's basic viability, all efforts that focus on the organism alone must reach their point of diminishing return. There simply is no way to sustain the long-term health and welfare of a fish in contaminated water, no matter what or how much we feed the fish. This is the framework in which I would like to make some preliminary remarks regarding the impact on the American mosque of three major contributors to the American socio-cultural eco-system: liberalism, secularism and atheism.

Liberalism

There are so many iterations and 'schools' of liberalism that it almost seems inaccurate to speak of it as a single phenomenon. But while some of the differences between the various schools of liberalism are significant,¹ the bedrock of liberalism is the commitment to liberty, from the Latin liber, "free." Pursuant to this goal, there are at least three basic characteristics that continue to inform the major forms of liberalism today. The first is the theoretical rejection of all sources of authority

outside the individual or collective self as the basis of morality and or socio-political organization. This goes back to the beginning of modern liberalism in 17th-18th century Europe. The primary object of this rejection was first the Catholic Church and then institutionalized religious authority more generally. We see this in Kant's famous proclamation: "Have the courage to use your own reason! ... Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a portion of mankind ... remains under lifelong tutelage and why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians." Originally, this position did not entail any rejection of God or religion; it was more directed towards the authority of the religious establishment. In its quest to affirm the priesthood of all believers, however, Protestantism would raise the value and authority of private, interiorized belief over those forms of religious conviction and practice that recognized the community as a source of religious authority. This, alongside its effort to empty the socio-cultural eco-system of all supernatural or mystical elements, greatly expanded the domain in which secular perspectives or approaches could legitimately reign.² Ultimately, liberalism would evolve into a more secular identity, and its commitment to autonomy (literally, "self-law") and its rejection of heteronomy (i.e., the acceptance of authorities outside the individual or collective self) would strain its relationship with scripture-based, "organized religion." This remains the case today, especially where the "organized religion" is Islam.

The second feature of liberalism is its commitment to individualism. Liberalism focuses on and privileges the individual self, not in its attachments to larger collectivities, such as family, community or religious group, but first and foremost in terms of the individual self's right to pursue individual fulfillment. Liberalism's point of departure, in other words, is the sanctity of individual desire, which it assumes can be satisfied independent of relationships to others. This is not to say that liberalism has no regard for relationships or the broader collectives of which individuals are a product. It merely asserts that the individual and not the group is the ultimate decider of what and how much authority these relationships shall have. As the liberal feminist Martha Nussbaum explains, "each person is one and not more than one... each feels pain in his or her own body ... the food given to A does not arrive at the stomach of B."³ Thus, liberalism is "opposed ... to forms of political organization that are corporatist and organically organized – that seek a good for the group as a whole without focusing above all on the well-being and agency of individual group members."⁴ Therefore, "The central question of politics should not be, How is the organic whole doing?, but rather, How are X and Y and Z and Q doing?"⁵

The third feature I would like to cite relates to liberalism in its most influential contemporary form: that of John Rawls. This particular feature has to do with how we negotiate conflict. Since the

ideological basis upon which individuals base their views and actions may differ substantially, Rawls feared that people might not be able to find enough common ground to resolve their differences. If A is able to invoke his ideology against B, B will fear that he cannot get a fair hearing and walk away from negotiations, leaving the conflict outstanding, perhaps to the tune of violence. As a solution, Rawls proposed that all parties be made to argue their positions on the basis of what he called "public reason," and that only arguments based on public reason be accepted. Public reason is not indebted to or based on any of the competing parties' concrete ideological commitments; rather, it draws upon what they all share in common. For example, Muslims, Jews and atheists might disagree over the authority of the Qur'ān, but they can all agree to ban crack-cocaine, based on the mutually shared value of health-preservation. Despite public reason's potential for ameliorating public conflict, it carries a number of significant side effects: it denies people the right to indulge their true beliefs when negotiating public conflicts; it privileges the ability to argue over the commitment to what is right; it falsely assumes that the prevailing cultural matrix will not constitute a plausibility structure that unfairly privileges some arguments (those of the rich, powerful and majority) while penalizing others (those of the poor, minorities or unpopular groups).

