

## Research Notes

Our winter issue for 1995 (vol. 12, no. 4) will be a special issue dealing exclusively with the issue of secularism. It is our pleasure to announce that Abdel Wahab Elmesseri, professor emeritus at 'Ayn Shams University, Cairo, Egypt, has accepted the position of guest editor. He received his doctorate in comparative literature from Rutgers University (1969) and has taught in several universities in the Middle East. He has served as a cultural consultant for the Arab League delegation to the United Nations and has written extensively on Middle Eastern affairs, Islam and Islamic thought, and Zionism. Among his publications are the following: *Encyclopedia of Zionism's Concepts and Terminology* (1975); *Israel and South Africa* (1977); *The Earthly Paradise* (1979); *The Palestinian Wedding* (1983); *The Zionist Ideology* (1983); *The Palestinian Intifada and the Zionist Predicament* (1989); and *The Soviet Jewish Immigration* (1990). Recently, he has been engaged in an ambitious project to write an encyclopedia of Zionism in Arabic. The following is an introductory outline of his vision of secularism. Willing contributors to the *AJISS* special issue are not to be restricted to the intellectual boundaries of this thesis. What is presented here is essentially aimed at opening the door for a wider scholarly debate. Contributors interested in the subject are welcome to submit research papers, review articles, or book reviews to *AJISS* before the end of June 1995. All contributions will be subjected to the normal review procedures for publishing (ie. reviewed by two referees, upon whose decision, papers will be accepted or rejected and/or returned to the authors for specific amendments).

## 1995 Special Issue: Secularism

The definition of secularism as the separation of church and state has gained currency and has become more or less universally accepted, probably because of its tameness. It confines the secularizing processes to the political and economic realms. Although it could be extended to cover what is commonly called the realm of "public life," it never goes beyond that. The term suggests that processes of secularization are explicit and quite identifiable, and that an individual's private life (i.e., dreams and nightmares, tastes and aesthetic sensibilities) can be hermetically sealed off and thus remain free of the ravages of secularism.

One glance at life in the modern West demonstrates the fallacy of this assumption. The state, far from staying out of the realm of public life, has penetrated deeper and deeper and into to the farthest corners of our private lives. The corporations and pleasure industries have infiltrated our dreams, have shaped our images of ourselves, and have controlled the very direction of our libidos.

Like most, or probably all, world outlooks, secularism revolves around three elements: God, humanity, and nature (nature is hereafter referred to as "nature-matter" in order to emphasize the philosophical dimension of the concept and to dispel the romantic aura that has surrounded it and weakened its analytical and explanatory power). The attitude of God—is He transcendent or immanent; is He above

nature and humanity and history or immanent in (namely reducible to) them—is what defines the status of a human being in the universe and his/her relationship to nature-matter.

Secularism declares that it is immaterial whether or not God exists, for He has very little to do with the formulation of our epistemological, ethical, aesthetic, and signifying systems. If God exists, He takes two extreme forms: a) He could be too transcendent and removed from humanity and nature, indifferent to human suffering, or b) He could be seen as completely immanent in both humanity and nature (or in either) and as having no existence separate from them. This view, which is the more common of the two, is known as immanence. Immanence implies that a) the world as given has within it all that is necessary for its full understanding and utilization, and b) that the human mind is so equipped that it could acquire all of the knowledge necessary for a full understanding of, and dominance over, nature. If nature is autonomous and self-sufficient, then so is the human mind. This duality (or dualism) produced two orientations within the same secular outlook:

1) *A humanity-centered outlook.* Even though an individual exists in nature-matter as an organic part of it, he/she is basically a rational creature whose mind possesses certain powers of reasoning, abstraction, totalizing, and other abilities. Each individual can use his/her limitless mind (the *logos* and the center of immanence) to reach objective and moral truth, without any reference to any point that is external to the human mind or to nature.

