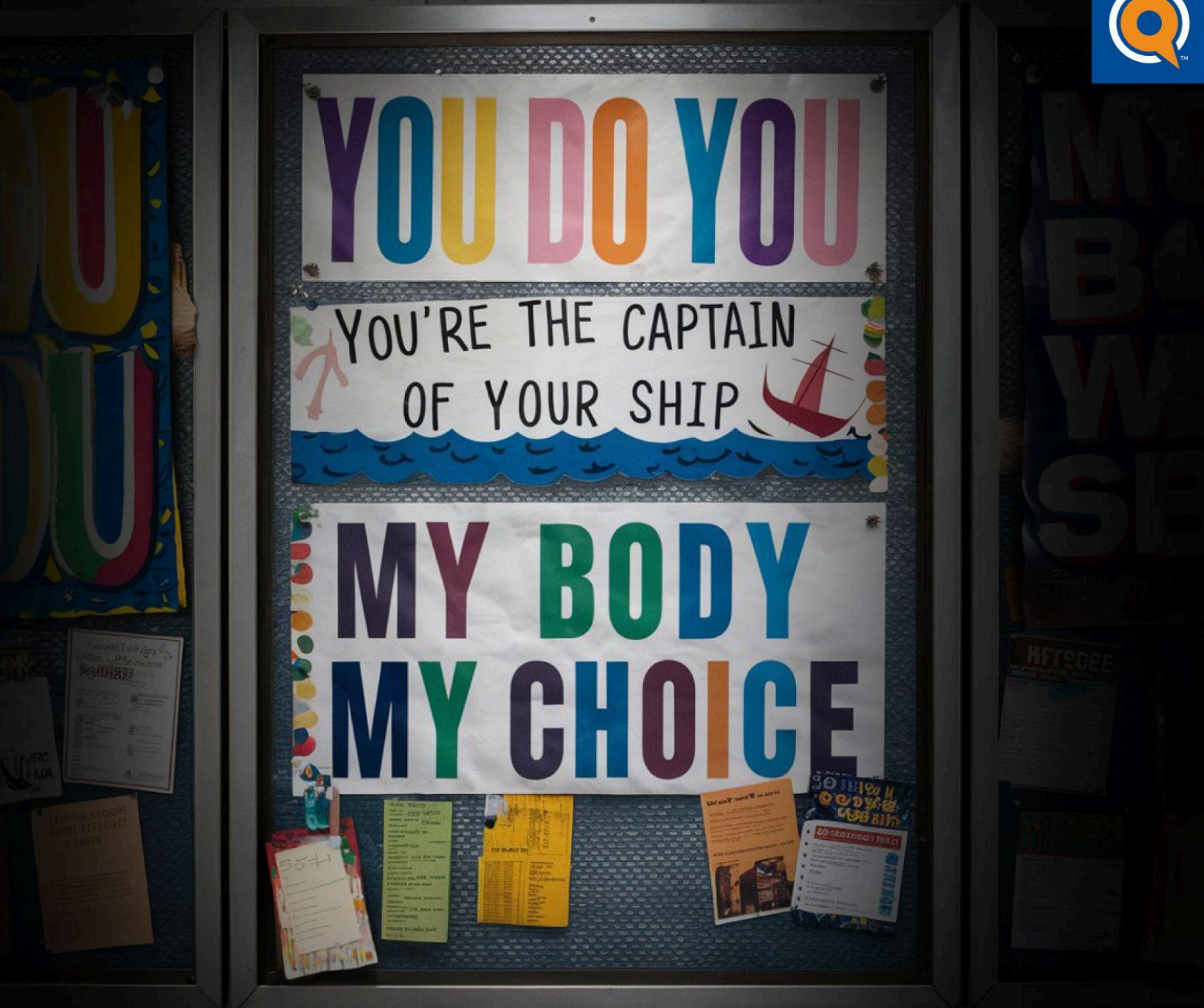




Breaking Free: Unshackling the Muslim Mind from Secular Thought and Reestablishing the Islamic Personality

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Introduction

You do you.

