

INTRODUCTION

Secularism, Women & the State: The Mediterranean World in the 21st Century

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This volume grew out of a *salon* or *conversazione* on the theme of “The Prospects for the Secular State in the Mediterranean World in the 21st Century” hosted by ISSSC—the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture. The event took place during June 2007 at Trinity College’s campus located on the historic and beautiful Aventine Hill in Rome, Italy. The purpose of this gathering was to assemble a diverse group of people from different Mediterranean nations, academic disciplines and professions for a relaxed, multi-cultural exchange of information and opinion on one of the key political and intellectual questions of the moment, one which is on the agenda today in one way or another in every country in the Mediterranean region. How should the state and government respond to diversity of beliefs and worldviews in today’s society?

Given the range of nationalities and world views—Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Jewish, secular—represented among the participants, we did not expect a consensus to emerge. We had no wish to craft a conference declaration or statement but instead we succeeded in having some respectful and interesting discussions that enhanced our mutual knowledge and understanding. The intellectual focus of ISSSC is on studying the prevalence and impact of secular ideas, values and traditions in the contemporary world. Our 2006 international research conference in Hartford, Connecticut, which had the title “Who’s secular in the world today?” focused on sociological research and cultural issues. Those proceedings were published in the volume *Secularism & Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives*. In 2007 in Rome, the agenda was more on politics and the role of the state—and so on political science and government—combined with a clearer geographical focus. What was particularly unique about the conference was the large proportion of women scholars. One

of the outcomes of our discussions was a consensus that gender relations and the status of women were key variables for understanding the prospects for secularism and secularity in all the Mediterranean countries; hence the title of this volume, *Secularism, Women & the State*.

The relationship and place of secularism and religion in government and public life have been major political issues since the time of the French Revolution and the Italian *Risorgimento*. This constitutional debate remains at the heart of many contemporary national disputes about democracy, pluralism, the role of women in society and educational policies. During the 20th century, the tensions and divisions surrounding the “church/mosque-state” question led to brutal civil wars in Spain, Greece, Lebanon and Algeria. In European states where this issue was thought to have been settled, the question has returned as a result of the migration of Muslim populations from the south to the north of the Mediterranean basin.

To what extent can we speak in the early 21st century of a “Mediterranean World”? Obviously it is not as tightly bound politically, culturally or economically as it was during the height of the Roman Empire, but even then there was a division between a Latin-speaking West and a Greek-speaking East. Yet Imperial Rome created a very similar interconnected world to our own, especially in terms of conflicts and fast moving international events around *Mare Nostrum* (our sea). We are not the first generation of people, as ancient historians such as Tacitus, Pliny or Josephus would tell us, to have to deal with complex and interlocking political problems affecting the interplay of military, economic, migratory and cultural forces. Moreover, well-educated citizens of the Roman Empire could probably follow much of the discussion and arguments that are presented here about constitutional arrangements, the problem of sovereignty, the role of the state in public and economic affairs, the function of the law, the role and status of women in society, republican versus monarchical or theocratic political systems, and the debates among faith and reason and religion and skepticism.

Today, the idea of an integrated Mediterranean region is a focus of French foreign policy and in 2008 President Sarkozy launched a Union of the Mediterranean. This concept has intellectual roots and reflects the influence of the great French historian of the *Annales* school, Fernand Braudel (1902-85).¹ Within the context of human history Braudel emphasized two themes—Technology and Exchange. His thesis was that it is imbalance that creates exchange and therefore leads to progress. This is very much the underlying theme of this volume.

The analyses in the chapters of this volume, given the social science background of the authors, tend to lay stress on transformations over recent

decades. Certainly the European section of the Mediterranean world has seen remarkable and unpredicted changes as open and free societies have flourished alongside quite unexpected transformation of the economy. As recently as the 1970s, Franco's Spain and the Colonels' Greece were not conducive to democratic and especially secularist ideas. The speed of economic improvement in these countries since the downfall of the last of the fascist regimes has been impressive as has the accompanying social change. In Italy, too, there has been a political and social revolution with the surprising collapse of both the Christian Democrat Party and the national birth rate.

The regional migration of people northwards from poor to rich countries is much discussed now in political and economic circles. However, one often neglected and overlooked historical trend with important political consequences is that as the countries to the north of the Mediterranean have become more pluralistic or multicultural, those to the south and east have gone in the opposite direction and become culturally more homogeneous. Since the end of World War I, beginning in the 1920s, the Muslim majority countries have lost or expelled their minorities—their native Christians, their ancient Jewish communities, as well as their French, Italian, Greek and Armenian populations. Istanbul, Alexandria, Algiers, Tangiers, even Beirut are not the polyglot, cosmopolitan cities they once were. One consequence is that there is less pressure on these southern Mediterranean states to organize society and the polity in order to cope with diversity while on the contrary that need has increased in the European states. This bifurcation or polarization of the historical experience of the Mediterranean world during the late 20th century underlies much of the discussion here.

