

Review Article on Islam and Science

ISLAMIC MODERNITY AND THE CHALLENGES FOR SECULAR LIBERALISM

by *Stefaan Blancke* 

Abstract. In his recent book *Islam Evolving: Radicalism, Reformation, and the Uneasy Relationship with the Secular West*, Taner Edis discusses Islamic responses to the modern world and how the West deals and should deal with them. He argues convincingly that the biggest threat to secular liberalism is not fundamentalism but an Islamic form of modernity. He attributes some of the latter's success to Western neoliberalism and to the failure of secular liberals to come up with persuasive arguments. He thus puts part of the blame on the West. However, although self-criticism is an essential aspect of a well-functioning democracy, we should not take it too far. Instead, there exist convincing reasons why a secular liberal society is strongly preferable to a religious conservative one.

Keywords: accommodation; Islam; modernity; norms and values; religion; science and religion; secular liberalism

On March 22, 2016, suicide bombers targeted the international airport of Brussels and the city's metro system, causing the deaths of 32 innocent bystanders and wounding numerous others. After the attacks in Paris half a year earlier, which had involved several Belgian terrorists, Muslim terror had come closer to my home in Belgium once again. Naturally, these attacks ignited discussions about a variety of issues including the balance between our safety and our rights of freedom, the causes of terrorism, and the relation between the secular state and conservative religious communities of various stripes including Muslim minorities. Long-felt societal tensions with these communities, based upon concerns about the lack of integration and the violations of basic rights, rose to the surface yet again. Our liberal democracy can deal with opposing points of view. In fact, our political systems and public space has been designed for doing just that. Whether the discussions are about the distribution of welfare, mobility choices,

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or the balance between economy and environment, our political model allows each to give voice to one's particular position and, through political debates, subsequently arrive at a compromise of some sort. Arguments play a pivotal role in this process, and they can because everyone agrees on the terms and the rules by which we play, some of which we consider to be among our highest achievements.

Muslim communities, however, seem to pose an entirely different challenge as they appear to function by a different set of norms and rules altogether, coupled to a disregard of pivotal aspects of modern society. The submissive role of women clashes with our emancipatory views, the unstunned slaughter of sheep at the Festival of Sacrifice infringes upon our increasing sensitivity to animal rights, and calls for a Sharia rule for Muslims conflict with our secular law under which, in principle at least, all are treated as equal. Moreover, Islam seems to play a central role in the structuring and the justification of these practices. This connection between religion and people's lives appears strange, even unsettling to secularized Europeans. What are we to make of the relevance of religion in the lives of Muslims? What does Islam mean to them and what role does it play in their political and societal views? How should we accommodate such views, if at all? And, vice versa, what is the future of liberal secularism in Muslim countries? These and other related questions form the central themes of Taner Edis's new book, *Islam Evolving: Radicalism, Reformation, and the Uneasy Relationship with the Secular West* (2016). As we will soon see, his answers are not very reassuring.

Taner Edis is well placed to discuss these important issues. As a Turkish American and a "godless infidel" with Islamic roots, he has personal experience, both in Turkey and the United States, with the clash between conservative religious and secular forces. He is a professor in physics at Truman State University and a prominent skeptic with a profound interest in the relation between science and religion. He has authored interesting books on the impact of science on religious and nonreligious beliefs (*The Ghost in the Universe: God in Light of Modern Science* [2002], *Science and Non-Belief* [2008]) and the role of science in the Islamic world (*An Illusion of Harmony: Science and Religion in Islam* [2007]). With his new book, he has broadened the scope to discuss modern developments in the Islamic world in general and how these relate to the secular West. The result is a fascinating and richly documented book that offers surprising insights about Islam and the challenges it poses to secular liberalism.