You're the captain of your own ship.

My body, my choice.

These and similar platitudes have embedded themselves in both modern vernacular and the individual psyche. Charles Taylor has described our time as an “age of authenticity,” defined by the moral imperative to “find yourself, realize yourself, and release your true self.”¹ The liberal state not only promotes this morally autonomous self as an uncontested good, but assigns it inherent value and validity. As we will show, what results is in fact a mockery of the individual.

This paper examines the consequences of living under secular hegemony. It accounts for the historical phenomenon of “creating” the secular self, evaluates the legitimacy of this invented “self” via an Islamic lens, and demonstrates the devastating impact of secular power on the Muslim psyche if left untreated. Finally, it argues for the necessity of reclaiming our Islamic sensibilities and commitments.

The invention of the individual

The modern self can be traced back to the Enlightenment. Individual sovereignty was recognized and protected by the doctrine of secularism, which likewise promoted state sovereignty.² Secularism is an inherently complex concept with competing definitions;³ for our purposes, it is understood as a political doctrine that provides the state the power to determine: (1) “what constitutes a religion; (2) which beliefs and actions are deemed religious or alternatively secular; and (3)

¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London: Belknap Press, 2007), 475.

² Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 134.

³ It is important to note that scholars understand and categorize secularism in more than one way. Secularism is multifaceted and the very categories of what it means to be “religious” and “secular” are constantly being reworked and reassessed.

which of those religious beliefs and actions are acceptable to and tolerated by the State.”⁴

The inauguration of secularism as a world order was anything but natural. It was a project that emerged as an antidote to Western Europe’s trauma stemming from the tug of war between Church and State. Early modernity, between the 16th and 18th centuries, centered on efforts to put religion in its “place” and was marked by attempts to weaken the Church’s stronghold on society.⁵ In trying to resolve the supposed tension between religion and state, secularism never clearly delineated the boundary of either. It is against this backdrop of secular confusion that religion morphed into a plaything of the state. The secular reenvisioning of religion as a malleable entity belies the naive understanding of secularism as a mere separation between religion and state. In actuality, what the secular order does is *recreate* religion to fit the state’s “ongoing, deepening entanglement in the question of religion and politics,” which fundamentally “is a feature of the expanding regulatory capacities of the modern state.”⁶ The reconfiguration of religion into a docile and obedient subject of the state was not simply prescribed for Western Christian society—it was deemed a panacea for the global world order.⁷ Europe simply served as the launchpad from which to export secularism, fully sanctioned by Western imperialist expansion to the rest of the world. The secular project aimed at creating a new “self” characterized by moral autonomy and political independence. What exactly does this self entail? What are its predispositions and assumptions?

In the liberal imagination, individual autonomy is inextricably linked to one’s moral authority. Immanuel Kant is often credited for introducing autonomy as an

⁴ Ali Harfouch, “The Secularization of the Muslim Mind,” *Traversing Tradition*, April 8, 2019, <https://traversingtradition.com/2019/04/08/the-secularization-of-the-muslim-mind/>.

⁵ To present the emergence of secularism simply via the lens of religious wars is an incomplete narrative. It is important to acknowledge the social, political, and economic realities at play in order to capture a more complete image of the political doctrine. For details on the historical circumstances that nurtured secularism, see William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 124–80 and Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 1–17.

⁶ Hussein Agrama, *Secularism, Sovereignty, Indeterminacy: Is Egypt a Secular or a Religious State? Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, no. 3 (2010): 495–523.

⁷ Cavanaugh, *Myth of Religious Violence*, 120–21.

