Project Outline

ICONS, IMAGES, AND IDEOLOGIES OF RELIGION AND NATION: Secularism, Religious Nationalism, and the Public Sphere in Comparative Perspective

This project examines the constitutive role of religion in the formation of secular-national public spheres in the Middle East and South Asia. We argue that in order to establish secularism as the dominant national ideology of countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and India, the discourses, practices, and institutions of secular nation-building include rather than exclude religion as a presence within the public sphere. This gesture of public inclusion is the means by which the authority of the secular state is realized and consolidated. In other words, the formation of these nation-states involved the creation of secular-national public spheres, where, contrary to the common understanding that secularism excludes religion, various forms of religious practices, knowledges, and movements were monitored and given a specific public presence. In most of the countries in the Middle East and South Asia, the controlled inclusion of religions and religious-based movements in the public spheres were the main means through which secular states established their authority. In this sense, it is possible to argue that it was these secular founding ideologies that laid the basis for the politicization of religion in these countries, and that the later development of religious-based political movements (such as, political Islam in Turkey, the Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hindu nationalism in India) are in fact products of such secular systems. As such, these religious-based political movements, which introduce alternative national projects, cannot be assessed properly without a due understanding of the secular systems and founding ideologies that made them possible in the first place.

This project seeks to investigate the specific ways in which secular founding ideologies emerged in the MENA region and beyond, how they inscribed quite unique and particular relations between the secular, the religious and the national in the public spheres, and how these interventions resulted in the politicization of religion so as to give rise to current religious-based alternative national projects. We address these issues through a collaborative and comparative analysis of the formation and transformation of the public spheres in these countries, understood in terms of material practices and visual fields rather than as abstract and disembodied entities. Specifically, we examine three such fields: urban space and architecture, cinema, and public images and rituals with a view to exploring how the relation between secularism, religion and nationalism is displayed and performed.

We also explore how public enactments of the religious-secular relationship change over time as contending national projects with alternative visions of this relationship gain social and political prominence. We will address the following research questions: What kinds of visual representations of secular identity were formed at the founding moments? How did religion figure in these representations of

the secular? Through what means did religion-based alternative national projects emerge in the public sphere and how did they define their relation to secularism? What kinds of alternative visibilities and visual/material/cultural practices were produced by such projects?

We believe that the wide and diverse variety of institutions, actors, sites, and practices that constitute the public sphere necessitate the use of an equally diverse and flexible research methodology that draws upon theoretical insights from a broad range of disciplines. Accordingly, instead of focusing on a single representative aspect of the public sphere, our project examines three different public sphere sites or sets of practices, each of which requires a different set of reading strategies and theoretical tools. Thus although we are interested in a common general question, namely, the ways in which the formation of secular-national public spheres engages with the issue of religion, we recognize that different public sphere sites within a nation may reflect very different versions of this relationship, and that an interdisciplinary exploration of these variations will enable a more complex and fuller understanding of the constitution of publicness in the regions of MENA and South Asia.

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