Yet the picture is complicated by the historical legacies of European colonial and Ottoman imperial rule. Greek Christians were ruled by Muslims but Turks never had European rule whereas Israel and Egypt had both sets of rulers. Political secularism has much deeper roots in Turkey than in Spain or Greece. In Europe, the traditional process of separating religion from politics has sought to limit the powers of a dominant religion or religious authority in the public, personal and political life of Europeans. Two models emerged. The first, which predominated in mainly Catholic countries (France, Spain, and Italy), is based on a process of formally limiting religious authority through a series of laws, decrees and international treaties. A second model evolved in countries where the decision-making center of the predominant religion was closer to home and where there was not an overall religious authority for all members of a given faith, such as in predominantly Orthodox countries (Greece) and Israel. This involved a gradual co-optation of the religious institutions into the purview of the state. This was possible in many of these countries because of the strong identification that the

Orthodox and Jewish religions have with a particular nation.

Today, the fast pace of modernization including urbanization is affecting every Mediterranean country. Nevertheless, one cannot enter this arena without confronting the current debate about the relationship of Islam to secularism and democracy. The Arabic word for 'secular' (*'almaniyya'*) is new in Arab political literature. It is derived from the word for "world" (*'alam'*) and not from the word for "science" (*'ilm'*) so it refers to the world we live in. Many of the chapters suggest that the separation of religion from the state in the Sunni school, where religion is incorporated entirely into the state, has become nearly impossible, as a result of the merger of religion with politics and politics with religion, and the disappearance of the boundaries between the two.

At stake in Europe's search for a secular balance with Islam are three pivotal issues: 1) freedom of expression as practiced in a pluralist secular democracy, which is absent in most predominantly Muslim countries; 2) the status of women in Islam, and, equally important, the West's perception of the way women are treated in Islam; and 3) the prevailing European views regarding sexual rights, identity and orientation and those expressed by spokespersons of Muslim communities in Europe.

The focal point for concern about women in Islam centers on the veil, as our authors on France and Turkey demonstrate. Is the veil simply an outward expression of one's faith or a beacon for the oppression of women? Both points of view have a basis of truth. The strict dress code enforced by the Iranian morality police and the *burqa* demanded by the Taliban are very real examples of oppression and hardly an example of Muslim women choosing freely to express their faith. However, for many European Muslims choosing to wear the veil is a matter of personal freedom and an important outward symbol of their faith and, in some case, ethnic provenance. The question of the veil has been discussed most decisively in France, where the French National Assembly overwhelmingly voted to ban the wearing of the veil in the public sphere (meaning that employees of the state or wards of the state, such as students in public schools, may not wear the veil during work or school). It should be noted that banning the veil from the public sphere is not a French invention; such bans have existed for decades in Turkey and Tunisia, where generally they are seen as significant advances in women's rights and secularism.

The chapters in Part 1, *Secularism & the State*, feature the experiences of nine Mediterranean countries with an assortment of constitutional arrangements and models such as strict separation of church and state, e.g., France and Turkey; religious concordats, e.g., Spain and Italy; confessionalism, e.g., Lebanon; and various forms of state religious establishment, e.g., Greece, Israel, Algeria and

Egypt. This focus on political secularism is augmented by data on the power of public opinion and cultural norms expressed through “national narratives,” historical references and traditions. This approach leads to the chapters in Part 2, Women & Society, which involves looking at societal, demographic, economic and legal changes in various states. The insights and trends these chapters reveal are of crucial importance for understanding the future prospects of the region.

One conclusion that emerges from the majority of these contributions is a realization that though perhaps there can be secularism without democracy there can be no democracy without some commitment by the state to political secularism as well as freedom of conscience and the need for the modern state to respect it. In a secular democracy, the state does not promote values that came from one religious tradition in particular. The state also begins to protect individual rights to dissent not only from particular religious doctrines, but also from the norms and values that were imposed based on that doctrine. The general consensus is that women are the primary beneficiaries of such changes.

We believe the ideas and opinions expressed in this unique volume are worthy of a wide readership, especially at this time when international understanding is so vital and other parts of the world are experiencing similar challenges. Detailed information on many of the issues covered here has not been previously available in English. So we appreciate particularly the efforts of most of the authors for whom English is their second or third language, to help educate and inform English-speaking readers about their particular country and its people.

ENDNOTES

1. Particularly his famous three volume work published in 1949, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (*The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*).

