

Introduction

THE ECUMENICAL FRAME

And all the prophets are my kin, but the sky
is distant from its land,
and I am distant from what I speak . . .

—Mahmoud Darwish, “A Canaanite Rock in the Dead Sea” (1992)

Every history of sectarianism is also a history of coexistence. This book reveals how a complex, and now obscured, modern culture of coexistence first developed in the modern Middle East, which today appears to be little more than a collection of war-torn countries and societies. In particular, I question two stories that have traditionally dominated the perception of the Middle East. The first stresses a continuous history of sectarian strife between allegedly antagonistic religious and ethnic communities; the second idealizes coexistence as communal harmony.

More fundamentally, I dispute an entire way of looking at the Middle East, and the Arab world in particular, as some kind of pathological place consumed by the disease of sectarianism. Sectarianism is a real problem, but it is no more real, and no less subject to change over time, than are analogous problems of racism in the West and caste politics and communalism in South Asia. There is a key difference between orientalizing the Middle East (thinking of it as strange, aberrant, and dangerously different) and historicizing it (putting it in context and in dialogue with analogous experiences in other parts of the world). Once we understand this, we can, I believe, study the history of coexistence in the Middle East

without defensiveness and without the misplaced paternalism that so often dogs pronouncements about the region.

The conventional usage of the term “coexistence” is admittedly limited. Typically, it vaguely describes what has been one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the long sweep of Arab and Islamic history; it often nostalgically refers to the golden age of Muslim Spain. During the Cold War, the phrase “peaceful coexistence” denoted the toleration of otherwise incompatible communist and capitalist systems that threatened each other with annihilation; in Lebanon, coexistence indicates the allegedly harmonious relationship between separate and notionally age-old communities; in the United States, it suggests an anodyne dialogue between monotheistic faiths in a secular republic. The contemporary usage of “coexistence” hints at an equality between people of different faiths that is not warranted by historical scrutiny. Nevertheless, the term remains resonant and it evokes for me a specific age, and a new kind of political intimacy and meaningful solidarity that cut across Muslim, Christian, and Jewish religious lines. These together define a hallmark of modern Arab history.

Rather than taking sectarianism or coexistence for granted, or assuming either of them to be age-old features of the Middle East, I am interested in historicizing both notions. At what point was “sectarianism” first identified as a political problem? How did parceling out public office along sectarian lines become an expression of equality? Why was this done in some parts of the Middle East but not in others? When was “coexistence” first celebrated as a national value? And how and why did religion go from being a key element of an inegalitarian Ottoman imperial politics discriminating between Muslim and non-Muslim, and privileging Sunni orthodoxy over other Islamic denominations, to a key component of post-Ottoman national politics affirming the equality of all citizens irrespective of their religious affiliation? These are just some of the questions this book will answer.

My interest lies principally in clarifying how different understandings of the relationship between religious diversity, equality, and emancipation have legitimated and cohered radically divergent and highly experimental political orders across the area during the century from roughly 1860 until 1948, an era that first saw the Ottoman Empire reform itself, and then saw European powers destroy and divide the empire into various post-Ottoman states that enjoyed only a nominal sovereignty. This book is

specifically focused on the Mashriq—that is, the region that today encompasses Lebanon, Syria, the occupied Palestinian territories, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq, all of which were once under a common Ottoman rule.

The Mashriq is a region in which Arabic-speaking Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities were tightly and densely interwoven during and following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. It is also the region of the Middle East that has seen the most sustained attempts to forge political solidarities among men and women of different faiths. Thus, it is different from Turkey itself, where the non-Muslim presence was largely expunged during and after World War I. It is also different from North Africa or the Gulf, where the indigenous non-Muslim presence was less influential in the region's cultural development. The Mashriq has witnessed constant internal resistance and reaction to the secular implications of national solidarities. Last but far from least, it has been the setting for relentless European, and more recently U.S., interference that both speaks for and exploits the historical diversity of the region. The work to imagine and build societies that transcend sectarian difference has been multifaceted and contradictory. It has received its fair share of setbacks, in our own age perhaps more than in others. But, as I see it, this work has also continued for over a century. I am especially interested in how the idea of modern coexistence as equality between Muslim and non-Muslim went from being unimaginable at the beginning of the nineteenth century to unremarkable by the middle of the twentieth century. This history deserves an empathetic telling.