We should note, however, that, especially in its most popular form, liberalism only aspires to

be a political theory, not an overall philosophy of life. In other words, its primary aim is to regulate relations between individuals and the state and between individuals and each other in the political sphere. In theory, therefore, liberal commitments need not govern life outside the political realm, e.g., in the family, civic organization or religious group. In reality, however, liberal society calibrates its basic institutions (e.g., education, government, law, entertainment) to instill, police and reinforce liberal values and sensibilities. And these tend to go wherever people who have been socialized in a liberal society go. Thus, even if political liberalism does not set out to be an overall philosophy of life, it turns out to be virtually indistinguishable from such in terms of its actual effect, not only in the political sphere but everywhere. As Harry Eckstein notes in his congruency theory, “Governments perform well to the extent that their authority patterns are congruent with the authority patterns of other units of society.”⁶

The Impact of Liberalism on the American Mosque

These features of liberalism clearly affect the function and overall relevance of the mosque. First, the theoretical rejection of all authority outside the individual (or collective) self casts a cloud of suspicion over the mosque as an institution intimately connected to the heteronomous authority of religion, where God is supposed to be the source of

ultimate value. Second, to the extent that individual Muslims come to see little value in anything beyond the ability to pursue personal interest, they are likely to experience as oppressive both the mosque’s attention to the overall interest of the group (to the extent that a mosque actually does this⁷) and to any number of basic restrictions or obligations that are either dictated by the religion or simply go along with reasonable attempts to maintain the functional integrity of the mosque (e.g., restrictions on attire or certain kinds of commercial or social activity). While mosques should ideally take an interest in all community-members – the pious and sinful alike – they are not mandated to place the interests of X, Y, Z and Q over those of the organic whole. Finally, to the extent that “public reason” becomes the basis upon which Muslims expect to negotiate differences, the concrete and specific dictates of the Qur’ān, Sunnah and recognized tradition will likely strike them as oppressive or as unfairly tipping the balance in favor of those who can claim greater knowledge of the religion.⁸ Rather than the Qur’ān, Sunnah or this or that madhhab, these Muslims will prefer to negotiate on the basis of such ‘neutral’ concepts as “equality,” “freedom” or whatever seems most effective in reconciling Islam with the dominant culture.⁹ Given the broader society’s greater purchase on these principles, such lines of argument run the risk of subordinating Muslims to the dominant society’s view of what constitutes a “reasonable” argument or a “good” or a “bad” Muslim.

Secularism

Like liberalism, secularism is a concept that has multiple meanings and usages. Ultimately, however, all of these revolve around the idea that, in modern society, religion either is or should be irrelevant or domesticated, playing no authoritative role in how the state or society is structured or run. In the U.S., this is reflected in a general attitude towards religion that basically recognizes the value of protecting it in the private realm (the home and individual conscience) while vigilantly striving to insulate the state and society from all authority or influence grounded in organized religion. This, it is believed, is the best way -- if not the only way -- to ensure religious freedom for all. Of course, at the heart of all of this is an understanding of "religion" (and thus religious freedom) that is indebted to the Protestant tradition, where the emphasis is on interiorized belief rather than conscientious practice. What is unqualifiedly protected, in other words, is private belief not religious practice.¹⁰

Also as with liberalism, American secularism is primarily a political theory, not an overall philosophy of life. In theory, American secularism does not tell anyone what kind of religion he or she should have or if he or she should have any religion at all; it merely seeks to regulate the impact of religion on collective life. But just as we saw in the case of liberalism, the uninterrupted, trans-generational socialization of people into secular

political outlooks, reflexes and modes of being will tend cumulatively to morph into a more secular outlook on life as a whole. Religion, according to this outlook, comes to be looked upon as a private affair, as nobody else's business, and as suspect or even dangerous whenever it aspires to go beyond this, not only in the public realm but in such sub-state spheres as the family or religious group. Viewed from this perspective, American secularism clearly exercises influence far beyond the realm of the purely political sphere. Indeed, it promotes and sustains an overall secular mindset.

