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Considering Gender and Generations in Lybarger's Pathways to Secularism

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Loren Lybarger's essay aims to point out that once dominant secularism is still alive among Palestinians in Chicago, although those who embrace it live in a "marginal, disconnected space" brought on by the ascendance of Islamic religious institutions and faith-based organizations, businesses catering to an Islamic lifestyle, and persons choosing a pious Islamic "way of life." He argues that even though secularism represents an apparent minority perspective among Palestinians [here I am not sure whether he means Muslim Palestinians or all Palestinians] examining it remains important. It is important because of the recent and increasing tendency among scholars to explain the actions of people who happen to be Muslim by referring to Islamic religious beliefs, values, practices, and history. Aside from potentially being wrong, these scholarly treatments obscure the social forces that shape Islamic identities as well as those that keep secularism alive. Furthermore, the overlapping and weaving complexities of human social life are obfuscated by when a secular/religious dichotomy is used as an analytic tool. Secularism and religious revival are "interactive and mutually constituting processes," as each of these ideological positions is often deployed by persons and groups in response to the other. Finally, he argues that studying Palestinian secularism allows us to understand the mechanisms and processes that help it to persist. After reviewing some of the scholarly debates surrounding the terms "secular" and "religious," Lybarger embraces the calls of Taylor, Casanova, and Starrett to carefully study the meanings attributed to and deployments undertaken in the name of these ideological stances. Secularism needs to be studied because people, groups, and states continue to take actions and counter actions in its name.

Lybarger states that his analysis will emphasize the subjective meanings individuals ascribe to social action, which he organizes into patterned groupings using the Weberian tool of ideal types. He defines secularism as an ideal type of "recurring stance that individuals can adopt across a range of diverse social contexts" that "implicitly resists, rejects, demotes, or otherwise ignores the prior claim of religious solidarity" with religion positioned as "subordinate, ancillary, or relative to other identities." Secularism can be a social orientation, practice, mode of solidarity, or stance. What makes an orientation secular is the "explicit rejection or implicit irrelevance to it of the primacy of religious authority as a foundation for individual ethics, social identification, political unity, and governance."

Surely secularism exists among Palestinians, both Muslim and Christian, and I

concur with the author that its continuing presence is often overshadowed by the focus of many scholars on matters Islamic. To me, the most interesting part of this essay is the part that interacts with the type of research I do as a sociologist who has long studied Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim American communities. In the following, I take a closer look at the three ideal-typical modes of secularism Lybarger discovered in his interviews and especially at the paths people are said to have taken to arrive at secularism, commenting on them using findings from my current and prior research. These comments do not indicate that the processes Lybarger identified are inaccurate, but they do suggest some complexities and next steps in data collection and analysis. As I explain below, with regard to “secularism in the Post-Islamic key” I would like to see what interviews with younger generations of Palestinian Americans might uncover. As for the two types of syncretic secularism Lybarger identified, I suggest that gendered upbringing explains some of the differences *in the process* towards secularism between the case studies of Ismael and Muna: in many ways their routes were determined by their gender as it intersects with how being raised as a Muslim in the US is interpreted and implemented by parents and community.

The first ideal type Lybarger discusses is “secularism in the Post-Islamic key.” This is a discursive mode that reformulates pan-Arabist and leftist thinking in ways that respond to the rise of Islam in Chicago and in Palestine. Here we see clear evidence of a mutually constitutive process as these reformulations take into account and come to terms with the multiple ways that Islamic institutions, organizations, values, and lifestyles have increased in popularity and dominance. This is done discursively by interpreting actions and events that might give internal credibility to this upsurge as really being less about Islam and more about the failings and shortcomings of non-Islamic institutions and the harmful interventions of external others.

According to Lybarger, this type of secular perspective is learned. It is passed down through family discussions and through the transmission of a collective narrative that is specific to secular community-based programs. These programs communicate such a narrative through Arabic classes and history lessons, cultural and artistic groups, and activist solidarities. In other words, learning this type of secularism requires family and community action. I wonder what impact the passage of time, globalization, and ongoing changes in Chicago’s Palestinian community have had on the life of this ideological perspective. Research data that I am now analyzing, based on interviews I conducted with ninety-three transnational Arab American teenagers [born and raised in the US, taken “back home” for high school], would suggest that meaningful vehicles of communication, as well as the narratives they convey, have changed for younger generations. With regard to Palestinian American teens, I found — to my enormous surprise — that the overwhelming majority had negative pre-dispositions toward Palestine before moving there with their families, had never read a book, heard a poem, or seen a film about Palestine, had not attended the programs of a secular Arab organization, and knew mostly, and sometimes only, that Palestine was a violent place. While

these teens had a strong identification with Palestine instilled by their parents, very few had internalized any type of collective narrative, whether secular, religious, or other, about Palestine. This includes youth who attended Arabic classes [Qur'an] at religious institutions, for indeed religious institutions were usually the only sources of such language training. [It is important to point out that in most places in the US, Muslim institutions are more ethnically diverse and less Palestine-concentrated than in the southwest suburbs of Chicago.] The majority of youth reported that their main sources of information about Palestine were the US and Arabic-language media, the latter being what their parents watched, and occasionally the stories of a relative returning from Palestine to the US. Rather than a collective narrative, these sources transferred unmediated images of violence. So, I would ask, if secularism in the post-Islamic key is passed down through family and learned in secular organizations, what shall be the fate of this type of secularism in the current generation of youth?

Lybarger identifies two other, less politicized and more implicit, forms of “syncretic secularism” that emerged from his interviews. One he attributes to the “impact of assimilation processes,” while the other reflects a “disenchantment originating within the religious milieu itself.” Quotes from his interviews with a married couple, Ismael and Muna, are used to highlight the social processes that produce these two forms. Upon reading this section I saw the typical gendered upbringing patterns that characterize Palestinian American Muslim communities. Ismael, as a male, is allowed to attend public schools, mix socially with non-Arabs and non-Muslims, engage in activities that go against Islamic teachings, and work in the settings of his choice. Muna, as a female, is required to conform to her parents’ views of proper Muslim decorum and behavior, which likely excluded almost everything Ismael was allowed to do. The details notwithstanding — his enlistment in the Navy, her attendance at a strict Islamic school, his family in which piety was not central and hers where it was said to be but her father drank alcohol and engaged in non-marital sex — it seems to me that for most Palestinian Muslim girls who decide that religious faith has low meaning for them, the path to that point almost certainly has to pass through the “religious milieu” or at least through strong religious socialization and expectations of conformity [unless their parents are secular, which produces more of the learned mode of the first type]. For similarly inclined boys, on the other hand, such a passage is not required, essential to, or informative of their “secular” choice. It is thus less likely that “assimilation” would seem to explain the female path and “disenchantment with religion” the male path. Surely, Muna had to engage in a different personal struggle than Ismael as to whether she was beckoned by faith in God. Although they interpret their paths in the ways that they did, I think they both experienced exposure to other ways of life (pluralism / assimilation) as well as disenchantment with religion, although they did so differently because of their very different gendered trajectories. In light of these gendered pathways, I would temper strict notions of assimilation and disenchantment, or external [pluralistic society for the male] versus internal [religious milieu for the female] social forces with notions of gendered agency.

Overall, I would like to see the author develop and refine each of these ideal types of secularism based on many more cases. When he does so, he not only will be able to convince the reader of his findings, he also will be able to tease out more fully what is going on, give more consideration to generational changes and gendered patterns, and reflect on where Palestinian secularism might be headed.