DEMYTHOLOGIZING THE SECTARIAN MIDDLE EAST

The ubiquitous representation of a sectarian Middle East consistently medievalizes the region. It conflates contemporary political identifications with far older religious solidarities. The historian Bruce Masters insists, for example, that “as long as religion lay at the heart of each individual’s worldview, the potential for society to fracture along sectarian lines remained.”¹ Perhaps. But between the potentiality of sectarian violence and its actuality lies the history I tell: how a modern political culture emerged that valorized religion and coexistence, and demonized sectarianism. It was only in the twentieth century, after all, that the Arabic terms for “sectarianism”

and “coexistence”—*al-ta’ifiyya* and *al-‘aysh al-mushtarak*—were coined as an integral part of a new imagination that accepted Muslim and Christian and Jew as equal citizens within a sovereign political frame.

“Sectarianism,” indeed, is not simply a reflection of significant fractures in a religiously diverse society. It is also a language, an accusation, a judgment, an imagination, and an ideological fiction that has been deployed by both Middle Eastern and Western nations, communities, and individuals to create modern political and ideological frameworks within which supposedly innate sectarian problems can be contained, if not overcome. No organization or movement, after all, actually describes itself as “sectarian,” just as no modern government anywhere claims to be against “coexistence.” The perception of a sectarian problem can reflect an idealistic attempt to build a radical new political community that transcends religious difference. It can denote a way that members of long marginalized communities make political, cultural, and economic claims to resources and privileges in any given nation. It can also justify a cynical mode of colonial or reactionary nationalist governance that exploits religious or ethnic diversity in a given region.

Sunni, Shi’i, Maronite, Jewish, Armenian, or Orthodox Christian identifications are not etched uniformly into the fabric of the past and present. They are historical designations whose meanings have changed and whose salience has ebbed and flowed. At any given moment, communal identities may appear to be entirely genuine and palpable. They may be positive or negative, open-minded or insular. These identities, nevertheless, are not recovered from some container of the past that preserves an unadulterated sense of self and other. They are, instead, produced over and over again in different forms and for different reasons. They manifest only after having been riven by innumerable schisms and after having undergone repeated redefinitions throughout their long histories.

Anyone who has lived in the Middle East, of course, will know that stubborn sectarian problems exist in countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Bahrain, and Iraq, just as anyone who lives in the United States will likewise perceive an obvious racial problem there. Imagine, for example, hypothetically, a situation in which a foreign power removed the U.S. federal government, abolished the U.S. Army, and encouraged the division of the United States along racial lines—similar to how the United States

acted in Iraq in the aftermath of its invasion of that country in 2003. The race problem in America would inevitably be exacerbated and its implications changed. This is not because the racial identities in America are unchanging or “age-old,” but rather because their meaning and transformation, like sectarian ones, are so clearly dynamic products of specific historical, material, and geopolitical contexts.

To demystify the modern problem of sectarianism is to understand how it is far more an expression of a global tension between sovereignty, diversity, and equal citizenship than a restaging of a medieval religious schism. It may indeed be helpful for readers to think about communal and sectarian outlooks, actions, and thoughts in the modern world as analogous to racial and racist outlooks, actions, and thoughts in the United States. The most interesting scholars of American history have grappled with the immense salience of race by historicizing it, not by taking it for granted. They have examined how the notion of race has been produced and reproduced in the context of a U.S. republic that embraced democratic freedoms and justified perpetual bondage.² Neither modern racism nor modern sectarianism, in other words, is intelligible outside of the richness of its respective context. Invariably, both are expressed with the full knowledge that there are powerful and meaningful antiracist and antisectarian currents that oppose them. This does not mean that sectarianism is the same as racism, nor that the historical experience of Sunnis, Shi‘is, Christians, and Jews in the Arab world is the same as that of Latinos, Anglos, and African Americans in the United States.

