The Question of Religion and Secularism in Morocco: A Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

This paper brings critically to the surface an issue of academic importance; it is the issue of Tradition and Modernity in Morocco. The paper narrows down the scope of analysis and discussion into only reading through one of the building-blocks of this wide and complex issue, and that is titled "The Question of Religion and Secularism". Textual analysis is adopted in order to better locate the narratives of both discourses, religious and secularist, in their appropriate socio-cultural milieu, which is the Moroccan culture. In addition, the paper aims at interrogating the culture of religion and of secularism and see how they interact, we assume either convergence or divergence or ambivalence, in a society which is still trying to orient itself. It also takes critical stands on both discourses analyzed and tries to identify contradictions according to the principles of the project proposed by each discourse. In a nutshell, this is an attempt at self-disillusioning; this disillusioning includes also aspects of thought produced by intellectuals about this issue.

Keywords: religion, secularism, modernity.

Religion and Secularism have different worldview towards the structure of society; the way it should be. Modernity by Secularism ushers in a fissure in the consciousness of society; that is to say, it comes along with shakeups at all levels of society. It forms, to use Gaston Bachelard's, an "Epistemological Break" with religious thinking, with the one-dimensional

way of looking at, and a break with conservativism in all its aspects. Hence, Modernity as a relatively new stage in the history of human thought provides us with a set of epistemic[1] tools through which there is a newly created interaction with the world.

On the other hand, the rise of modernity also marks a rejection of religion, not specifically as a practice, but as a way of understanding the world, interpreting it and experiencing its realities. Religion is regarded by modernity as a demoted culture which does not proceed with the idea of "progress" posed by modernity. Conversely, religion is seen as hampering the potential of the individual as well as the collective to make their way through history. Hence, modernity in Europe engenders Secularism as "a necessary order", an order that is demanded by the historical conflicts: ecclesiastical domination over all facets of life, religious and sectarian conflicts, and also the execution of scholars. These are realities working as factors which gave rise to Secularism in European society.

Secularism is thought to be a cultural feature, culture which is best seen as it "… purposes to regulate human affairs by considerations purely human" (Holyoake 33). In this regard, Secularism has been a cultural project which is based mainly on the "worldly" regulation of human realities; we bear in mind thinking of history as driven by certain laws of cause and effect- Teleological, not instead as being deterministic- Theological. Secularist project then puts aside all the religious "Idée reçue" (Said 96), which have marked the ethos of the pre-secularist culture of the European society. In other words, secularism is a culturally-oriented movement whose seeds were first sown by the Enlightenment movement. In this regard, secularism is, to borrow Emmanuel Kant's expression, to free oneself of "self-incurred tutelage" (1).

Secularism is seen also as a cultural revolution against the premises of the orthodox thinking. Secularism bases its project on the efficacy of reason and thinking to triumph over

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[1] Foucault's concept: episteme is the ruling unites of knowledge at the certain point of time in a certain cultural environment.

the structural making of society; that is to say, its traditional formative ideas, be them religious or folkloric myths. It seems that secularism, in light of this, is a deconstructionist enterprise aiming at rethinking the rudimentary structural units of society. Furthermore, George Jacob Holyoake (1871) defines secularism as:

> Look[ing] to tradition as presenting a storehouse of raw materials to thought… but it utterly disowns tradition as the ground of belief …, no sacred scripture or ancient church can be made a basis of life …. But it disowns all appeal to such authorities as final tests of truth. (16-17)

Secularism is, in light of this quote, a decentralization of the natural order of things or the ruling ideology. It deals with religious ideas, which Holyoake stresses by saying "no sacred scripture or ancient church" (14) as a discourse which negates the opposites—the different, in this case, Secularist counter-arguments. Religious ideas promulgated by religious texts are treated as discursively formed texts, which need to be criticized and tested by the authority of reason. The quote also highlights a sense of "disowning" for all facets of traditional ideas, this "disowning" plays a major role in paving the way for restructuring the makings of society.

The question of religion, which makes the second underpinning concept of this paper, is also suggested to be dealt with as a culture. Religion also has to be considered as a body of divine decrees—Sharia Law generally—not as a practice. Secularist theoretical discourse, highlighted earlier, has got an oppositional stand towards religion, but not, meaning religion, as a body of practices, but necessarily as a body of divine laws encompassing different aspects of human life. Hence, secularism and religion are to be seen, in this regard, as two opposing discourses.

