

Book Review

Iqtidar, Humeira. *Secularising Islamists?: Jama'at-e-Islami and Jamma'at-ud-Da'wa in Urban Pakistan*. 232 pp., Chicago University Press 2011

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The Pakistani Taliban's claim that they targeted Malala Yousafzai because of her promotion of secular and western values and subsequent threats that they will target others of similar persuasion has brought the oppositional relationship between Islamism and secularism into sharp relief. On this question Humeira Iqtidar's recent book, 'Secularizing Islamists?' – despite its somewhat provocative title – promises to provide some insight as it studies two Islamist groups, the Jama'at-e-Islami and the Jama'at-ud-Dawa, with their explicit rejection of secularism.

The title, 'Secularizing Islamists?,' interrogation mark notwithstanding, causes confusion for if they are anti-secular how can they be secularizing? Iqtidar is clear on their anti-secularist stance and the title refers not to their anti-secularist ideology but to the fact that they may, albeit unwittingly, be participating in and promoting secularization as a social process. As Islamist organizations she finds, unsurprisingly, that they are obsessed with, and critical of, secularism. For them secularism is antithetical to Islam primarily because they do not abide by secularism's requirement of confining religion to the private domain. Their insistence on the public and political dimensions of Islam produces an explicit rejection of secularism as an ideology that informs state policy with its goal of ensuring religion as personal and private rather than public and political. But if not secularist, are they secularizing?

By secularizing or secularization Iqtidar is referring to the sociological theory that emerged in the late 1960s, that argued that various transformations in modern life and religious experience was leading to the increasing marginalization and privatization of religion. The thesis held that religion had become increasingly an individual matter of faith rather than an aspect of collective, public or political life. Some more extreme versions of the secularization thesis expected religion to disappear completely as societies are modernized. That is, modern life would be characterized by rationality and

secularity. With the 'resurgence' of religion in the late 1970s and 80s the thesis came under critical scrutiny and was discarded by many as being too singular and unsubtle – both in its underlying assumptions and in its prescriptive mode. Nonetheless, in its descriptive mode the thesis did point to key features of modern life such as increasing specialization and differentiation so that religion becomes just one sphere of life rather than an all-encompassing totality. Further, it suggested that these different spheres of life, for example, the economy, politics, health, science etc. whilst initially emerging out of, or in relation to, theological concepts eventually generated their own particular principles and rationalities that were independent of theology and religion.

Iqtidar's intervention is to argue that the criticism of the secularization thesis has largely been focused on the idea that religion becomes privatized and ignored the processes of rationalization that are also indicative of secularization. She argues that contemporary Islamists increasingly rationalize religion, indeed to some extent are forced to, as they effectively exist in market competition with other Islamists to win adherents. Under these competitive conditions they increasingly tailor religion into a rational coherent whole so that religion becomes objectified and individualized. This is what makes the 'Secularizing Islamists?' of the title. But this raises a number of questions and objections. The first is why refer to this as 'rationalization of religion,' which may well be occurring, as 'secularization?' The argument that religion can be rationalized and therefore made more attractive to modern sensibilities is a more defensible thesis and one that has been made before. Second, Islamists often understand Islam to be a complete code of life and are therefore not just opposed to secularism but are also opposed to processes that encourage secularization. Hence their attempt to work against specialization and differentiation by arguing that there is, for example, Islamic finance, Islamic economics, Islamic science and presumably Islamic sports ad infinitum. It would seem then that Islamists are not just against secularism as policy or

ideology but are also against secularization as a social process. However, having identified the existence of rationalization amongst Islamists, Iqtidar elevates it to evidence of their involvement in secularization at the social level. But this seems confusing. Rather than conflating rationalization with secularization the more substantive, defensible and interesting point, would have been to argue that reason and individuation is not the preserve of secularists alone.

The author's engagement with theoretical questions is at the expense of her empirical research and interactions with Islamist activists that were fascinating, and had they been further developed would have served her critical project much better. For example, she recounts an episode where Jama'at-e-Islami women are critical of 'honour' killings and distance it from Islam only then to discover that a senior male Jama'at-e-Islami scholar had stated that honour killings had not been condemned in Islam. This occasions considerable disquiet, further reflection and a critical perusal of the issue that suggests that Islamist women are not always going to toe the line on patriarchal policies. Had the author reflected more on her material rather than directing it in the service of a debate on secularization one might have had a rich study on Islamic activism.

Despite these substantial issues the author raises a number of crucial points. Like others she argues that one should not assume that Pakistan is meant to be an Islamic state. If anything, Muslim nationalism, as opposed to Islamism, should be primarily understood as secular. She also is attentive to the differences that exist amongst Islamist organizations, which all too often are ignored under the general presumption of religious militancy. For example, the Jama'at-e-Islami is a non-sectarian, democratic Islamist movement whereas the more recent Jama'at-ud-Dawa, is sectarian and anti-democratic. Third, she indicates the important legacy of colonial secularism and suggests it may have been pivotal in the development of Islamism. However, one would have liked to see this argument elaborated but the wider point that there is no one single model of secularism but rather varieties of secularism that are historically specific is acknowledged. Finally, she argues that it is important to critically scrutinize liberal-secularism as opposed to assuming that it is a panacea for the problems afflicting Pakistan. While a more critical engagement of liberalism and Islamism, of their respective perils and possibilities, is necessary, it is at times difficult to discern the grounds of her disquiet with liberalism. Unfortunately this is not elaborated and ultimately the book is more productive in the questions it raises and the empirical issues it addresses than the theoretical analysis it offers.