ISLAM VARIETIES

At the start, the author emphasizes that we should be careful not to treat Islam as a monolithic entity. As with all things that are unfamiliar to us, we tend to essentialize Muslims, placing them under a single category and

thinking about them accordingly. However, this psychological tendency prevents us from acknowledging the various ways in which Muslims experience and think about their religion. Not only are there various factions, such as the relatively familiar distinction between Shiites and Sunni Muslims. But also, just as with Christians and Jews, you get various views about the role that Islam should play in society, from fundamentalists to conservative and moderate religious Muslims to liberals. According to Edis, the conservative line is by far the most popular, but even here, views vary about what constitutes true Islam. Edis convincingly argues that every position, fundamentalist, conservative, or liberal, is the result of interpretative and creative processes. Of course, Islam is a religion of the book, but Edis explains that Muslims enjoy considerable flexibility in interpreting the Quran and other sacred sources, which are notoriously vague and incoherent. In order to imbue the sacred sources with meaning, one has no choice but to engage in hermeneutics. This process also enables Muslims to adapt orthodoxy to changing circumstances. As long as one is capable of showing that the interpretation remains within orthodoxy, it stands a chance of being accepted as such. This also goes for the more liberal views, Edis explains, although these views are marginal and depend on a rather eccentric reading of the sacred sources.

Nevertheless, conservative interpretations tend to carry the day. Liberal Muslims form not only a marginal group but they also need to be careful at times, as they run the risk of being branded as apostates, thus facing harassment, or worse. Fundamentalism manages to seduce quite a few young Muslims in cities who take what Edis describes as a Protestant-like approach to their religion, turning to the holy text directly instead of a settled religious tradition for divine guidance. But in the eyes of most Muslims, these views are an aberration from what they consider to be the “real” Islam, which forms the core of traditional communities. In the orthodox view, religion is not something that should be restricted to the private sphere, but forms the cornerstone of society. Such a society should not be confused with a theocracy, an antimodernist, backward form of government that originates from religious romanticism and where strict, literal interpretations of divine rules reign supreme. Instead, as Edis shows throughout his book, conservative Islam can adapt quite well to modern times. Muslim nations such as Turkey rely on applied science, technology, and the free market to make progress. However, religion remains pervasive. The result is a form of modernity without disenchantment, a pious modernity.

PIOUS MODERNITY

It is not Edis’s intention to provide us with a general overview of Islam. Instead, he chooses to focus on those aspects of Islam that pose a particular challenge to secular liberalism. One of the main and strongest messages of

the book is that it is not so much Islamic terror or fundamentalism that we should worry about, even though these cultural forms attract a lot of attention in the West. Instead, it is the almost intangible, and thus much less visible process through which conservative religious views adapt to modern circumstances and as such, develop into a full-fledged Islamic alternative to secular modernity. Such processes are harder to detect, which explains why the media tend to overlook them. Edis, however, clearly identifies and thoroughly discusses the factors that shape Muslim modernity.

Take science, for instance. Secular liberals tend to think of it as one of the highest achievements and at the same time one of the main driving forces behind Western civilization. Indeed, by delivering technological innovations, science has helped to shape the dominant position of the West. But it has also led to the disenchantment of the world, delivering insights about reality that deeply conflict with religious views. Evolutionary theory, for instance, removes humans from their privileged position as intended by God and puts them among the animals. As it poses a major threat to their belief system, conservative religious communities and nations are hesitant to embrace and promote science. This, in turn, explains why Muslim regions fall behind the West when it comes to scientific and economic development. But this is only part of the story. Conservative religious people do not think of themselves as antiscientific. They just think that the bits that they do not like about science are unscientific. Many conservative religious individuals today are perfectly capable of building a career in the applied sciences such as engineering without ever being confronted with more challenging theories. For instance, it is perfectly possible to work in a lab on DNA without accepting the basic tenets of evolutionary biology, even though, of course, genetics provides lots of evidence for evolution. Edis points out that this situation is not an exclusively Muslim affair, which is certainly true, unfortunately. In the United States, creationists make the distinction between what they call operational and historical sciences. The first category is the type of science that you can do in the lab, by conducting experiments and testing hypotheses through more or less direct observation. It is a narrow, physico-centric view on science, a science that results in concrete applications and technologies. In contrast, the historical sciences are not much of a science at all. In the spirit of postmodern philosophies, theories about the past such as evolution or geology are mere interpretations of facts that can just as well have an alternative, equally valid interpretation in terms of creation and the flood. Nobody was there to witness one species change into another or to see the formation of rock layers. Ken Ham, the president of Answers in Genesis, the largest "Young Earth" organization in the United States, advises children to ask adults who teach them evolution a single question: "Were you there?" As such, creationists are perfectly capable of enjoying the technological benefits of modern science without having their religious worldview

shaken. Edis points out that comparable things are happening in Muslim nations.