2) *The nature-centered outlook.* God either does not exist or is reduced to marginality, for the world as a given contains all that there is to know. But it is nature-matter, not the human mind, that manifests the *logos*, as the individual is nothing more than an organic part of the world of matter and, as such, completely reducible and subservient to it. Nature-matter, through its continuous flux and unceasing evolution, keeps on evolving higher and more complex forms of life and intelligence. In other words, it is both the creative and the unifying principle in the universe. The whole world (nature and humanity) is subject to one and the same natural law, which is known, collectively, as “scientific laws,” “laws of movement,” or “immutable and objective laws of nature.” In this nature-centered universe, humanity has no special status, for nature is neutral and indifferent.

The nature-centered outlook could become more polished and sophisticated, and even more complex, but, in the last analysis, every-

thing is subject to a ruthless monistic causality. The category of nature-matter could conceal itself under more subtle categories ("secular absolutes") that duplicate in their very structure the reductive monism of the category of nature-matter. The most common absolutes are the following: the nation-state, the market economy, the profit motive, the principle of utility laws of supply and demand, the invisible hand, the pleasure principle, libido, eros, the *Volk*, the Absolute Idea, the *élan vital*, will power, historical inevitability, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the white man's burden. All of these absolutes and ultimate points of reference have causal primacy and are presumed to be of comprehensive explanatory power of both man and nature.

Issuing forth from the nature-centered outlook, an individual is merely a natural man or woman. There are many variations on this concept, the two most important being "economic man," and "physical" or "libidinal man." Economics views the individual in economic terms alone and as reducible, despite his/her complex totality, to a number of identifiable needs to be satisfied and an amount of energy to be used (and sold as labor). Each individual is a productive and purchasing power to be explained in terms of input and output and to be utilized in production and consumption. Psychology sees the individual in either "physical" or "libidinal" terms. An individual's behavior is charted in terms of either external stimuli and responses (a nervous system) or in terms of a dark yet natural and physical libido. The duality of such "economic" and "physical" individuals corresponds to the duality of profit and pleasure, to the duality of production and consumption, and of the puritan and the hippie. It can also be seen as echoing the ultimate duality of the humanity-centered and nature-centered outlooks.

The ultimate goal of science has become precision, not complexity, and the very taxonomy of our sciences is based on this criterion. Sciences are either exact or inexact. Of course, the exact sciences are ranked higher in the hierarchy, which is based on nature-matter as an ultimate category, for exactness is defined in terms of proximity (or distance) from the one principle that governs the universe: general (material and natural) law. The paradigmatic hypothetical moment in this context, the moment when the paradigm fulfills the immanent law, is when a comprehensive knowledge of these laws is reached and then formulated in the neutral, precise, and exact language of algebra or through mathematical equations and simple binary oppositions that do not know God, man, angels, or devils, and that stand beyond good and evil, completely sterilized from history, emotions, and time.

If all of these terms and methodologies are but variations on, or manifestations of, the concept of nature-matter, the same could be said of such concepts as progress, growth, and planning, for they all operate in terms of the causal primacy of one or a combination of material factors.

Thus the world is caught in the web of materialistic hard causality, of cause inexorably and unambiguously leading to effect, of stimulus producing response, of infrastructure secreting a superstructure—just as matter somehow miraculously produces mind—with “effect,” “response,” “superstructure,” and “mind” being mere epiphenomena and illusion. An individual’s consciousness itself is nothing but “a higher form of matter.”

There is another duality that characterizes all immanentistic systems: the oscillation between an extreme cosmism, which deifies the cosmos, and an extreme acosmism, which denies its very existence. The pattern can be found in ancient gnosticism, some adherents of which considered the world as the seductive handiwork of the demiurge that undermines the very scheme of salvation and the individual’s attempt to rejoin the divine *pleruma*. But there were also those who tried to achieve salvation by sinking into nature so completely that they would exhaust its powers and be freed from it.