“attribute of individuals in our capacity as individuals to prescribe moral law to ourselves,” thereby nestling the individual and God in the same “moral community”—rendering God “morally superfluous.”⁸ Kant’s link between morality and autonomy had a profound impact. The self now served as a moral agent in its own right and asserted the subjectivity of morality itself. God and His revelation were to be trumped by individual impulse and expression, thereby championing feelings over principles. The morally autonomous self was viewed as the beacon of authenticity in its ability to esoterically unveil “inner truths” (no matter how fleeting), “objectifying the world and submitting it to its own demands.”⁹ This championing of the autonomous self not only legitimizes the “arbitrariness” of morality itself, but deems its instability natural.¹⁰ Like a feather in the wind, our morality is subjected to the ever-changing current of our own whims, our moral judgment determined by a constant inconstancy.

Thus the individual is deemed self-sufficient and capable of meaningful choices by virtue of simply existing. The contemporary phenomenon of transgenderism captures this moral and epistemological nihilism. The desire to align feelings of being trapped in the wrong body with one’s physical gender expression has sanctioned transgender individuals to explore the options of gender-affirming surgeries, puberty blockers, and hormone therapy. Irreversible changes are celebrated under the banner of choice. Feelings are deemed inherently valid and therefore actionable, no matter how fleeting or temporary. Yet the same principle invoked to celebrate manipulation of one’s body is conveniently minimized for one who detransitions.¹¹ Many who transitioned trusted the authenticity of their “inner truths” only to realize their feelings were entirely wrong. “Inner truths” easily morph into inner lies when the individual is left to face real, lasting repercussions made in the name of embracing whims and desires.

⁸ Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 31.

⁹ Hallaq, *The Impossible State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 80.

¹⁰ Hallaq, *Impossible State*, 35.

¹¹ This is not to suggest that those who detransition are unsupported as a collective. Rather, it is to emphasize that the lack of value to their narrative results in a lack of emphasis and/or avoidance in mainstream media. For further details, see “Robin Respaut, Chad Terhune, and M. Colin, “Why Detransitioners Are Crucial to the Science of Gender Care,” *Reuters*, December 22, 2022,

<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-transyouth-outcomes/>.

When morality is redefined as a personal matter and relegated to the private sphere, two significant commitments are suggested: (1) morality is subjective; and (2) all expressions stemming from different moral codes are equal in value. This effectively enslaves the individual to the fragility of their fluctuating moral framework. The creation of the secular self subsequently creates a “cult(ure) of authenticity,” where individual expression (no matter how insignificant or seemingly absurd) carries intrinsic significance.¹² If the secular self is understood *a priori* to be sincere and dignified in its aims, how then are we to judge what is just? Or more fundamentally, on what basis are we to judge at all?¹³

When secular power creates and nurtures an ecosystem that excludes God from any real legitimacy or sovereignty, the vacuum created is effectively filled by man’s (sanctioned) creative power. The calibration of the secular self is contingent on the individual following their whims, rendering any efforts to seek “truth” and authenticity futile. The impact this has on religious expression and adherence is disastrous. In a secular world, the cultural milieu divorces universality from religious belief, practice, and ultimately truth. The secular self is forced to internalize that: (1) unshifting truth can never exist and (2) authenticity is tethered to fleeting experiences and emotions. This creates a buffet of choices, where consumers can ‘mix and match’ at their discretion, thereby concocting “spirituality” from a series of impulses that satiate the individual appetite.

Current trends reflect the decentralization of religious practice, as surveys indicate that about a quarter of US adults identify as “spiritual but not religious.”¹⁴ The rise and normalization of baseless practices such as sending positive affirmations into the universe, the usage of healing crystals, and encouragement of daily meditation

¹² Corey James Anton, *Selfhood and Authenticity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 4.

¹³ Stephen Guardbaum emphasizes that personal autonomy cripples one from concretely making judgments about justice. He notes that “each individual associates his personal autonomy with the criteria of justice that he uses in making these judgements.” Stephen Guardbaum, “Liberalism, Autonomy, and Moral Conflict,” *Stanford Law Review* 48, no. 2 (1996), 385–417.

