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Response: Noah Salomon

Author: [Jeremy Walton](#) (---.dsl.emhnil.ameritech.net)

Date: 05-05-04 22:08

Noah Salomon's admirable paper, "Undoing the Mahdiyya: British Colonialism as Religious Reform in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1898-1914," exemplifies the virtue and necessity of meticulous historical and ethnographic research to broad questions of religion, secularism, and modernity. Through his detailed engagement with archival sources concerning the period of British administration of the Sudan following the years of Mahdiyya rule, Salomon makes a strong argument for a political and practical understanding of secularization. Rather than considering Sudanese Islam merely as the object of British reforms, Salomon also urges us to consider religion as a crucial site through which colonial power itself operated. In doing so, he ultimately suggests a new understanding of the relationship among colonial administration, secularization and religion, which focuses as much on questions of governmental procedure as it does on points of ideology. One of the crucial themes of Salomon's paper is the political function of the distinction between orthodox and heterodox Islam that British colonialists invoked. In the aftermath of the Mahdiyya, the British did not seek to undo Islamic governance altogether, but savvily attempted to inculcate a particular type of Islam that militated against the potentially subversive spirituality of Sufi brotherhoods. The challenges of colonial administration both necessitated and presupposed a distinction between orthodox Islam and heterodox Islam. Salomon illustrates, in great detail, the principles upon which this distinction between orthodoxy and heterodoxy were drawn. The British, drawing upon their experience in other Muslim societies, actively encouraged the codification and centralization of Sudanese Islam, relying upon fixed notions of the Shari'a, the Qu'ran, and the regulatory role of the ulema. As Salomon brilliantly demonstrates, this pragmatic concern for the definition of Islam ultimately demanded that British colonial administrators themselves take up the functional role of the 'alim in order to intervene in the debates concerning the scope and methodology of Islamic tradition. For instance, Lord Cromer, the Governor of Egypt from 1883 to 1907, actively advocated the salafi movement of Muhammad 'Abdu as a version of Islam most appropriate to the contingencies of modern political life. Salomon's acute inquiry into the pragmatic dimensions of the colonial distinction between orthodoxy and heterodoxy ultimately yields significant lessons for students of religion and secularism generally. Though the British were certainly engaged in a project of secularization in Sudan, this project did not merely act on Islam, but through it as well. This dialectic of religion as both an end of secularization and as a means itself of this secularization necessitates attention to both the manner and logic by which religion becomes rationalized in modern political contexts. Furthermore, the shift to an understanding of religion—or discourses and practices concerning religion—as an active component of secularization avoids the teleology of privatization, autonomization and political irrelevance that theories of secularization often imply. As Salomon remarks near the end of his paper, "The establishment of a secular state (in Sudan) necessitated not that religion retreat into a private sphere, but that religion enter the public sphere in a very different manner than it had previously." In the end, Salomon's careful attention to the particular way in which the colonial political project in Sudan operated through and thereby redefined Sudanese Islam is the unique contribution of this paper. This contribution sheds light not only on Islam in colonial Sudan, but on the relationship between religion and secular political projects generally.

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A note to my respondents

Author: [Noah Salomon](#) (---.dsl.emhril.ameritech.net)

Date: 05-09-04 18:16

I extend my sincere gratitude to Jeremy and Cassie for their thoughtful and generous responses. Both of these careful scholars brought a unique perspective to bear upon the material I presented, and opened up new avenues for inquiry as I continue to think through the questions I posed in my essay. Jeremy's ability to gather the arguments I had scattered across the thirty or so pages of this essay and to reframe them in such a concise and incisive manner was greatly appreciated. As the author of this piece, I often lost sight of the big picture, and became bogged down in the details. Jeremy's articulation of the arguments of my paper within the context of the debates occurring within the study of secularism goes a long way towards helping me to rethink where my research fits into the broader conversations anthropologists and historians are having about this under-examined topic. Cassie's response was extremely insightful, and her helpful skepticism about my argument uncovered some key points that certainly need to be clarified. I thank her for her careful criticism, and hope that my response to it is adequate. In the following, I will try to respond briefly to the two main questions she poses.