What this juxtaposition involves, rather, is understanding how different communal, racial, and sectarian formations—and, just as importantly, different antiracist and antisectarian commitments—were, as I will explain more fully below, common legacies of a global nineteenth-century political revolution. This revolution introduced the profoundly important and historic principle of political equality among citizens, many of whom had been historically and legally discriminated against or classified as inferior in centuries past, in very different circumstances and contexts—Jews in Europe, blacks in the United States, and non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, to name a few cases. I recognize, of course, that the vast divergence in the historical experiences of Ottoman Christians and those of oppressed slaves in America can make a direct comparison of the two

groups misleading if not mendacious. However, it is important to appreciate how each became vital to the unfolding of parallel yet distinctive politics of emancipation and citizenship in the nineteenth century. What is manifestly clear is that this revolution of equality was deeply contested in every part of the world, including in the United States and Europe. Political equality, after all, is never simply a noble principle that merely spreads from the West to the rest of the world. Rather, its introduction *anywhere* has always been complex.

Perhaps most obviously, the meaning of equality has depended heavily on the quality of political sovereignty, and often on power. Napoleon emancipated Jews in occupied German states; European powers pressured the Ottomans to concede the equality of Muslim and non-Muslim during the Crimean War; and the Union freed slaves in its war against the Confederacy and passed the important Reconstruction Amendments to the U.S. Constitution during the era of Radical Reconstruction when northern soldiers occupied the South. I recognize, moreover, that equality is not an uncomplicated good, for its emergence in different parts of the world has invariably excluded certain groups—slaves in the antebellum United States being only the most obvious example (one can add colonized subjects, women, Native Americans, and African Americans during Jim Crow). Yet, while scholars have recently underscored how modern secular states have excluded minority groups and communities, many of those same states, and the struggles for meaningful self-determination that often accompanied their creation, also legitimated hitherto unimaginable forms of secular affiliation and solidarity. The terms of inclusion are my interest in this book.

EXPLAINING THE ECUMENICAL FRAME

The contemporary obsession, in scholarship and media, with the so-called sectarian Middle East has almost totally obscured a parallel modern development that began to take shape in the Ottoman Empire after 1860. The late Ottoman and modern Arab worlds witnessed the first attempts to cohere modern political solidarities—and to reconcile those solidarities with the reality of religious and ethnic difference in the region. These

attempts unfolded within complex geopolitical shifts that saw the Arab region pass from Ottoman dominion to European colonial rule.

I call this modern form of coexistence the *ecumenical frame*. I use the term “ecumenical” because I think it indicates the relevance of religion, which has always maintained a strong public presence in the Middle East. By “frame,” I am referring to the scaffolding of a project being built. This ecumenical frame was made out of eclectic Ottoman, European, and Arab materials. Its construction commenced during a specific nineteenth-century moment (hence we could also think of this as the beginnings of an *ecumenical age*); it included many people of the region who belonged to different religious communities; it could and did change over time; and it was neither permanent nor impervious to its social and political environment. The ecumenical frame suggests the rich diversity of the Mashriq that has stubbornly confounded repeated attempts to reduce the region to one religious hue.

The Greek word *oikoumenē*, from which the term “ecumenical” derives, means the whole of the inhabited earth. Scholars of Islam have also invoked the notion of the ecumenical to describe the great shared but also diverse “Islamicate” culture that developed and spread across much of the world.³ I am aware, of course, that in modern Christian ecclesiastical usage the term “ecumenical” means the cooperation among various separate Christian denominations in the pursuit of a common ideal, the universal church, and is typically distinguished from the term “interfaith,” which indicates cooperation between different religions.⁴ Nevertheless, I adapt the term “ecumenical” here to capture the shared sense of the universal, transcendent ideal of a modern political community in which explicit religious differentiation was transformed from being a marker of imperial culture to being a crucial aspect of national culture.

In using the concept of the ecumenical frame, I am referring to three things: (1) a body of thought that sought to reconcile a new principle of secular political equality with the reality of an Ottoman imperial system that had historically privileged Muslim over non-Muslim, but that was also attempting to integrate non-Muslims as citizens; (2) a system of governance that often retained vestiges and signs of Islamic paramountcy while upholding the equality of all citizens irrespective of religious affiliation; and (3) a new political and legal order that has consistently upheld

both the constitutional secularity of citizens *and* the necessity of religiously segregated laws to govern marriage, divorce, and inheritance that have actually denied the secularity and equality of citizens.