¹⁴ “More Americans Now Say They’re Spiritual but Not Religious,” Pew Research Center, September 6, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>.

via yoga and mindfulness all capture the spirit of these findings. The mission of secular spirituality is to cultivate and foster a *feeling*, whether that be a calmed state of mind or a heightened sense of purpose/connection to one's self and the world at large. While this most certainly points to a decrease in structured religious practice, it suggests something even more telling: secular society cannot rid the human being of its natural disposition (*fiṭrah*) to seek a higher power. The endeavor to find connection to the metaphysical without religious creed is a testament to this feature embedded in the human psyche. The most secular spirituality can offer the modern world is a variety of epistemologically problematic practices that have *potential* to stir up fleeting feelings of fulfillment. It effectively morphs religion into a self-serving, malleable entity, no longer grounded in creed and dogma, but rather guided by individual whims and desires. In essence, secular spirituality shifts one's servitude from God to the self.

In concert with this trend, it is not surprising that many individuals in Western Muslim communities justify the bypassing of Islamic principles through the seemingly harmless mindset of “only God can judge me.” Whether it is Muslim businesses rationalizing interest-based transactions or Muslim influencer culture redefining hijab norms, the unfortunate reality is that many Muslims numb themselves to disobedience through the “harm principle.” This mentality undeniably carries the pathologies of secular thought. It not only privatizes religious commitment, but provides the individual the confidence to become a religious consumer rather than follower.

It is through this mechanism that an individual who self-identifies as Muslim, but lacks the necessary theological and practical commitments, is produced and legitimized.¹⁵ Such is the secularized Muslim, content to prioritize the experience of a feeling over legitimizing the basis of the feeling itself (i.e., the validity of creed). In its efforts to replace the “opiate of the masses” with the opiate of untethered spirituality, the secular project places feelings and esoteric experiences

¹⁵ The popular 2015 BuzzFeed video titled “I’m Muslim, but I’m Not...” illustrates this phenomenon. Efforts to break stereotypes on what it means to be Muslim or follow Islam only echo secular sentiments of the individual having a hand in what their religion “looks like” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMQjyRc7eiY>).

above creed. One may encounter a Muslim who stops praying because they no longer *feel* the “benefits” of prayer. What this reflects is secularism’s ability to embolden the Muslim to filter Islamic practices by their perceived emotional or “spiritual” output.

Secular power does not directly expunge religion (i.e., God) from individual consciousness and activity. Rather, it operates by stripping God of sovereignty and granting it to Mankind instead. Secular power (and the institutions by which it functions) quietly but pervasively establishes a legal and social order that renders religion—and by extension, God—irrelevant. Under a secular order, religion essentially becomes an offshoot of deism; God is given the space to “exist” (if the individual so desires), but has no real role to play in society. Individuals are given the green light to *believe*, but it is the secular legal regime that ultimately dictates the shape of their actual religious *practice*. In other words, the “freedom” which these aforementioned Muslims seek when feelings are emphasized over creed is not a genuine freedom at all. In reality, their ability to practice “Islam” in such a way (and the contents of the “feelings” which inform that practice) stem from the power of the state—and are therefore at its mercy.

Disciplining the secular self

In the early twentieth century, shortly after the establishment and formalization of the American public education system, Jehovah’s Witnesses refused on religious grounds to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance mandated for public school students. This precipitated a legal and cultural controversy. In *Minersville School District v. Gobitis* (1940), the Supreme Court upheld the requirement of students to participate in the daily ceremony while simultaneously asserting that failure to do so could result in expulsion. Two thousand students were subsequently expelled from public institutions, never mind the social violence and fury directed against the Jehovah’s Witnesses for choosing loyalty to their religious beliefs over state-mandated practice. While the Supreme Court would backpedal three years later, the case exposed the necessary fragility of religious freedom under a secular

order. This is because “individual autonomy” is secured through the coercive apparatus of the state—the state can crush individual freedom *precisely because it is the only means by which that freedom is guaranteed*.

