Response to Loren Lybarger, “A Disenchanted Exile”  
Alain Epp Weaver (Mennonite Central Committee)  
May 2014

How stable are the concepts of the secular and secularism? More specifically, how stable is the “ideal type” definition of secularism developed by Loren Lybarger through careful analysis of ethnographic case studies of Palestinian-Americans in the greater Chicago area as “any social orientation, practice, mode of solidarity, or stance that implicitly or explicitly resists, rejects, demotes or otherwise ignores the prior claim of religious solidarity”? Secularism, in this account, entails “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,” with religion repositioned as “subordinate, ancillary, or relative to other identities . . . that constitute the social whole” (10-11).

Lybarger’s argument has much to commend it. He helpfully describes secularism as a tradition of discourse that can be and is transmitted generationally. The secularist move of positioning religion and religious authority as subordinate to national identity has a long history within Palestinian nationalism. During the first decades of the twentieth century, Muslim-Christian Associations brought Christians and Muslims into a shared framework of Palestinian Arab nationalism. A British report from 1926 reveals nationalist success in subordinating religious confession to national identity: “The dearest thought to every young local Orthodox Christian is that he is an Arab, and his most cherished aspirations are those of Arab nationalism, which he shares with his Moslem fellow-countrymen.” As these examples suggest, Palestinian Christians have played a key role in articulating a secular Palestinian national identity in which religious identity is incorporated within and subordinated to national identity, and arguably Christian schools in Palestine have been key institutional locations for the forging and transmission of secular Palestinian identities. It would be intriguing to know what Lybarger has discovered in his fieldwork regarding the transmission of secular national identities among Palestinian Christians in the Chicago area: does it parallel his findings related to transmitted secular identities among Palestinian Muslims, or does it differ in specific ways?


Lybarger’s definition of secularism also allows him correctly to position much of the boycott, divestment, sanctions (BDS) movement as secular in character, even when BDS activists deploy religious tropes. Lybarger’s argument here can be bolstered and supplemented by a consideration of right of return movements among Palestinians in the diaspora (which often intersect and overlap with BDS efforts). Palestinian refugees and activists may use religious language and imagery to argue for refugees’ right to return to sites of their former homes and villages in what has become the State of Israel, but that religious discourse is typically incorporated within and subordinated to the broader cause of refugee return—and so is, in Lybarger’s terms, a secular effort. Consider, for example, the Palestinian refugee activist and cartographer Salman Abu-Sitta, who has defended the Palestinian refugee right of return as “sacred, legal, possible.” Abu-Sitta’s description of Palestinian refugee return as “sacred” operates within a secular (in Lybarger’s sense) nationalist framework, with the term “sacred” describing primarily the unbreakable connection of the Palestinian people (both Christian and Muslim) to the land. Given this sacred bond of land and people, the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes is accordingly “sacred to all Palestinians,” Abu-Sitta writes. “It has remained their fundamental objective since 1948. Their determination on the return issue has endured despite warfare, suffering, and enormous social and political hardships. In this, the refugee from Iqrit, who is an Israeli citizen, the refugee from Lydda, who is a Jordanian citizen, the refugee from Haifa, who is stateless in Syria or Lebanon, and the refugee from Jaffa, who is a U.S. citizen, have the same determination.” The right of return is sacred for Abu-Sitta because it is “an indestructible core of the Palestinian psyche”—yet the overarching movement to press the Palestinian refugee right of return is, using Lybarger’s definition, a secular effort.

As intriguing and generally useful as I find Lybarger’s ideal type definition of secularism to be, I would also suggest—and I doubt that Lybarger would disagree—that while individuals and communities perform secular identities in some contexts, in other contexts religious solidarity assumes primacy for those same individuals and communities. For example, in the northern West Bank village of Zababdeh, the students and teachers (both Christians and

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Muslims) at the Latin (Roman Catholic) school where I taught for three years in the early 1990s would routinely proclaim in various settings that they were Palestinians first, Christians and Muslims second. At graduations and other public festivities Christian and Muslim religious discourse and iconography were certainly present, but they were woven into and secondary to Palestinian nationalist discourse. Yet, for many of these same students and teachers, religious authority was primary—or at least assumed a much more pronounced role—at the level of individual and family ethics, a fact that runs counter to Lybarger’s definition of secularism as a stance in which religious authority is rejected or irrelevant as a foundation for individual ethics. And at times religious affiliation and solidarity would become primary for Zababdeh’s Christians, in particular when the Christian community would rally around real or perceived attacks on individual Christians from the village (e.g. threats to the honor of a Christian woman and her family in the form of catcalling): at such moments for Zababdeh’s Christians religious solidarity (which was also bound up with extended family and clan, or *hamula*, solidarity) superseded national bonds. Put another way, Palestinian Christian identity was sometimes performed in a secular manner in which Christian was subordinate to Palestinian, and at other times in a way in which Christian superseded Palestinian. Lybarger’s ideal type definition of secularism can thus be accepted with the caveat that in the messy realities of many contexts the secularist stance only partially and incompletely shapes individual and social lives.