This is not markedly different from the view of modern secular gnostics, who start from the here and now and seek instantaneous gratification. They concentrate on the world of objects, sensations, sense data, and material indicators to the exclusion of everything else. The body and one’s genitalia (in postmodernist discourse) become the ultimate cognitive metaphors. But gradually the secular absolute, the one principle underlying all phenomena, appears and effaces reality, and the world of specific forms and identities becomes neutral undifferentiated prime matter—the human face divine is replaced by an X-ray thereof, after which comes a complete luminosity that is structurally similar to total darkness.

This process of reduction, deconstruction, and neutralization is also a process of desanctification of both nature and man. Everything is reduced “in the last analysis” to the level of useful/usable or useless/unusable matter, which gives rise to what may be termed the “secular imperialist epistemology.” Humanity and nature are forms, to one principle, immanent in matter. Both are reducible to their lowest common denominator (the one principle), so that they may become quite amenable to measurement, quantification, instrumentalization, utilization and, in brief, more amenable to technocratic engineering and programming. Both humanity and nature, being simply one-

dimensional, can be readily harnessed in the service of an ultimate purpose (a *telos*) to be defined by statesmen or scientists, or an amalgam of both: in other words, a technocratic elite that has a special access to the *gnosis* of science and/or of the state.

Everything, including the human individual, has to be subject to measurement. Everything has to be instrumentalized, reduced to the general laws of nature and matter, all of which lead to technological utopia and the end of history.

The human mind itself within this naturalistic frame of reference grants sanctity to nothing. It sees the world (both humanity and nature) as ultimately knowable (and controllable and usable). The light of reason, knowing no limits, penetrates everything like a ruthless X-ray. It judges everything by objective neutral criteria (firmly rooted in the ultimate category of nature-matter). And matter, as we all know, does not hesitate or mediate, brooks no ambiguities and tolerates no complexity, recognizes no *logos* or *telos*—it just keeps on moving and expanding unless stopped from without, something like a “natural man.”

On an epistemological level, an individual degenerates into the state of nature, moves like it, expands like it, all the while becoming more or less a natural force. Being autonomous and self-referential, standing beyond good and evil, the individual cannot be judged by any criteria that is external to himself/herself. If the world is centered around the individual, it is centered around his/her own interests, physical welfare, and profit and pleasure. This is why we argue that if secularism is the theory, then imperialism is the practice, for secularism, in all of its orientations, generates an imperialist epistemology. Imperialism, like nature, cannot stand a vacuum, and therefore has to swallow the whole world. And, like nature, as it cannot stand complexity or transcendence, it has to flatten everything and make it level with matter.

Since the Renaissance, the West has been frantically scrambling for Africa, Asia, the seas, the air, the sky, and even our psyches, all the while hoping to instill in us an insatiable cupidity that would integrate us into the western market system and reduce us to the level of economic and libidinal units. The imperialist project, however, was implemented first in Europe itself: the rise of central secular nation-states that rationalized western societies and their inhabitants in terms of the nature-matter paradigm until the western individual became a one-dimensional rational and natural being. The nation-states secularized western societies, and their imperialist troops secularized the rest of the world. Secularism and imperialism are but two manifes-

tations of the same secular imperialist epistemology of immanence and conquest.

Secularism was emerging as it was being monitored and described by individuals in the West. One aspect was seen, then another, then a third, and so on, and one aspect was named after the other. The phenomenon was never seen in its wholeness, and the totality was never clear (till very recently). The perception of the phenomenon was dichronic, as was the process of naming. The piecemeal terminology was not integrated in one united paradigm—first it was humanism and/or the Reformation, then the Enlightenment, rationalism, and utilitarianism; then the counter-Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Darwinism; then positivism, existentialism, phenomenology; and finally came the need for history and postmodernism. Racism, imperialism, and Nazism were seen as mere aberrations, as having a history distinct from the history of secularism. The history of western philosophy assumes a certain autonomy, and the issue of increasing levels of secularization as a possible explanatory paradigm for the endless oscillation between subject and object is hardly even considered.