However, Edis notes that this is not the only similarity between the American Bible Belt and some Muslim nations. Both do not only appropriate a religiously harmless applied form of science, but also another typical modern aspect of modernity, namely the free market. Although neoliberalism tends to overturn traditional communities, it does not necessarily result in less religion. On the contrary, neoliberalism and religion, albeit in updated, modernized versions, seem to go hand-in-hand reasonably well. Edis assumes that the reason for this intimate relationship lies in the fact that neoliberalism reduces citizens to consumers without any guidance or norms about what constitutes the good life. All that matters is personal consumption and entertainment. As such, Edis argues, liberalism undermines the construction of a public sphere with shared goals and values, which is consequently left for religion to fill in and give direction and meaning to people's lives. The author even goes as far to name neoliberalism, and not Islam, as the major threat to the secular liberalist project. And, because of the historical connections between neoliberalism and secular liberalism, this is a problem of our own making.

Here, Edis, however, downplays two important issues. One is that trade and markets, because they are based on nonzero sum interactions, tend to create higher welfare. And a limited amount of prosperity—not being hungry, some comfort, and access to basic goods—is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for liberal secularism. Once people can stop worrying about providing for their daily bread, they will be less tempted to turn to the divine for help and security. The second point is that this will not happen spontaneously. Markets are without morals; they do not tend to the good in themselves. But they can be highly effective tools for increasing welfare when regulated by policies that help to target certain communal goals and redistribute wealth, organize education, and when extended with social care plans that provide a minimum of social security for all. This appears to be the ideal recipe for increasing secularity, which in Edis's view (and I agree) constitutes the best guarantee for success of a secular liberalism. Hence, although there might exist a historical connection between neoliberalism and secular liberalism, they are not necessarily connected. In fact, I would argue, neoliberalism, when defined as the ideological and misplaced trust in the free market as the single provider of goods, is not so much a descendant but rather an aberration from the secular liberal project.

Looking at Islamic law, Edis explains, one can discern similar modernizing trends. Most Muslims tend to think that divine law is important, but there are immense differences in ideas about what the law stands for and what exact role it should play. There are groups and countries that defend a traditional interpretation, with harsh punishments and the death penalty for apostates. Unsurprisingly, these types of strict religious regulations are

the most disturbing to secular liberals. However, according to Edis, other Muslims think of such interpretations as remnants of premodern times. Instead, they will look to adapt divine law to changing circumstances. This even creates opportunities for liberal interpretations, but most reforms tend to preserve a conservative ethos. Edis thinks that the prospects of liberal secularism in the Islamic world are dim. He points out that the few experiments of introducing secularism into Muslim nations, with Turkey as the most renowned example, have failed. Steps toward more liberal ways of life only seem possible by reinterpreting sacred sources and laws, not by removing them from the public sphere. However, whether developments will take a liberalizing course, depends on local political conditions. Things might just as well develop in the opposite direction.