Cassie expresses doubt towards what she characterizes as "the argument that colonial Sudan cannot be said to have been 'secularized' under the British." She points to the applicability of Cassanova's "differentiation of spheres" thesis to the case that I studied to prove her counterargument that the British project was a secularizing one. I certainly have no qualms with Cassie's point. Instead, I hope that my paper showed the reader that secularization did indeed occur in Sudan under the British. What I was trying to argue (and evidently didn't do so clearly enough), is not that secularization did not happen, but rather that we as scholars need to rethink what secularization means, and in particular its relationship with religion. In this case, secularization meant a certain attempt to reform Islam in a manner so as to make it compatible with the goals of the emerging nation-state that the British were trying to develop in Sudan. What fascinated me was that the British secularization program did not relegate religion to the private sphere, as we might expect, nor did it banish it from influence over politics, or the like; rather, the British invited religion into the process of state formation in novel ways, that effected the outcome not only of the Sudanese state but of Islamic structures of authority and belonging as well. As I stated in my conclusion, "The British advance into the Sudan was to bring a certain kind of modern secular form of government to theocratic [Mahdist] Sudan. But we must be careful to recognize that despite the secularizing project, there was at every level a very real engagement with religion. In the early years of their occupation of the Sudan, as part of their larger project of secularizing the state, the British attempted to redraw the boundaries of local religious communities and reshape Islam in the Sudan (emphasis not in original)." The British did indeed secularize the Sudanese state, with the "differentiation of spheres" that Cassie points out; I take this as a given throughout the essay. What is interesting to me is precisely the relationship of this secularism to religion: the concepts of religion that inform it, the types of religion it makes possible, and those it forecloses.

Next I want to address Cassie's point that the British feared the Sufi organizations due to their links "with competing sources of military and political power." This indeed is an underexamined area of my paper. To sketch out an argument that needs to be made much more thoroughly, I would say that this is true about the British relationship to some "Sufi" organizations, and less true about others. The Mahdist order (which is not properly Sufi, but certainly emerges out of that context) was a political and military order that the British tried to crush. Yet due to the Mahdi's own contentious relationship to many of the Sufi orders (see O'Fahey 1999, in my bibliography for an excellent study of the Mahdi's relationship to the Sufi orders), those that did not align themselves with the Mahdiyya were, at least in those early years of the British occupation, not significantly tied to any military or political order that could pose a direct threat to the British. Certainly the British fear was there that these groups could spin wildly out of control and pose a security threat in the future, but these groups had no existing military order, and had been alienated from that of the Mahdi. Therefore while Cassie's approach would certainly shed light on the British relationship with neo-Mahdist groups, I am somewhat less convinced about what a "military strategy" analysis would tell us about their relationship to the Sufi orders. Nevertheless, this is just my initial hunch; it would take a much more thorough inquiry to prove this point fully.

Many thanks to my respondents for their careful readings of my essay and for this helpful exchange. I've really enjoyed it!

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Noah Salomon: Response

Author: Cassie Adcock (---.uchicago.edu)

Date: 05-06-04 09:25

When so many, considering the political situation in contemporary Islamic countries, are ready to attribute such qualities as intolerance and non-secularity either to Islam, or to the incomplete modernization of postcolonial states, the careful investigation offered in this paper into the history of the introduction of modern political forms in the Sudan is an important contribution. Mr. Salomon's argument that the colonial modernizing effort did not bring with it a privatized form of religion, but that the British state in Sudan itself instituted a form of state-regulated "public" Islam, is an important corrective to much contemporary thinking on the intermixing of religion and politics.