In "Imagined Communities" (1983), Benedict Anderson argues that religion plays a role in building the sense of nationalism/unity amongst the members of society. This links

religion to culture and begs us to pose different questions - related to memory/and history and how religion has been playing a major role in the Moroccan cultural consciousness. On the other hand, secularism proposes a sense of "fragment-ness,"[2] in that it stresses de-structuralizing of society, especially at the level of culture/tradition. Questions of minorities and marginalized outgroups[3]   and taboos- which include religion- are raised and considered by secularists.

In a nutshell, the secularist discourse is deconstructionist in nature. Sources examined above argue that secularism does not concede to any religious authority; as suggested by Holyoake "no sacred scripture or ancient church can be made a basis of life" (16-17), secularism defies the authority and seeks a new social and cultural structure based upon "considerations purely human" (33). It is also highlighted that secularism has been subject to certain unique conditions which resulted in its emergence as a "necessary order" in Europe, according to El-Kbissi. He defines certain cultural, economic, historical and social circumstances as the leading causes that ended in secularism as a way of life.

It is also underlined that secularism is not an innocent term; it may reflect certain Eurocentric values which undermine its very basis. Charles Taylor argues that secularism is also misleading, and it may cause cultural problems. We can relate this cultural problem with how secularism, as informed by the philosophy of enlightenment, interact with the realities of life. Secularism argues that God is dead; this causes a problem for the religious societies, whose basic structure is established upon the belief in God and executing His order. The theoretical framework proves that there is a sense of difference between both discourses; in their premises and also in their worldview. This theoretical framework will be a starting

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[2] I do not mean by this term a sense of dislocation/ambivalence only, but a sense of individual freedom which may go in opposition with the sense of Nation-ness/unity amongst a cultural group.

[3] In-group vs outgroup refer respectively to a dominant group and a marginalized group.

platform for digging into the different unconsidered aspects of the relationship between both projects-religious and secularist.

Texts are not only mere words on pages, but instead they are contexts. They are contexts in the sense that they are set in certain circumstantial bounds-forces of time and space as well as historical contingencies. Texts, for this reason, provide the actual space-time for the analysis, and any stripping of these spatiotemporal actualities will result in the impoverishment of the issue. Here lies the weakness of the previous studies on the issue; scholars do not allow for cultural and social particularities of the society concerned, but because of the conditioning ideologies, they keep the analysis at the level of theory as informed by different narratives- secularist and religious discourses. The choice of textual analysis comes as a result of, first, a lack of literature which adopts this approach to the issue, as already been said; the academic output on this issue is superficially descriptive- with the exception of Abd-El-Jabri's writings   , in the sense that it is a contrast between the assumptions of tradition and those of modernity, which does not go in accordance with this textual approach which assumes a practical reading of the issue, through examining texts as "witnesses of society", and their authors as "conscience of society" (El-Jabri 25).

In addition, texts are images of people and of their concerns. Hence, without taking into account the key factors—people's concerns, it will be difficult to assume any probable cause for the failure of Moroccan society at many levels, one of them is the treatment of the issue—Religion and Secularism. Moreover, Edward Said defines the novel, which will be our tool of analysis, a new approach to the issue- as "a concretely historical narrative by the real history of real nations" (92). This evinces the importance of taking texts- the novel- as tools to be explored and studied. It is then an attempt at coming up with a new approach that takes texts as historical narratives governed by certain meanings of culture and society. In addition,

relying on novels permits us to test the cultural specificities to, what I call, the Idea of Tradition and Modernity, and not the opposite.

Most writings treating this issue start from the assumption that Tradition/Modernity are the touchstones against which other things are measured- the progress of society and its developments, but with texts- texts as "cultural artefacts " (Said 323), the cultural particularities are brought to the principles of Tradition and Modernity. This method allows keeping the analysis on guard against the conditioning ideologies that have influenced the analyses as well as the views of previous studies. In a nutshell, the paper assumes a textual method (texts as documents) to the issue, which brings the cultural actualities of the society to the principles of tradition/modernity. This guarantees not falling prey for the methodological mistake of depriving the topic of its "Context[s]".

A textual method adopted assumes different gradual modes of analysis; the first mode consists of two stages presented as follows. The first stage is focusing on the author's treatment of the issue, we called the Author: an Outside View. In this stage, the method focuses on the theme and how it is presented, either from a societal perspective or from the intervention of the author himself. Relying on the author's treatment is of importance in that he can be taken as a representative of the educated and as part and parcel of his society. Therefore, any signs of this clash or ambivalence between religion and secularism can be detected in his thought and feeling as manifested in the text. Hence, the author's intervention in the text is of value to the understanding of this issue.