The Impact of Secularism on the Mosque

It is not difficult to imagine the impact of such a mindset on the place and function of the mosque. First, the notion that religion is or should be irrelevant to life outside the home runs counter to the whole point of the mosque as a public, religious institution. This is particularly problematic, given the role the mosque has been called upon to play in Muslim individual and collective identity-formation, going all the way back to the time of the Prophet. The adhān, for example, marked Muslims as a distinct community in Medina: "And when you make the call to prayer, they [the unbelievers] take it as a joke and amusement." [5:58] Similarly, the mosque served as a legitimizing agency for individual claims to loyalty to the Muslim community, as seen in the case of masjid al-ḍirār. [9: 107-10] Second, to the extent that Muslims imbibe the understanding of religion

as internalized beliefs as opposed to conscientious practice, the value of the mosque is likely to wane. For one does not need a particular place in which merely to believe the right things. Third, Muslims who embrace the sense that religion is “nobody else’s business” are likely to resent and or suffocate under the collective ethos and disciplined atmosphere of the mosque. Finally, as secularism as a political ideology is normalized and strengthened through socialization and culture, religion itself is likely to be displaced as a meaningful approach to life, even on a personal level. This will obviously reduce the relevance of the mosque.

Atheism

Given the foregoing, atheism’s impact on the place and function of the mosque would seem obvious. After all, what meaning can worship have in the absence of belief in God? Here, however, we should note an important difference between atheism in general and scientific atheism (or what is sometimes called “the new atheism”). While traditional atheism denied the existence of God, it did so in the context of a world that could still be seen as enchanted, full of mystery, infused with a supernatural ‘something’, and even suggestive of a life beyond this one. By contrast, scientific atheism insists that the material world is the extent of all existence. There is no supernatural, enchantment, mystery, or life beyond death. Even the notion of a “soul,” as some numinous reality, violates the

scientific standard of verification and the notion of the universe as an unflinching mechanical organism. On this understanding, scientific atheism renders the whole enterprise of religious ritual entirely pointless. For there is no “self” to get beyond, purify or discipline; there is no “soul” to be spiritually nourished; and there certainly is no afterlife for which to prepare. When we compare this, however, with the perspective of, say, Buddhism, which also embraces an atheistic outlook, the difference between traditional atheism and the new atheism becomes clear. While the Dalai Lama can state openly that he does not believe in God, he would be the last to deny the power and importance of ritual. In sum, atheism is one thing; scientific or new atheism is quite another. And the two relate quite differently to the logic and value of ritual.

The Impact of Atheism on the Mosque

As the most fundamental function of the mosque – literally masjid, i.e., “place of prostration” -- is tied to individual and collective ritual, any understanding of reality that denies the value and efficacy of ritual must deny the value and efficacy of the mosque. And it is here, in its relationship to ritual, that scientific atheism makes an important departure from both liberalism and secularism. Muslims who imbibe the perspective of scientific atheism, either through socialization or due to the feebleness of the Muslim counter-narrative, are bound to become alienated from ritual and to

experience great difficulty in finding meaning in the activities that constitute the *raison d'être* of the mosque. Liberalism and secularism, meanwhile, while also posing problems for how Muslims relate to the mosque, do not fundamentally contradict it. For there simply is no fundamental contradiction between liberalism or (American) secularism and ritual.¹¹

The Mosque Between Internal and External Challenges

By focusing on the problem of plausibility structure, I do not mean to imply that mosques do not generate problems of their own that ultimately work against them. The poor state of Friday sermons, inadequate and unwelcoming accommodations for women, lack of appeal to and programming for youth, an overly judgmental or an overly lax religious atmosphere, an often off-putting ethnic nativism or ideological stridency, under-qualified leadership, entrenched, arbitrary administrative cultures – these problems are all well known. But even many of these problems ultimately circle back to the problem of plausibility structure, as the latter will contribute much to what Muslims expect (or not) from the mosque. Thus, the problem of plausibility structure is real and should not be ignored in favor of a more navel-gazing approach. Liberalism, secularism and scientific atheism, for their part, are major contributors to the prevailing plausibility structure in America.