Thus the Enlightenment’s concerted effort to produce the “individual” is precisely what, in practice, denied the self individuality. Modern “individuality” can only be achieved through the modern state, which takes on the responsibility of defining, training, and disciplining the self via its various institutions.¹⁶ The “self-evident” authenticity and autonomy of the “self” is not self-evident at all, considering that the production of the self was and is a carefully coordinated and collaborative process. As Talal Asad points out, John Locke’s emphasis on “natural right as a limit to arbitrary government may also be closely linked to the desire to stabilize the contingent character of the self through a legal concept of the person.”¹⁷ The result is that one is only as free as the state allows them to be. While the individual is sold the illusion of an endless sea of choices to define themselves by, in reality the state not only sets the parameters of the human imagination, but depends on said parameters to function and survive.

In other words, we are not as free as we think. Our self-perception and outlook are inherently autonomous and therefore authenticity is but an illusion. “Free” society markets the fantasy that the individual carries the creative toolkit to independently think and by extension, to *be* as they please. What is often overlooked is what the secular self neglects to internalize: the regulation of thought and expression. Values and norms are largely shaped by secular liberal institutions. Already in the 18th century, Rousseau argued that the autonomous self can only flourish when citizens function “harmoniously and uniformly on the basis of the single general will,” where the liberal order offers a framework of conduct to help regulate and contain collective action.¹⁸ So much so, that individual self-determination isn’t actually an individual effort; the individual “may mistake an epistemological insight of

¹⁶ Hallaq, *Impossible State*, 76

¹⁷ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 135.

¹⁸ Gardbaum, “Liberalism, Autonomy, and Moral Conflict.”

relativity for a practical or ethical maxim” normalized to them.¹⁹ That is, individual leanings and affinities, rather than being truly individual, are often the result of state-sanctioned modes of “normative” beliefs and practice.

Take modern views on gender roles. The current status quo demands the championing of women in the workforce, but is less enthusiastic about celebrating women as caretakers of the family. Ideas of female “success” and “empowerment” are by no coincidence associated with the former rather than the latter. The rise of “girlboss” culture and the simultaneous devaluing of women’s role as custodians of future generations reflects the modern state’s power and its ability to shape individual aspirations.

Furthermore, it reveals the limits of the state’s tolerance for “self-expression.” Actions taken and beliefs affirmed must be justified on the basis of individual choice rather than normative truth. This is clear in modern discourse on hijab in the United States. Religious garb is celebrated and accepted on the basis of individual choice, but deemed oppressive if grounded in religious dogma. The American Muslimah’s hijab is (theoretically) legitimized so long as it is a reflection of her individual *choice* to cover. Should the choice to cover come secondary to theological commitments, it would garner a very different reaction. Ironically, then, it is via the prescribed agency of the self that its subjugation takes place.²⁰

Thus, for all that the secular self presumes its own “freedom of thought,” freedom in the absolute sense does not actually exist; “no matter how independently minded, everyone is to some degree dependent on other people, on conventions and on things he or she has not created, such as language.”²¹ Thought itself is always tethered to a broader established network of meaning. Consider the etymology of the word *terrorism*. Terrorism historically referred to state-sanctioned violence toward those opposed to the French Revolution. The term eventually

¹⁹ Anton, *Selfhood and Authenticity*, 4.

²⁰ For details on the creation of a national identity and implications of the human rights discourse, see Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 134–40.

²¹ Olivier Bert, “Foucault and Individual Autonomy,” *South African Journal of Psychology* 40, no. 3 (2010): 292–307.

came to more vaguely signify violence enacted to actualize political goals. The question of what and who fell under the broad banner of terrorism became arbitrary, subject to the self-serving whims of the state's propagandists. As the adage holds, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.