ACCOMMODATION

The fate of secular liberalism in Muslim environments should be of great concern to secular liberals worldwide. Equally pressing is how secular liberal countries should deal with Muslim minorities. In this case, tensions arise between the freedom of religion and religious beliefs, norms and practices that violate various rights and freedoms, including the freedom of religion, and even secular core principles such as equal treatment for all. In modern Western societies, religion is not the backbone of our communities. Religion does not dictate our laws, prescribe social and moral rules, and put limitations on our thoughts and behavior. We enjoy freedom of speech and extensive individual autonomy because diversity in opinion helps to think of and create better outcomes, and criticism from others is necessary to adjust our views. Moreover, we advocate, promote, and protect women's rights and the rights of homosexuals and transgenders because we do not want incidental factors such as gender and sexual orientation to affect one's societal status. And we defend the right to abortion and euthanasia because people should be able to make these difficult choices without the interference of people's historically accidental and unsubstantiated supernatural beliefs. In conservative Muslim minority groups, these cherished freedoms and rights tend to come under pressure. Yet, because liberals tend to respect people's religious beliefs and maintain that the state should not interfere with people's individual choices, Muslims enjoy considerable freedom to build a religious community on nonliberal principles. Any attempt to curtail the influence of such communities is subsequently challenged as an assault on human rights and an illicit intrusion of the state on individual choices.

Edis aptly illustrates the tension between freedom of religion and Islamic life with a thorough discussion of the role of women in Muslim communities and Islamic feminism. He acknowledges that, generally, Muslim women are not treated equally, a societal norm that finds its origin and justification in the sacred sources. In the eyes of liberals, women should be

freed of their lower position and granted equal rights. Edis, however, points out that women, who overall tend to be more religious than men, might actually opt for such religiously ordained submissive roles themselves, as a way to become a good Muslim and come closer to God. As Edis (156) puts it: "The freedom they seek is the freedom to submit." When young women from Muslim minorities wear the veil, some of them insist that it is their personal choice. What rights do liberals have then to question their choices and demand that they remove their veils? However, liberals see veils as symbols of oppression, and in many cases women are indeed coerced by the men of their communities into wearing them. A few years ago, a Belgian public school director decided to ban all veils when she learned that Muslim girls were forced to wear them by their male co-religionists. The decision stirred quite a lot of public debate, and, indeed, several young Muslim girls established a group that promoted the wearing of the veil as an individual choice. Such arguments clearly tap into liberal sensitivities, and the group received considerable support from left-wing and humanist corners.

As Edis points out, the question as to how to accommodate strong religion with a highly secularized environment is complex, and various options are available. One option, for instance, which builds upon our respect for diversity, is multiculturalism. According to this model, society is organized in a way that allows various cultural groups to live next to one another, each with its own rules and respect for other people's values and norms, even though we do not always agree with them. From such a perspective, conservative Muslims can have considerable freedom to organize their communities as they please, including separate roles for women and a dominant role for religion. Connected to this is the idea of legal pluralism, which means that communities can arrange their affairs by implementing laws that only apply to their own members. Edis rightly argues, however, that none of these options are very attractive. They emphasize differences between groups and therefore make it more difficult to find common ground and hence to engage in a shared public sphere. Moreover, on the basis of well-intended but misplaced relativism, it allows backward rules and norms to linger on at the expense of individuals who suffer as a result. Now, one might argue that many people are happy to live in close-knit communities with clear-cut societal roles. But many other people are not, and they do not have a choice. They are forced to live in ways that they resent. And for that reason alone, it is the obligation of secular liberals to create freedom for all who wish to enjoy it. That means changing the norms within religious communities, at home and abroad.

RELIGIOUS NORMS

Norms are about group cohesion and community, but they can also be tools to manipulate other people's behavior. By setting a norm, one indicates

that this is a goal that one expects people to aspire to. Persuading people to follow your norm may bring several advantages. For instance, you can rally people to realize some ideal that you think is important and are incapable of realizing by yourself. If you care deeply about the suffering of cattle and have become a vegetarian for that reason, your behavior alone will change little for the animals that continue to die *en masse* in slaughterhouses. Only to the extent that you manage to make your norm the goal of many others, things might start moving in the right—that is, your—direction. The bonus is that, consequently, your share of the burden becomes less demanding. In some cases, people even set norms to which they themselves only pay lip service and let other people get their hands dirty. In other words, norms create plenty of opportunity for exploitation. Hence, we can expect that people will not blindly accept every norm on offer, but that they will discriminate between norms that suit them and norms that do not. Consequently, in response to people’s vigilance about norms, we can expect the norm setter to have at her disposal various means of persuasion. (I base these views on the argumentative theory of reasoning developed by Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber; for more details, see their recent book *The Enigma of Reason* [2017].)