An appreciation of the ecumenical frame provides a lens through which to understand the emergence of a new norm of coexistence rooted in the principle of secular equality—that is to say, the cultural and constitutional commitment to the equality of citizens of different faiths. But the ecumenical frame is also the subject of this book because it was built, it was redesigned, and, in some instances and areas, it was destroyed. It supported several overlapping, and sometimes contradictory, Muslim, Arab, Ottoman, Christian, and Jewish subjectivities. Some were more secular, others more pious; some were republican and others monarchical; some were communalist and others radically dissenting; some were liberal and others Marxist. For this reason, I do not see the ecumenical frame as reducible to “liberalism” or as a cognate for a “liberal age,” a term that I have always found deeply inadequate to describe the sectarian and nationalist violence of the late Ottoman era, the dawn of post-World War I European colonialism across the Arab Mashriq, and the variety of anti- as well as philo-colonial, secular as well as Islamist, mobilizations that have defined Arab politics in the twentieth century.

Arab Christians played a major role in the elaboration of this frame, out of proportion to their demographic weight (similar, in a sense, to the roles that German and American Jews have played in the elaboration of pre-Nazi German culture and contemporary American culture, respectively). By the same token, as the demographic majority, Muslim Arabs in the Levant were indispensable to making the principle of political equality with non-Muslims ubiquitous in mainstream political culture. In its most radical incarnation, this frame encouraged forms of equality and solidarity that denied the political significance of religiosity; in its most conservative formulation, it merely accepted religious diversity and engaged in what Moroccan philosopher Muhammad ‘Abed al-Jabri referred to as a “traditional understanding of tradition.”⁵

The story I tell about the ecumenical frame is, at first glance, primarily an intellectual one, insofar as those who first wrote, imagined, and inculcated coexistence were typically literate Ottoman Arab subjects between 1860 and 1920. These individuals were, for the most part, not directly

connected to statecraft. Although the history of the ecumenical frame should be explored from the vantage point of many different social classes and experiences, this book begins with what I believe is still an extraordinarily underappreciated story that has never had its proper telling: for the first time in the late Ottoman period, literate Arab Muslims, Christians, and Jews collectively denounced “religious fanaticism,” which they construed to be an unnatural deviation from a normative “religion” and the “coexistence” that religion allegedly engendered. They did so while many, though by no means all, of their Ottoman Turkish and Balkan peers and analogues fought existential wars to define new nation-states denuded of meaningful religious diversity.

The story of this book is also a political one. The act of imagining new forms of political equality was neither obvious nor inevitable. I use the term “Arab” in this history to indicate a conscious modern identification among Arabs that transcends religious affiliations. I categorically do not mean the term to be an anachronistic cognate for “Arab nationalist,” although of course Arab nationalists of the twentieth century did use the term in precisely that manner. For the earlier periods in Ottoman history, I generally refer to Arabic-speaking Christian or Muslim or Jewish subjects of the Ottoman Empire.

Although the ecumenical frame emerged amid massive political, economic, and technological transformations in the empire, it continued to be modified long after the demise of the sultanate. When the Ottomans were overthrown, their former subjects in the Mashriq were pressed to articulate and express new sovereign, political forms of the ecumenical frame. They did so in a variety of conservative monarchical, consociational, and republican ways. Rather than dismissing their labor as a reflection of the derivative, predictable, and self-serving schemes of native nationalists who were only interested in power, this book situates the different ways that Arabs went about rebuilding the ecumenical frame in their post-Ottoman world.⁶

At the same time, I argue that during the century in question, sharp religious and social differentiation remained visibly at the heart of a new shared public order that ostentatiously abjured religious discrimination among equal citizens. The role of Islam in public life and the relationship between the legacies of the imperial Islamic past and the realities of

Western colonialism that habitually favored minorities were immensely fraught topics. By the middle of the twentieth century, nevertheless, an overlapping consensus, to borrow the phrase of philosopher John Rawls, had been secured in the Mashriq concerning the necessity of political independence, the principle of religious diversity, the equality of all citizens, *and* the codification and maintenance of highly gendered and unequal sectarian regimes of “personal status.” These regimes have governed marriage, divorce, and inheritance for all citizens and have prevented the introduction of even an optional secular marriage code anywhere in the Arab world. This interplay between and among dynamic and variegated groupings of secularists and communalists in the Middle East has contributed to the inherently conservative nature of the ecumenical frame and suppressed its more radical implications.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY BEGINNINGS