A plethora of terms to describe different aspects of modern life has been developed. Some unity is seen, but each term remains encapsulated in the phenomenon it describes and never goes beyond it to a higher paradigm. Some terms are positive (i.e., growth, rationalism, progress, mobility, and the conquest of nature). Some are more or less neutral (i.e., value-free outlook, objectivity, modernization convergence, and the end of history). But many are quite negative and refer to what a historian of philosophy terms a "dark enlightenment": the crisis of modern civilization, quantification, mechanization, standardization, instrumental value-free rationalization, alienation, the crisis of meaning, philosophies, philosophical nihilism, the Americanization of the world, commodification, reification, the modern world as an iron cage, and the disenchantment of the world.

The overall unity is merely glimpsed; it is never fully articulated into a paradigm showing the overall unity underlying the terms. If we had developed a unified and complex paradigm of secularism, we probably would have seen some kind of a relationship between the Enlightenment and deconstruction; between modernization, modernism, and postmodernism; between humanism and imperialism; between Nietzscheanism, Tarzan, and Hitler on the other hand and pragmatism, the sex queens of the movie industry, and Eichman on the other; between pornography, rationalism, and imperialism and the

Holocaust (Zygmunt Bauman in his *Modernity and the Holocaust* shows the relationship between rationalization and genocide).

What is sorely needed is a comprehensive and more complex paradigm of secularism that can show relationships hitherto unseen, one that can integrate the different terms that describe one and the same phenomenon of secularism as if it were made up of different unrelated phenomena. Why, one may ask, has such a paradigm not been developed yet? Or, if it has been, why has it not been articulated effectively or been given the centrality it deserves? In an attempt to account for this situation, the following reasons may be given:

1. The humanist illusion of the possibility of asserting the primacy of the human over the natural within a materialistic frame of reference was all too real. Western individuals operated in terms of two outlooks: a human-centered and a nature-centered outlook. Rather than see the utility, what such people saw was a dichotomy that fed the hope of a heroic humanist materialism.
2. The division persisted in another form: the capitalist/socialist dichotomy, wherein the revolutionary forces of humanism raised the banner of socialism with humanity as a self-transcending secular absolute inscribed upon it.
3. A decisive factor that contributed to the failure of the West to develop a comprehensive paradigm of secularism is the fact that Christianity persisted, even after it was separated from the state. It provided western secular individuals with the ethics and metaphysics necessary to run their personal lives and even some aspects of their social life. Thus society did not have to face the Hobbesian problem of a society based on mere self-interest and rational calculation, where each individual is merely and exclusively a wolf vis-à-vis other individuals, where all human relationships are contractual, and where the state stands guard against warring tribes and individuals. Christianity provided western individuals with a conscience, a purpose, and a basis for one's outlook other than prime matter.
4. Moreover, western social science itself was being gradually secularized. Eventually, it more or less completely assimilated many, if not all, of the metaphysical tenets of secularism: the belief in progress and in the autonomy of humanity and nature, and the denial of the possibility of transcendence. The disappearance of the concept of human nature as an ultimate point of reference in the human sciences is a dramatic manifestation of the level of secularization.

The humanist illusion of self-transcendence and of an ethics without metaphysics has been dealt an almost fatal blow after two world wars, after the environmental disaster, and after our realization of the impossibility of imperialist control over ourselves and our environment. The socialist illusion lies dead in the ashes of the Soviet Union, and its obituary is writ large by the emergence of organized crime syndicates that have been able to assert their control over many Russian cities. The talk of a phoenix-like return of socialism is merely the hope of old-line socialists who need something to clutch at for the rest of their individual lives. As for the secularized categories of Christianity and the remnants of Christian belief, these have been dealt a fatal blow now that the secularization of dreams and of one's inner life has been achieved, that one's public and private life has started almost to correspond, and now that the one-dimensional (natural, rationalized) individual has become a dominant reality. The ravages of secularism are now clear, and its total reality is clearer than ever. It is time to modify our paradigm to make it more comprehensive and complex.

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