One obvious means by which to install a norm is violence. If I am able to accumulate sufficient power, I can make people follow my norms by force, even if they utterly resent it. The Communist regime in the Soviet Union springs to mind. However, in many cases, especially when no such power is available, people do not resort to repression, but to arguments by which they try to convince other people to accept and behave by their norm. There are several ways to achieve this. One successful strategy is to avoid the impression that the norm you defend is in your self-interest, but instead argue that it is actually for the benefit of the group. Another option is to suggest norms that are intuitively appealing. For instance, arguments for equal payment for women tap into our feelings of fairness. Such beliefs will stand even a better chance of being accepted when they cohere with people’s background beliefs that are often shaped by the culture they live in. Claims for women’s rights can exert far more muscle in an environment that is already receptive to claims about rights in general. Of course, these strategies pose no guarantee for success, but, on average, they will help the norm to become more widely accepted and perhaps even part of the dynamic set of cultural norms. One argument, however, works like a nuclear bomb that blows away all other arguments. That is that the norms we propose have been issued and reinforced by supernatural agents that are far more powerful than us mere humans. Hence, if we do not obey these norms, we call their wrath upon us. And to be sure, we do not want anyone else of the group to break these norms either. We call them religious norms.

At one point Edis suggests that the conservative ethos of Islamic communities is not specific to Islam, but instead typical of traditional close-knit

communities that “enforced conformity through gossip” resulting in “a stunted public realm” (103). I agree that these conditions will tend to generate a more conservative morality in general, with or without the Islamic flavor. Indeed, religious norms form no exception in the sense that they too are shaped by cultural evolutionary processes by which they adapt to our intuitive preferences and the ecologies in which they find themselves. Furthermore, the fact that norms tend to take on a religious outlook is itself a result of such processes. The fact, however, that these norms come with the stamp of approval by an all-powerful deity and are eternalized in a holy book, endows them with a universal legitimacy that stretches far beyond the borders of Islamic communities. This has two very important consequences. First, the alleged divine origin of religious norms can motivate adherents to spread these norms to other communities, either by argument or by force. In other words, religious norms have an enormous advantage in terms of transmission. Second, once spread, religious norms are highly persistent and even remain resilient in more hostile environments. Furthermore, I would argue, they will tend to create the conditions under which they can flourish, mostly within small Muslim enclaves in the cities of Europe, but in other cases, the adherents have plans to bring the entire Western society under Sharia law.

LIBERAL CHALLENGES

Clearly, liberals who argue against conservative religious norms face an enormous challenge if they want to disseminate their morals. Their norms cannot piggyback on supernatural support to boost their cultural success. Yet, they can rely on another universal force, namely the force of reason. I thereby do not mean that liberal norms converge on an objective moral truth, but that they are supported by better reasons than religious norms. For instance, it is more reasonable to treat women as equal to rather than inferior to men, because sex differences do not provide any grounds for such discrimination (and we have very good reasons for not trusting a holy book that says differently as a source of moral guidance). Now, liberal norms of course also have the goal of altering people’s beliefs and behavior. That is why they are norms. As such, from a sociological or cognitive perspective, it appears as if it is just one group of people, secular liberals, trying to impose its values upon another group. Hence, liberal norms appear to be more a matter of “groupishness” and struggle for power than of good reasons. On several occasions, Edis seems to go along with this. For instance, on page 127, he writes: “We oppose traditional Islamic law as secular liberals, because of our identity, our interests, and our stable, considered judgments that make us secular liberals.” And on page 162: “We resist conservative Islamic ideals because in the political rivalry between pious modernity and secular liberal modernity, we happen to belong to the secular liberal side.”

However, the fact that liberal norms emerge and function as other norms does not necessarily undermine their universal acclaim. In fact, how else could these norms come about?