The modern ecumenical frame reflected a major ideological and political departure from the older imperial model of Ottoman Muslim privilege. Its beginnings lay in the imperial proclamation of nondiscrimination between Muslim and non-Muslim subjects in 1839, and of equal citizenship between them following the promulgation of the Ottoman Constitution of 1876—the period in Ottoman history known as the *Tanzimat*.⁷ The breakdown in the nineteenth century of a long-standing and profoundly unequal Ottoman imperial system that had ruled for centuries over a vast multireligious, multiethnic, and multilinguistic landscape opened the ideological and political space for new political horizons and vocabularies—some of which were more inclusive and some far less so.

It is important to acknowledge the fact that the legal and ideological disestablishment of Ottoman Muslim hegemony occurred under enormous European pressure. This disestablishment was *not* the result of Ottoman Muslim grappling with the implications of a system of pervasive discrimination that (in different ways and with different intensities) affected dress, architecture, forms of address, and sociability across the Islamic Middle East. Nor was this disestablishment the consequence of social movements that identified such discrimination as a problem. Many Muslim subjects in

the empire viewed the ending of Islamic privilege as a concession at a time of aggressive Western military and missionary assault on Islam itself. This defensiveness affected and shaped the contours of the post-Tanzimat ecumenical frame.

By the same token, as alluded to above, it is vital to recognize how many cultures around the world in the nineteenth century struggled with new ideas of secular citizenship, national unity, and political equality. Many states at the time strove to reconcile these notions with long-standing convictions of religious and racial difference. The Ottoman Empire contributed its distinctive part to a much larger global problem of citizenship and equality that pulled in several different and often deeply contradictory directions. The rapprochement between Protestant and Catholic (and eventually Jewish) Americans went hand in hand with the systematic racist exclusion of black Americans and staggering antiblack violence and inequality. The integration of Jewish Germans in modern German culture was another example, though it was vitiated by pressures to assimilate that Arab Christians never faced. The emergence of Hindu and Muslim collaboration in Bengal even before the rise of the Congress movement in India points to still another example of cross-communal solidarity, but in this case the British Empire never offered its colonial Indian subjects citizenship, nor was there a corresponding Mughalism that was the equivalent to Ottomanism under which Arab subjects of the Ottoman Empire thrived.⁸

The conjoined problems of coexistence and sectarianism in the modern Middle East emerged at roughly the same time as those of nationalism and racial anti-Semitism in modern Europe, and those of emancipation and segregation in the postbellum United States. The point of any juxtaposition is inherently heuristic. The comparisons historians typically make involving the Ottoman Empire are between large multiethnic empires (the Ottomans and Russians for instance) that collapsed during World War I. These comparisons can obfuscate the fact that European empires such as Britain and France were also multiethnic and multireligious, and that the United States itself constituted a vast multiethnic, multilinguistic, and multireligious expanding state in this same period.⁹ They also obscure the fact that the challenge of political inclusion has plagued every secular state in the modern era—whether democratic republics or empires. The Ottoman and American cases might well be

juxtaposed, in fact, to emphasize their coevalness. They each refracted older discourses and practices of discrimination through a radically new lens of equality and citizenship. The United States, after all, endured the Civil War and many bouts of antiblack race rioting at roughly the same time that the Ottoman Empire witnessed unprecedented fragmentation and sectarian mobilizations and massacres involving the emancipation of non-Muslims.¹⁰

My point is to suggest that what race has been to America, religion has been to the Middle East in one specific way: both are perceived as stable and obvious problems, but their political implications have, in fact, changed radically across a century. My point is not to pretend that non-Muslims in the Ottoman case had the same economic, social, racial, or political status as black slaves in America or Jews in European ghettos. Islamic imperial rule that legitimated Muslim ideological, legal, and cultural privilege over non-Muslims (while guaranteeing them protection and religious autonomy) is not the same thing as the baleful ideology of white supremacy that posited the innate, biological, and perpetual supremacy of one group over all others and that was elaborated in the context of chattel slavery and settler colonialism in the United States. Rather, my point is that if in America the question of race defined, undergirded, contradicted, and rendered ambivalent the meaning of U.S. citizenship, in the Ottoman Middle East the question of religious difference haunted an incomplete, paradoxical, and often contradictory nineteenth-century project of equal citizenship.