A Measured Muslim Response to Liberalism, Secularism and Atheism

In closing, I would like to try to make two points. The first is that while liberalism, secularism and atheism all challenge Muslims, we should not make the mistake of over-reacting to any of them. As I have stated elsewhere, to reject liberalism altogether would be to reject various liberal elements that exist in Islam. For example, while in general Islam takes a more communitarian approach to negotiating the public order, communities have no absolute authority to deny individuals pursuits that God grants them. Thus, asserting one's individuality is not at all necessarily a violation of Islam. In fact, Islam may require individuals to go against the infelicities or unwarranted impositions of a wayward community. Indeed, this would seem to be the whole point of the Qur'ānic injunction to "command what is good and forbid what is bad" (*al-amr bi 'l-ma'rūf wa an-nahy 'an 'l-munkar*), which it directs both to the community and its individual constituents.

Similarly, because secularism is often understood to imply the marginalization or banishment of religion from public life, many Muslims take issue with the concept. But this discomfiture should not blind us to the difference between "secularism," as an ideology, and "the secular," as a legitimate category in Islam. As I have noted elsewhere, there are many issues that *sharī'ah* does not address (e.g. speed limits or

drivers' licenses) and for which Muslims will have to rely on modes of knowledge or reasoning that are not directly indebted to the sources of Islam (including, e.g., experience, actuarial science, city planning, etc.).¹² Inasmuch as these deliberations cannot be based on the concrete textual sources of the religion, they may be deemed "secular" – i.e., *dunyawī*. Indeed, to try to force concrete textual sources on these issues can end up putting these sources themselves at risk. For no speed limit is likely to prove permanently appropriate, and when its shelf-life runs out, the textual sources claimed to be its basis are also likely to come under fire. We should note, however, as I have noted elsewhere, that there is a fundamental difference between the "Islamic secular" and the modern Western secular. The Western secular is contrasted to religion and falls entirely outside of it. The Islamic secular is contrasted to the authority that is concretely derived from the textual sources of *sharī'ah*. And while it falls outside that authority, it does not fall outside the universe of values, meanings, virtues and indications that constitute Islam as religion.¹³

But not only should we not over-react to liberalism and the secular, even atheism is not entirely devoid of insights of value to Islam. Islam's very testimony to faith begins with a pointed negation: There is no god. It goes on to affirm this negation as the proper default presumption, affirming that it can only be legitimately overturned only via commitment to God: There is no god ...

except God. Greater attention to this fact might retard the tendency towards over-hastiness in attributing absolute, unassailable or permanent authority to any historically or socially determined, theory or way of doing things, be these the product of the Muslim East or the predominantly non-Muslim West. Indeed, much of the talk about reform today might benefit from a more explicit recognition of the value of Islam's pointed negation.

Negotiating Plausibility Structure

The second point I would like to make relates to how Muslims might respond to the challenge of plausibility structure. This is a much larger issue than space will allow here. But let me offer the following. Issues affecting plausibility structure often fall outside the confines of the strictly religious sciences or "*shar'īyāt*." Sometime around the middle of the 20th century, however, I suspect that Muslims developed the tendency to view Islam independent of its plausibility structure. From here, the Muslim *Aufklärung* or "way out" came to be identified with the "religious" disciplines: *fiqh* (law), *uṣūl al-fiqh* (legal methodology), *'aqīdah/ kalām* (theology), *taṣawwuf* (Sufism). Islam ceased to be a "civilization" and was reduced to a much narrower understanding of "religion" inspired by the European Enlightenment. In her book, *How Judaism Became a Religion*, Leora Batnitzky describes a similar development in Judaism. She writes, "Prior to modernity... Judaism was not a religion, and Jewishness was not a matter

of culture or nationality. Rather, Judaism and Jewishness were all these at once: religion, culture and nationality.”¹⁴