While this may be simply construed as a battle of semantics, the reality is far more sinister. It is the power of dominating narratives and the language used in shaping them that justified the decimation witnessed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is the system of classification that sanctioned the Graveyard of Empires. It is the capacity of rhetoric that emboldens the likes of Madeleine Albright to declare the death of half a million Iraqi children to be 'worth it.' It is the configuration of expression that can transform Palestinian resistance against settler colonialism into the justification of their genocide. Words have power. We must acknowledge that language belongs to a system. The words we use intrinsically operate within parameters set by the modern state and its various institutional collaborators in the media and elsewhere, swaying individual action and presentation.

This is how colonialism, in every sense, is constituted by secular power. We often overlook how colonialism revels in its ability to divide humanity into "'imagined communities' in both the mind and on the map."²² This facet of colonialism, often referred to as "coloniality,"²³ is not one that purely operates in the material realm; that is, its oppression is not necessarily palpable.²⁴ Coloniality falls under the broader umbrella of "soft power." Soft power is the subtle yet coercive force that prescribes collective values, norms, and sensibilities under the banner of

²² Sean L. Yom, "Islam and Globalization: Secularism, Religion, and Radicalism," in *Challenges of Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2017).

²³ Coloniality is understood to be a byproduct of colonialism. It is the systemic usurping of power from the indigenous to redefine thinking itself. Joseph Lumbard describes coloniality as "epistemic erosion," which causes the Muslim to "no longer think in line with their (Islamic) traditions," demanding the Muslim "employ paradigms from outside to conceptualize their place in the world." Joseph E. B. Lumbard, "Islam and the Challenge of Epistemic Sovereignty," *Religions* 15, no. 4 (2024): 6–7, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15040406>.

²⁴ Material colonialism is the Uyghur Muslim who is forced to spend their Ramadan eating and drinking interned in concentration camps. Colonialism is the Kashmiri living under constant surveillance and harsh curfews while struggling to feed their family. Colonialism is the murder of six-year-old Hind Rajab and her fellow martyrs, who remind us why it is impossible to overlook the tenacity of the colonial mission and erroneously assume it to be an egregious relic of the past.

universality and neutrality.²⁵ The ultimate objective of this dimension of domination is the intellectual gutting of a people and the subsequent recreation of the indigenous in the state's image.²⁶ This image is reflective of the state's position on reality itself—how the state believes civil society ought to look like and function, and how its people, by extension, construct their worldview. This hegemonic project is primarily orchestrated via secular power, which depends on narrative-building to legitimize and normalize its mission. In other words, the colonial project is alive and well. This should come as no surprise, considering that “colonialism” fundamentally describes the state's ability to actualize its vision via brute force and/or the diffusion of ideas. Ideological influence and material violence typically work in tandem to establish hegemony.

“Soft” power is thus not soft at all. We see it in how the secular liberal order supplies the vocabulary through which the individual filters thought. Discourse on the plight of Palestinians in Muslim spaces, which often favors the lens of “human rights” over anything more overtly “religious,” illustrates this phenomenon. The assumption, spoken and unspoken, is that “unlike the concerns of the Muslim—understood as tainted by the baggage of divisive theological attachments—those of the human rights worker are universal, capacious, and inclusive of the non-Muslim Palestinian.”²⁷ While seemingly harmless, the shift in language simultaneously promotes secular values and rejects Islamic reality and prescription. In the case of Palestine, it “denies Islam a capacity for the universal, it exalts human rights (and the secular politics of humanity in which they are embedded) as devoid of particularist commitments.”²⁸ Should we feel compelled to funnel our thoughts through the filter of secular language, we risk muddying our Islamic convictions beyond any hope of coherency or potency.

²⁵ Ali Harfouch, “The Great Fitnah: Secular Power and Muslim Future(s) - Part 1,” Ummatics, September 12, 2022, <https://ummatatics.org/political-theory/the-great-fitnah-secular-power-and-muslim-futures-part-1/>.

