
BOOK REVIEW

Agrama, Hussein Ali. 2012. *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. xiii + 288pp. ISBN 978 0 2260 1069 4. Hbk. \$85. ISBN 978 0 2260 1068 7. Pbk. \$27.50.

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Keywords: secularism; Islam, law; sovereignty, state.

Hussein Ali Agrama's riveting ethnography of Egyptian personal status courts and the Fatwa Council of Al-Azhar makes multi-fold contributions to our understanding of the changing nature of Islamic authority; the transformation undergone by the *Shari'a* as it is subsumed under the structure of state law; the role of the *mufti* (Muslim jurisconsult) and the *fatwa* (Islamic juridical response); and the nature of state power and political protests. However, Agrama's most significant contribution is to our conceptualizations of secularism. Interweaving findings from his two years of fieldwork on juridical practices in Cairo with analyses of law, legal changes, court judgments, case reasoning and the work of Islamist lawyers, Agrama investigates the nature of secular power in Egypt and beyond. Explaining the relevance of Egypt to broader theorizations of secularism, Agrama asserts that the question of whether Egypt is a religious or a secular state should be asked not just of Egypt but of a multitude of other states, including Western ones ordinarily considered as the epitome of liberal secularity. In alerting us to the similarities between Egypt and Western states, Agrama provokes us to rethink our broader understandings of secularism, irrespective of geographical context. However, as I will highlight, his assertions regarding the pervasiveness of secular power evoke questions regarding the meaningfulness of secularism as an analytic category. In his work, these questions remain only partially answered.

While acknowledging his intellectual debt to scholars of secularism such as Talal Asad, Agrama asserts that recent writings on the subject have added little to our theoretical grasp of this concept. Instead they have reiterated now-established notions: secularism comes in a variety of flavours dependent on context; its foundations are Protestant; rather than ensuring freedom of belief and practice, it operates through control and constraint; it fails to treat religions neutrally or keep them out of politics. However, the most troubling aspect of these recent studies, Agrama asserts, is that they theorize secularism in a manner consistent with secularism's self-definition.

Agrama's vital intervention in the terrain of studies on secularism is to theorize secularism in a manner not beholden to its own categories and criteria. To accomplish this, he moves away from examining the norms imposed by secularism to investigating how secularism works and how it acts upon our behaviours, attitudes and ways of knowing.

Departing radically from how secularism is ordinarily understood, that is, as the separation of religion from politics, Agrama instead asserts that secularism is best characterized as an “ongoing, deepening entanglement in the *question* of religion and politics” (p. 29; italics original). This “question of religion and politics” is two-fold: (1) what is the limit to which religion should impact society? And, (2) where should one draw the line between religion and politics? As can be gauged from these questions, they apply as much to what one might ordinarily term a “religious state” as well as to “secular states.” In fact, for Agrama, *all* states (be they self-avowed Islamic states or ones that declare themselves secular) are secular, since they *all* continuously question the relationship between religion and politics. This constant questioning, Agrama argues, enables secular power, and through it *all* states enact their sovereignty and infringe on our social life in increasingly invasive ways. Pushing Agrama’s argument to its logical conclusion, it appears that it is analytically beneficial to discard the category of secularism, at least in our analysis of nation-states.

However, as explained below, Agrama also asserts that there exist practices and spaces that evade secular power and state sovereignty. His discussion of these apertures—which he terms *asecular*—is arguably the most compelling aspect of his project. *Asecularity* takes a multiplicity of forms ranging from the practice and space of the Arab Spring protests to that of the Egyptian Fatwa Council. Agrama argues that both the Fatwa Council and the Arab Spring protest movements are indifferent to the stakes and questions of secularism. They do not concern themselves with the relationship between religion and politics and do not identify politics as intractably linked to the terms of the sovereign state. This intriguing possibility of resistance to state sovereignty and secular power is only explored briefly in Agrama’s work. This is unfortunate given the significance of such resistance, since, as Agrama reminds us, the state’s invasiveness in our social lives and its control over politics and religion are arguably on the rise due to the global dominance of the national security paradigm.

The compelling nature of Agrama’s arguments regarding *asecularity* and the striking similarity between the projects of self-avowed religious and self-avowed secular states is undeniable. Through shifting the established paradigm of scholarly discourse from what secularism *is* to what secularism *does*, Agrama poses a formidable challenge to recent theorizations on the subject. His book’s brilliant and incisive arguments must be grappled with seriously by all those engaged in studies of religion and secularity.