Muslims must reconnect with the vision of their pre-modern ancestors who saw Islam as more than just “religion” in the Enlightenment sense. From here, not only will issues relating to plausibility structure acquire explicit relevance, so too will all those Muslims – men, women, youth, clerics, non-clerics -- who can contribute in positive ways to this enterprise. Classical Islamic civilization was not the product of the likes of Mālik and Abū Ḥanīfa alone; al-Khawārizmī, Mimar Sinan and countless other men and women contributed mightily, including such ‘clerics’ as Ibn Ḥazm, who wrote on erotic love! We too will have to expand beyond the religious sciences, texts and personnel. Otherwise, continued neglect of plausibility structure will only breed apathy and alienation. And these have always proved to be more effective slayers of religion than bigotry or persecution. And God knows best.

Endnotes

1. We might note, e.g., the differences between Bentham's and J.S. Mill's Utilitarianism or Kant's liberalism vs. that of Nozick, Raz or Rawls
2. On this point, see, e.g., P. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* 3rd ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 110-25.
3. M. Nussbaum, "The Feminist Critique of Liberalism," *Political Philosophy: The Essential Texts* 3rd ed., ed. Steven M. Cahn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1033. Nussbaum's essay is taken from her book, *Sex and Social Justice*. She is defending liberalism against the critiques of such feminist writers as Alison Jaggar, Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin.
4. Nussbaum, "Feminist Critique," 1030.
5. Nussbaum, "Feminist Critique," 1033.
6. See H. Eckstein, "Congruency Theory Explained," <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/2wb616g6>
7. A mosque may mistakenly equate the Imām's or the executive board's or the influential in-group's abstract notion of an optimally operating or "orthodox" mosque with what actually operates in the best interest of the concrete, flesh and blood community members before them.
8. Indeed, the arrogant, blithe or seemingly self-serving manner in which some of those of knowledge might deploy their wares only adds to the laity's attraction to "public reason" as a means of insulating themselves from humiliation.
9. I should clarify that I do not place any premium on going against the dominant culture for the sake of going against the dominant culture, especially since the Prophet routinely proceeded in a manner that sought to minimize non-essential differences between him and his pagan or Jewish compatriots. My point is simply that such reconciliation should proceed with integrity to the concrete sources and values of Islam.
10. Increasingly, of course, Evangelical ('fundamentalist') Protestants seem to want to include their practice of religion, including the ability to influence government, as part of "religious freedom," while limiting others', viz., Muslims', religious freedom purely to the realm of internal beliefs. Thus, presidential candidate Ben Carson can warn that Islam is a threat to the Constitution, presumably because of the public expression to which it aspires, but when asked whether the Bible is superior to the Constitution respond that that's a "complicated question".
11. Of course, liberalism may oppose some of the forms that Islam's communal rituals take, e.g., women covering their hair for prayer, women standing behind the men in congregational prayers or the fact of men alone leading congregational prayers. But this is different from being opposed to the very logic and aims of ritual per se. After all, graduation ceremonies and the Oscars are just as much a ritual as individual or communal prayer. Few liberals or secularists, however, would be in favor of jettisoning these institutions. I suspect that even few scientific atheists would be opposed to these secular rituals, which underscores the fact that scientific atheism is ultimately opposed to religious ritual and not simply ritual per se.
12. See my "Islamic Law, Muslims and American Politics," *Islamic Law and Society*, 22:3 (2015): 253-91.
13. Again, see my "Islamic Law, Muslims and American Politics," esp. 282-89.
14. L. Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 2.