Let us compare with science. Sociological and cognitive studies of science have made it abundantly clear that science does not proceed by the application of a formal scientific method, but through the interactions of scientists with their peers and their environment. In other words, scientific knowledge emerges from scientific cultures, produced by minds that are no different in any crucial aspect than the minds of lay people (Rutten, Blancke, and Soetaert, 2018). Postmodernists wrongly infer from this that science is just another culture and that its epistemic authority is based more upon political power than upon reason. But the thing is, science is decisively *not* like any other culture. It is specifically targeted at allowing human minds to discover more and more intricate and complex stuff about the world around us. Building on ordinary capacities, scientists rely on all sorts of artifacts to improve their observations, use mathematics, logic, and statistics to sanitize their reasoning, and heavily depend upon others to pick out the errors and mistakes in their research. In that sense, as philosopher Susan Haack puts it in her book *Defending Science—Within Reason* (2003), science is “common sense, but more so.” And it is exactly because scientists have all these scaffolds at their disposal within their environment (the “more so”), that science results in and constitutes superior knowledge. Similarly, we can improve our moral reasoning, especially in a social setting that allows us to identify and criticize each other’s biases and self-interests and thus converge around more objective norms (in the sense that they are shared socially on rational grounds, just like scientific theories). Secular liberal norms are indeed the result of such deliberative, rational social processes. In other words, the fact that secular norms are defended only by groups of secular liberals does not undermine their legitimacy. There are good reasons why they are better norms.

Edis claims that reasons for secular liberalism might not be “universally convincing” and that religious conservatives will not be impressed. That is probably true, but the same goes for science. Large numbers of people are not impressed with scientific insights and arguments either, whether it is about climate change, evolution, or the safety of genetically modified organisms or vaccinations (see, for instance, Andrew Shtulman’s recent book *Scienceblind: Why Our Intuitive Theories about the World Are So Often Wrong* [2017]). Yet, this does not mean that we should stop trying to change people’s minds about these issues. And neither should we give up efforts to convince others of the reasonableness and the efficiency of our norms in terms of welfare and well-being. However, as Edis points out, arguments alone will probably not suffice. Secular liberals will also have to create the right conditions under which their norms become relevant. This will probably be the most difficult part of the task. One of major strengths of

this book is that it clearly shows how culturally entrenched religious norms are in Islamic communities and how the same cultural arrangements work against secularization. But it is not impossible to alter things. In Western European cities, some young Muslims radicalize to oppose Westernizing trends. Others, however, are becoming more and more secularized, taking a more pragmatic, liberal approach to their religion. And our own recent history shows how quickly such tendencies can lead to a secular society.

SELF-CRITICISM

One of the best things about secularized modern democracies—and which makes secular liberalism the best political arrangement imaginable—is that it leaves ample space for self-reflection and criticism. This is the only way to improve things, one step at a time. Hence, I think Edis is right in pointing out that not everything about Western civilization is praiseworthy. Neoliberalism indeed might sometimes exacerbate individualistic tendencies up to a point that people are left without any support either from their local communities or the government. Human rights are sometimes used as an excuse to invade other countries for more materialistic reasons. I agree we should work hard to avoid these missteps in the future. However, there is a thin line between self-criticism and self-flagellation that Edis crosses at times. As a result, he tends to sound more like a cultural pessimist than the proud and confident secular liberal he should be. Yes, increased individualism might have unwanted side effects, but it does not necessarily undermine people's tendencies to create and foster communities. Instead, the autonomy that people enjoy in liberal democracies allows them to choose freely what community they want to belong to. As such, people are not necessarily bound by religion, nationality, or any other feature of the community one happens to be born into. Because of that freedom of choice, people also realize that their membership does not depend upon an essential trait that they share with one another, so that they are not essentially different from people outside that community. Hence, despite differences of interest, people will not regard each other as intrinsically different, thus creating the opportunity to meet one another in the public domain. And this is exactly what happens, especially among young people. In this light, Edis's claim that "neo-liberalism is, at present, a more important obstacle than Islam" (211) is rather unconvincing.