The second stage of the analysis is to focus on the characters involved, we called the Character[s]: an Inside View". They are representatives mainly of society and their interventions will reflect movement of thought and feeling, which can either, as presupposed in hypotheses, be ambivalent or conflictual. The characters, in other words, form and showcase the Moroccan subjectivity presented as a set of cultural values. The method being

adopted is also deconstructionist as it tries to read the unread in the text. It starts from Bakhtin's idea that any text carries with it sub-texts or co-texts which can be contradictory to the text as an overall entity. This will allow us to read the text against itself and dig up any contradictions that might help understand the issue the paper is concerned with. It is a way to tell the untold and the unthinkable in the text.

The second mode is to deal with the novels at a macro-level and a micro-level, we called respectively: Macro-Level Analysis and Micro-Level Analysis; namely, the texts are to be taken as a whole- macro-level reading- and as a fragment - micro-level reading. These two ways will help us form an idea of the "whole way of life" (Raymond 90) of the Moroccan society. It is already stated that Moroccan culture is a religious one, and these two readings will determine to what extent that is standing and to what extent secularism- as the culture in itself- has got standing in the Moroccan society. These two readings also indicate two opposing poles. The macro-level is to be taken as representative of the collective consciousness of the society, while the micro-level can be representative of the emergent ways of feeling, which can be voices of resistance and/or of religious and cultural minorities. In short, these two ways of analysis help figuring out moments of clash, and the consequences which ensue, which could, as postulated, either be convergence or divergence or ambivalence. These two stages of analysis will result in gauging the reception and appropriation of the issue in question.

The novels being considered are Abdelallah Laroui's "أوراق or Documents" and Mohammed Berrada's "لعبة النسيان or Game of Forgetfulness"; these are the texts/documents which will be the centre of analysis and discussion. They will provide the background on which narratives of religion and secularism will be tackled. Both novels are complementary as they treat the Moroccan society- its make-up- from different perspectives. Historical contingencies, social and political realities, memory, tradition/religion and

modernity/secularism are all constitutive units that make up the Moroccan culture. The Cultural perspective is richly informed by these levels of the Moroccan society. These novels also provide different backgrounds embodied by the characters themselves; their views about the ills of society; their criticisms; their experiences all crave to understand their "Location of Culture" and their "Self-Orientation", and so does this paper.

The above analysis shows us two categories of findings. The first category stresses the hypotheses already stated. It also stresses the defined arguments of the sources considered in the "review of literature". This category reflects the three repercussions that the interplay of the religious and the secularist have resulted in at the cultural level of the Moroccan society. These repercussions are divergence, convergence and ambivalence. These three concepts will be discussed duly in the coming pages. The second category is the contribution of this paper to the literature on this field of study. This category highlights issues which were never discussed nor raised indirectly, despite the fact that, from a culturalist perspective, they affect in a way or another the way the debate about the issue of religion and secularism is done. Moreover, it is also a fact that, as the paper argues, the discourses under scrutiny are battling over the cultural ground.

What this means is that the discourses are culturally-oriented more than politically. This argument reflects the nature of the Secularist project more than the Religious; for when it comes to the Religious we have said that it is already "traditionalized". The paper, therefore, proclaims that the secularist project is a cultural order, more than it is a mere call for a separation of religion and the state. Furthermore, the study also sheds light on how the religious and the cultural in the Moroccan society interrelate and correlate. It argues that so many historical events have resulted in a process, which we name to be, of Historicization of the Religious. This process contributed to the association of the religious and the cultural in the Moroccan society- this is what is called in social theory "De-traditionalization".

In addition, the paper also draws attention to moments in which the religious and the political are entwined. The example of Friday has been highlighted. Moreover, the findings also highlight an interesting role the religious plays in the Moroccan consciousness, which what we called the "Symbolic". By extension, the idea of the "Symbolic" has been noted via examining the historicizing of the religious in the Moroccan culture. The novels studied have provided enough data to examine and explore this important aspect played by the religious. In addition, the paper has suggested several critical questions, whose ideological background settles upon the analyses of the two novels throughout the different stages followed. In short, the second category contains questions about History, Colonial Contact, Eurocentrism, Agency and Choice, Identity, and Culture-Collectivism/ Individualism. Each of these concepts- which make the contribution of this paper to the literature on this issue- will be discussed.