The key difference between the Middle East and the United States (and the West more generally), however, is that the inhabitants of the Middle East have hardly affected, intervened, and transformed modern Europe or the United States in the manner that Europeans and Americans have transformed, and still transform, the Middle East. Western powers went from being increasingly important factors, players, and agents in what remained a sovereign Ottoman polity to being the *hegemonic* architects of the post-Ottoman Arab world. Western powers claimed to protect non-Muslim minorities in the Middle East at the same time that those same powers encroached aggressively on the Ottoman Empire. There is a brute reality of Western involvement that simply cannot be denied, nor should it for a moment be obfuscated as secondary to the “self-inflicted wounds”

that allegedly really “mattered,” as Fouad Ajami tendentiously put it.¹¹ Yet to reduce modern sectarian problems to a question of colonial “divide and rule” is also to ignore the powerful legacies of the nineteenth century that *predated* direct European colonial rule. It also shunts aside the agency of Arabs, Turks, Armenians, Kurds, and others who were most invested in these problems.

The effects of Western imperialism were not monolithic. As much as British and French officials used the fact of religious diversity and theories of religious freedom and innate Eastern sectarianism to justify their interventions in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, they also inadvertently helped consolidate the ideologically antisectarian and nationalist Arab states in Syria and Iraq. Unlike the case of colonial Uganda and South Africa that Mahmood Mamdani has studied, in which a “politically enforced ethnic pluralism” was a hallmark of apartheid and a strategy for European colonial rule,¹² in the Ottoman Empire the situation was not nearly as binary, and European hegemony was far more diffuse. Muslim and non-Muslim Arab subjects in the Mashriq had far more latitude to build an ecumenical frame that was not merely a copy of some European original but coeval to what other subjects of the Ottoman Empire—and many Europeans, Americans, and Indian colonial subjects—were trying to achieve for themselves but in vastly different circumstances.

RECALIBRATING HISTORIOGRAPHY

When my first book, *The Culture of Sectarianism*, was published in 2000, sectarianism was thought of as mainly a Lebanese problem. Although the topic was debated intensely, especially during that country’s long civil war between 1975 and 1990, the framework of analysis was often parochial and national. Some scholars defended a sectarian paradigm of politics in Lebanon; others saw in it a lamentable native malady; still others viewed it as a consequence of foreign intervention in Lebanese affairs or as a consequence of the nature of the Lebanese state structure.¹³ Historians of the modern Middle East, more generally, have described various economic or political developments that, in their estimation, provoked a sectarian backlash. They suggest that the sectarian layer of identity is the deepest

and most meaningful layer, and yet at the same time they treat it as analytically insignificant. For them, as for so many other scholars, it simply exists. In an older orientalist literature, sectarian violence exposed an allegedly enduring Islamic or native fanaticism that was unable to accept the principle of secular equality.¹⁴

Admittedly, I do flag the religious identity of individuals in this book, either because they have made their religion central to how they read the world or to underscore an often overlooked point when it comes to the Middle East: religious identity does not automatically or necessarily dictate political belief. Ideological diversity is often far more important than ethnic or religious or sectarian diversity: one cannot merely equate being Sunni or Shi'i, Druze or Alawi, Maronite Christian or Jewish with having one predetermined communal outlook. I also sometimes use the phrases "sectarian violence," "sectarian mobilizations," and "sectarian institutions" in their conventional usage. In these instances, I am referring to tangible antagonisms between members of different religious or ethnic communities; to networks of affiliation, patronage, resource distribution; or to how political, social, and economic claims are made in a multireligious or multiethnic society.

Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, interest in sectarianism has increased massively around the world—in large part because of the deplorable state of affairs in Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf region.¹⁵ Some of the recent work that contextualizes sectarianism in the region has been excellent, and the best of this work is motivated by genuine antisectarian commitments (in much the same way as the best critical writing on racism or communalism is by those clearly *opposed* to these phenomena). Yet the deeply problematic comparative view that I have already alluded to in this introduction remains firmly in place: there is an assumption of a uniformly secular West against which the allegedly sectarian Middle East is implicitly or explicitly compared and judged.