Edis is also too harsh on modern secularized democracies in his discussion of the relation between Islam and science. He explains how Muslims resist scientific insights that would result in the disenchantment of the world, but this does not lead Muslims to reject science as a whole. Instead, they embrace applied science and technology, which are much less threatening to their religious beliefs. Edis, however, remarks that we should not pride ourselves on our scientific progress. The reason is that economic

powers in the West put great pressure on science to make a profit, which results in higher investments in applied than in fundamental science. But even if this is true, the development of technologies often depends on research and insights into basic processes and mechanisms. These can only be discovered if scientists enjoy the freedom to explore and investigate ideas, even and especially when these ideas do not sit well with societal, religious, or political sensitivities. Such academic freedom certainly exists in the West, which explains why science has been able to make such great advances there and why Muslim countries continue to send their future scientists to the West to study. In fact, academic freedom is one of the greatest achievements of Western societies. As long as scientists in Muslim countries are not allowed to engage in inquiry with an open mind, and as long as Muslim authorities continue to clip the wings of science in order to make it compatible with Islam, Muslim regions will continue to lag behind the West in scientific progress and literacy.

Finally, Edis seems to be confused about the history of secular liberalism. In an attempt to contextualize the sacred violence that Islam is often associated with, he argues that “atheists—and even, perhaps, all of us who identify with the European Enlightenment—have our own history of political violence to answer for, from the terror following the French Revolution to mass murders by communist dictatorships” (250–51). Elsewhere, he writes that “a serious secular liberalism . . . has to learn from catastrophic secular failures such as communism” (203) and that “it does not hurt to remember our own history of utopian violence, whether it is to make Indian or Irish peasants starve in the name of free markets or to ignore collateral damage on the path to a Workers’ Paradise” (268). Also, on page 294: “I should not forget that if the shine has come off the Enlightenment, this is in large part of our own doing. We have been at our worst at our most utopian: When we have sought worldly salvation in the coming Revolution or in the frictionless paradise of the Free Market.”

However, this association between non-theist dogmatic ideologies and liberal secularism is entirely mistaken. In fact, such ideologies are much more similar to the theist dogmatic ideologies we call religions. The main difference between dogmatic ideologies, theist or non-theist, and secular liberalism lies in their underlying view of human nature and the role of humanity in the larger scheme of things. In dogmatic ideologies, human happiness lies in the realization of a larger scheme, whether divine, political, or economic, in which humans play the central part. In contrast, secular liberalism starts from the assumption, now thoroughly backed by biological and psychological evidence, that humans are mortal, fallible creatures with mental mechanisms that are error-prone and that make us vulnerable to all sorts of mistaken beliefs. Hence, our beliefs about the good of humanity, natural or supernatural, might be wrong too. For that reason, we need to be careful about the goals that we set for ourselves and we need to be willing

to adjust them or replace them with better goals. Liberal and secular rights too are anchored in the realization that we are fallible creatures that can mistake their dreams for the truth. They thus tend to create a better world for every individual—not just for the elected few—and are therefore worth striving for. At the same time these rights set the constraints for how we can realize them: not by any means and at any cost imaginable, as in ideologies, but rather through small improvements and political negotiations, at each step checking whether it leads us in the direction of a slightly better world. Or, as Edis succinctly puts it: “I am not sure I can even imagine what a perfectly secular liberal world could look like. But I can still dream of finite improvements in our condition” (294). Spoken like a true secular liberal!

CONCLUDING REMARKS

My final evaluation of this book then is double-sided. Edis could and should have put up a better defense for secular liberalism. We do not stand for secular liberalism simply because of tradition or individual preferences, but because there exist strong arguments in support of our beliefs that have universal acclaim and are objectively better than the arguments in support of religious and nonreligious ideologies. Not only is secular liberalism based on a realistic, scientific view of human nature; it demonstrably results in a more equal, more peaceful, and more righteous society. However, *Islam Evolving* is also a very rich, thoughtful, and nuanced book about the Islamic world and its relation with the West. It puts into sharp focus the developments within Islam that secular liberals should be concerned about. As such, the book constitutes an urgent call to critically reflect upon the foundations of and reasons for secular liberalism and to become more politically aware and engaged.

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