The paper comes at this important conclusion, which is that the question of religion and secularism in Morocco, as discourse and practice, is governed by the previously stated concepts. These concepts are the dynamic mechanisms which regulate the Moroccan self-location and self-orientation. In other words, the Moroccan subject, as demonstrated by the acts and speeches highlighted throughout the paper, interacts with the secularist discourse via a religious background. During this interaction, several structures of "reference and attitude" (Said 242) urface as they are the categories through which the Moroccan subject first understands, assesses and acts or reacts towards the secularist project. Noteworthy is that religious discourse plays the role of a resisting force; while the secularist enterprise plays that of a cultural alternative- minority.

For the findings associated with the first category, the paper remarks and thus, by consequence, stresses the findings of the previous studies. The first piece of first-category findings relates to the concept of "Divergence". This particular term defines the moments of

clash between the religious and the secularist narratives. It has been noted that this Divergence is a cultural one. This paper may have defined a missing element in the previous studies which this "culturalness" of this Divergence. Most studies have defined the problem of clash to be ideological and political- Secularism versus Political Islam. However, the findings prove that the clash extends to the cultural arena of society. It is observed that each of these discourses is culturally-oriented, and this may be an extra piece added to the previous literature considered on this issue.

It is remarked, in light of this Divergence, that the religious in the Moroccan culture becomes a resisting power levelled against the secularist discourse which becomes an invading culture. This highlights more clearly the intensity of clash between these two discourses. The novels examined have submitted enough data to see this cultural divergence typified in the acts and speeches of the characters involved in the narrative. It is interesting to see the functions of religion and culture in society as presented above. In a nutshell, the paper, at this level, agrees with the previous findings, yet it highlights the cultural facet of the clash between the two discourses.

The second first-category related piece of findings corresponds to the idea of "Convergence"; this shows moments in which both discourses come to meeting points. In other words, the religious discourse responds to the secularist project with a sense of modern reading of itself- religious discourse. This remarked in a rethinking which took place in regard with serious questions posed by the secularist project, issues of women, gender roles, sexuality, and religious freedom. However, what is noted is a sense of preserved authenticity that the religious discourse intends to show. The religious discourse provides readings with respond to the requirements of the "modern society". What this means is that the religious discourse has to answer for the secularist questions. This marks a meeting point between the

religious and the secularist in the Moroccan society. There is also another aspect to this "Convergence", which is that of the Moroccan subjects sharing values of both discourses.

The third piece of findings relating to this category responds to the idea of "Ambivalence"; the novel argues that the Moroccan subject experiences a sense of un-decidability. Both discourses provide values which at times are conflictual, and the Moroccan goes through feelings of "attraction" to the values of the secularist project and at the same times of "repulsion". This cultural ambivalence also stresses, if considered in light of Homi Bhabha's argument[4] , a sense of cultural dislocation; and the truth is that we do hear such phrases accentuating this idea. Therefore, the concept of "Ambivalence" does put accent on the findings of the previous studies which argue that the Moroccan society is between Tradition and Modernity.

The first piece of findings related to second-category is what we called the presence of history in the Moroccan consciousness. The Moroccan culture, as the paper argues, has a high level of esteem in history. This is highlighted as "Sacred History". This sense of sacredness attributed to history plays two essential roles. The first one is the Historicizing the Religious, this process is to be regarded as very important in that the religious has been idealized; as an authentic self to be reproduced. In other words, it is the constant presence of authenticity directed by the religious discourse. The second role is manifested in how this Historicization of the religious attends to the function of religion in culture. This role is that of unifying the whole for a common goal. History, in this sense, plays an essential role in the Moroccan subjectivity. In addition, there is also another aspect to the issue of history and its immense presence in the Moroccan culture.

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[4] Homi Bhabha links this concept of Ambivalence with feelings of mimicry and mockery. Each of these reflects an aspect of what Ambivalence is; Mimicry is a process of imitation, and Mockery is self-fooling as the imitator only mocks themselves by trying to be "Almost the same" as the one they are imitating.