Furthermore, the caution that "if the goal of secular modernism is tolerance for religious diversity, the rule of reason over public affairs, and the relegation of religion to the private, then... we must seriously question the relationship between this modernization and the secularization that it claims to carry with it" (p. 28) is well-placed. The point that "modernization" may not bring with it increased tolerance for diversity as we are wont to assume is all the more important to consider, when we reflect that the modernization of religious traditions, or rather their state-directed reform, is not limited to the colonial period, but continues to be enacted in postcolonial states. (The work of Pratap Mehta, for example, discusses the role of contemporary Indian courts in imposing an elite, reformed variety of Hindu religion on non-elite classes).

But I would like to play devil's advocate a bit, not so much to raise a criticism as to provoke clarification by our author. It seems to me that the argument that colonial Sudan cannot be said to have been "secularized" under the British could perhaps bear some further treatment. In contesting the widespread secularization thesis, Mr. Salomon points us to the presentation by Jose Casanova. Leaving aside Casanova's discussion of the "normative" aspects of secularization, a reader might suppose that the imposition in Sudan of a form of Islam on the model of that outlined by Islamic reformer Muhammad 'Abduh might conform to Casanova's argument that the "core" of the secularization thesis, that modernity brings with it a "differentiation of spheres," that is, a differentiation of religion from the spheres of politics, economy and science, (the first point listed on p. 27 of Mr. Salomon's paper), holds weight. Muhammad 'Abduh's reform, which restricted Islamic law to "personal law," with a separate legal code to regulate questions of economy and crime, and which as Mr. Salomon observes "radically reforms the potential for religion as a comprehensive ethic in the life of a believer," might seem to constitute "differentiation" in Casanova's terms, particularly when contrasted to the application of Islamic law to "all aspects of public life" under the Mahdiyya regime. Certainly this paper has clearly demonstrated that religion was not "privatized" during the colonial period, that the state continued to have a hand not only in selecting the form of Islam to be countenanced, but also in Islamic legal reasoning on matters of properly "religious" matters of personal law. But I wonder whether some might not still want to argue that the British colonial reform in Sudan constituted a state-imposed "secularization," that is, a state-regulated introduction of a more properly differentiated form of Islam, in a society dominated by a form of religion which was as yet un-differentiated and all-encompassing. Might not some suggest, as has been done for the Indian case, that what we are looking at is an example of an imperfect effort to carve out a form of "religion proper,"

in a country where religion was hopelessly mixed with all aspects of life? It might seem that the British feared in Sufi Islam less a “privatization” of religion per se (p. 19, 28), than a form of religion which remained linked to competing sources of political and military power, and continued to regulate those spheres of life which the state endeavored to redesignate as “secular” (that is, the British may be seen as reacting to a perception of Sufi Islam as in an important and threatening sense, not “private” enough). Would it not be possible to view the colonial policy as a state-imposed differentiation of the proper domain of religion from the secular spheres of economy, politics, etc.?

Finally, considering Mr. Salomon’s framing question as to whether colonial governmental reform was also necessarily a project of religious reform, it might be appropriate to point out that the British colonial project was intended not only to reform state institutions, but to uplift the societies of the colonized. British officials who came to serve in colonial administrations were taught not only a certain understanding of Islamic orthodoxy, but were also educated in social scientific scholarship of the day, according to which religion was widely held to be central to the progress or development of individual character and social cohesion, which formed the capacity for advanced forms of government. Muhammad Abduh’s reformed Islam was informed by many of these same thinkers (Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mill), and his reform, like theirs, was explicitly oriented not only to the state, but also (ostensibly) to the improvement of society through the reform of religion. So, while it comes as a surprise to many of us, Cromer’s proposition that it was religion that was “keeping the colonized back” would have met with wide agreement among those who received a western education in the nineteenth century. The task, as this paper has compellingly demonstrated, was to accomplish the reform of religion in such a way that it could be made to appear compatible with the principle of religious freedom.

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