In this sense, I find Talal Asad's call for an anthropology of the secular important because he argues strongly against the alleged universalism of one kind of secularism, and against the idea of the neutrality of the secular public sphere in Western states.¹⁶ I also appreciate William Cavanaugh's observation that the modern secular era invented a "myth of religious violence."¹⁷ Also crucially important is criticism by Asad and Cavanaugh, and

by several other scholars, including Saba Mahmood and Wendy Brown, of the universal and colonial pretensions of Western discourses about religious freedom and tolerance, and about how embedded violence has been in the project of the secular state.¹⁸

Yet the criticism of Western secularity does not explain the nature of the sectarian problem in the Middle East. Asad, in fact, defines what he regards as a “millennium-old [Islamic] discursive tradition,” specifically against what he breezily dismisses as a “Western-derived” discourse of secular Arab nationalism.¹⁹ His necessary criticism of Western secularity as a project that both invents the idea of religion and seeks to privatize it seamlessly becomes a criticism of secular Arab nationalism. But secular Arab nationalism did not simply mimic its Western counterpart; it was one among several reactions to the historical transition from Ottoman Islamic to Western colonial supremacy. For her part, Mahmood refers to secular nationalist Arabs in Syria as “Christians” and asserts that their Egyptian counterparts “ventriloquize” the certitudes of a condescending Western, Christian-derived secularism.²⁰ For these scholars, it appears that secularity has only one authentic iteration, one provenance, and one history. They miss the fact that secular Arab nationalism and modern Islamism reflected contending antisectarian responses to the same set of problems involving sovereignty, citizenship, and equality.

Like several of my colleagues who work on the modern Middle East, I think it is necessary to question the stark segregation of the Westernized “secular” against the traditional “Islamic” that pervades the literature—as if these two groupings are always segregated communities in the modern era.²¹ But to do this empathetically (to feel this history as if it were our own as opposed to narrating sympathetically the history of others), we must also understand how and why a dichotomy between secular projects and religious ones has been key, at times, for the elaboration of, or bitter resistance to, the modern ecumenical frame.

The other problem that stems directly from the extraordinarily copious scholarship produced about Islam—and from those works, such as Asad’s and Mahmood’s, that use Islam to criticize the universal claims of Western secularism—is that they elide the abundant, obvious, and meaningful signs of Arab Christian (and, for a significant while, Arab Jewish) fellowship with Arab Muslims that has occurred on multiple scales and that is one of the

defining features of modern Arab history. I concur with Aziz al-Azmeh's criticism of the "over-Islamization of Islam."²² The fixation on the study of "Islam," "the Muslim," "the Muslim woman," and "Islamic piety" has ignored secular Arabs, or those Muslim Arabs for whom piety does not signify something publicly political. It also effaces the visibility and importance of Kurds, non-Muslim Arabs, Armenians, and others who have lived, interacted with, and shared a culture with Muslims across the Arabic-speaking Mashriq.

After breaking with the shibboleths of secular nationalism, I hardly see the point in romanticizing Islamic fundamentalism or valorizing minoritarian consciousness in the Middle East. One of the claims of this book is that just as one might use the experience of Arabs and Muslims in the West to understand the limits and pretensions of the secular West and its universalist claims, likewise one might use the experience and history of Arab Christians (and others of different faiths and ethnicities) as points of departure for understanding the modern history of the Middle East, and for thinking about the nature of coexistence within a predominantly Muslim world.²³

FACING DENIAL

To undertake this criticism of coexistence fairly, one has to roll back the taboos and the deep denial at the heart of Arab, Turkish, and Zionist historiographies. Zionist partisans, for example, routinely invoke the demise of Jewish communities in the Arab world to justify the Israeli dispossession of the Palestinians. Arab nationalist historians, for their part, routinely point to the ills of colonialism but have virtually nothing to say about the myriad inequities that non-Muslims had to endure for centuries, and that continue to be inscribed in various forms in most postcolonial Arab states. Similarly, until very recently, most Turkish historians have routinely denied—and the Turkish state continues to deny—the Armenian Genocide by pointing to the expulsions of Muslim subjects from the Balkans and the Caucasus.

The story of the ecumenical frame is aggregative. It encompasses different histories, each of which has its own genealogy and specificity. This