This aspect makes the second piece of findings, which is the Colonial Contact. It seems that this historical incident has shaped greatly how the Moroccans interact with the issue of religion and secularism. Religion has become a refuge-us-; while secularism-them-has been seen as an invading power. This idea correlates with Mohamed Abd El-Jabri's argument. Furthermore, the Colonial Contact has also been a source of critique for the secularists in Morocco. Some argue that their ideas are a "copy-and-paste" project, which does not correlate with the specificities of the Moroccan culture. In addition, it is noteworthy to articulate the role of religion during the Colonial Contact; and thus it necessarily has cultural repercussions; which shaped how Moroccans interact with the secularist project. This interaction is described to be an "utter rejection".

The third piece of findings relates to Eurocentrism. This actually was an idea raised during analysis. It questions the ideological basis of the secularist project in Morocco. It highlights the different conditions resulting in secularism in Morocco. One of them is the historical incident known as "Colonialism". The novels examined show the extent to which the Moroccan society has been influenced by this historical event. The fact is that the novels suggest that this called "Historical event" has exceeded its historical-ness[5] into having an impact "culturally". This, therefore, begs to interrogate the basis of "secularist project", and thus to what extent the secularist project is eurocentrism-free and also this allows interrogating the source of authority behind this project.

The fourth following piece of findings is the question of Agency and Choice. The secularist project is critiqued for not being a creative act of the self. Historical events—the colonial contact previously highlighted- might have a cultural impact upon the secularist project. Agency represents the idea of choosing-choice—the how of doing things. The

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[5] Refers to considering a particular historical event as a merely historical; it does not exceed that into having cultural or political or social consequences.

colonial impact[6] might be that conditioning ideology that shaped the orientation of the secularist project, argues the religious discourse. Hence, the question remains unanswered, as it actually requires research about the basis of the secularist discourse, and that even modernity, which they argue to represent, is to be interrogated.

The fifth piece of findings is related to "Identity"; the religious discourse, as highlighted before, is thought of in the Moroccan society as "the preserver of the identity". At this level, it should be noted that the religious is traditionalized in the Moroccan society. In other words, the paper argues that there is a strict link established between the religious and the cultural in the Moroccan society to the extent that the borderline between the two is unclear and undefinable. This turns the religious into a cultural practice that defines the Moroccan identity. What this means, in other words, is that the religion is the defining element of the Moroccan identity; this argument is summarized when saying Morocco is an Islamic state. On the other hand, the secularist project then becomes a threat to the identity, rather than a solution, in the eyes of the religious discourse.

The last piece of findings is concerned with culture; the paper's perspective is culturalist and so it is very important to consider this concept. It is underlined that the secularist project does not have a clear conceptualization of the Moroccan cultural configuration. What this cultural configuration means is that the Moroccan society is a collectivistic one; mainly produced by the religious aspect present as a unifying force - Imagined feelings, we called them previously in the paper. The secularist project, on the other hand, propagates individualistic culture, so this forms the biggest obstacle for the secularist project. However, it is remarked that the secularist project does not consider this typification

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[6] Some post-colonial theorists argue that empires have ended, but colonialism still continues- referring the cultural, political and economic colonialism. This is also referred to as neo-colonialism, and Marwan Kraidy has criticized neocolonialism.

of culture; which is a mistake in itself. What the secularist discourse does, instead, is trying to show that the type of culture is "dead" and "dehistoricized".

These basic observations make the findings of this paper; each of them targets a missing aspect in the debates about the relationship of the religious and the secularist in the Moroccan culture. In short, the paper has ascertained a very intricate link established between the religious, the secularist and the cultural in the Moroccan society. In other words, if Raymond Williams in his study of the English society argues that the introduction of certain cultural, economic and political elements has reshuffled the English society at all levels, the paper argues that the introduction of secularism has not been able to re-structure the Moroccan society. This inability is due to the dynamics[7] shaping and this governing the Moroccan consciousness.

Moreover, the paper touches upon another important aspect which is the established relationship between the religious and the cultural in Morocco; this very strong relationship renders the secularist project useless. This relationship has been defined as religionizing of the cultural and traditionalizing of the religious; what this means is that at different levels the cultural is associated with the religious, and the religious is linked with the cultural. This is manifested in associating the idea of civilization- cultural revival- with the return to the religious. Another example is the "symbolic function" the religious plays; this symbolic aspect also is a spin-off of that relationship. Friday has become a cultural symbol, in which also the religious and the political interrelate[8].

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[7] History, Colonial Contact, Eurocentrism, Agency and Choice, Identity, and Culture-Collectivism/Individualism.
[8] See how elections are run on Friday; at times, political speeches are addressed on Friday; the constitution has been voted for on Friday.

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