²⁶ Sherman Jackson references *mysterium tremendum*, or “second creators” (those who essentially are in control of this process of narrative/reality-building), who “pose the greatest challenge to God's monopoly on divinity.” Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 193. See Sherman Jackson's *The Islamic Secular* for a more current engagement with secularism.

²⁷ Muneeza Rizvi, “Palestine and the Question of Islam,” Critical Muslim Studies, May 15, 2021, <https://criticalmuslimstudies.co.uk/palestine-and-the-question-of-islam/>.

²⁸ Rizvi, “Palestine and the Question of Islam.”

We are social beings. Our individual expression is very much bound by collective commitments—commitments which today are meticulously managed by a bombardment of state and corporate influences.²⁹ The modern individual is enmeshed in a sea of synergetic influence, where consumer culture is propagated and the self indoctrinated to behave in carefully tailored ways. This is social engineering in all but name; institutions are provided free rein to “determine what we eat, what we watch, what we wear, where we work, and what we do.”³⁰

Racializing Muslims: The creation of the Muslim “identity”

The “secular Muslim” is not some purely organic phenomenon driven by individual liberation and choice, but rather produced by a particular legal regime and its constitutive epistemological and moral commitments. This framework considers an individual who lives by Islam (in principle and practice) as no different from an individual who simply claims to “belong” to Islam without practicing any of it. This clearly violates Islam’s call to couple belief with action.³¹ Religion is effectively reduced to a form of identity politics, where one can superficially “belong” to a religion while rejecting the very religious practices and theological commitments that define it. Thus, the Muslim is provided a sense of security in their “Muslimness” simply by virtue of identifying as Muslim. This is not to suggest that Muslims who struggle to practice their religion are not authentic in their Islamic commitment; it is impossible to judge the ultimate destiny of another believer. Rather, this is to emphasize that simply adopting Islam as an identity is antithetical to the very meaning of Islam: submission.

²⁹ For details on how the individual is influenced, see Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 135–170 (Docile bodies).

³⁰ Olivier Bert, “Foucault and Individual Autonomy.”

³¹ Qur’an 42:22, 45:30, 5:9, 2:82, and 4:122.

The state facilitates the reduction of Islam to an identity marker via its attempt to “racialize” the Muslim. “Racialization” here denotes the way in which a Muslim phenotype has been invented by state policy and legislation against the backdrop of the War on Terror. In the wake of 9/11, the Bush administration passed the Patriot Act, which authorized government surveillance of citizens deemed a security threat. In 2017, then-President Donald Trump issued the “Muslim Ban,” which barred Syrian refugees and travelers from targeted Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States. Both only exacerbated racial profiling and perpetuated the notion that Muslims could and should be identified and targeted by superficial markers. One’s “Muslimness” was effectively measured by the amount of melanin in one’s skin and “peculiar-sounding” degree of one’s name, the “exotic” clothing worn and the foreign language spoken. Discourse on the racialization of Muslims often focuses on the proliferation of Islamophobia and American Muslim national belonging. What is often overlooked is the influence racialization has on the Muslim psyche itself.

Islam is not a race. It is impossible to create a universal Muslim archetype, despite secular efforts to do so. The racialization of Muslims creates a dangerous space for believers to compartmentalize their Islam and lose sight of what actually makes them Muslim. Internalizing the framework of racialization pigeonholes the Muslim in the “minority” mindset, which often results in the adoption of an inferiority complex. As Saba Mahmood notes, “for a minority to draw attention to its plight, it must necessarily highlight its difference from the identity of the nation, exacerbating the fissure that produces the group’s exclusion in the first place.”³² When Muslims view themselves as a scrutinized religious minority, it inevitably impacts how they navigate their lived experience.

Take American Muslim political engagement. Rather than have their politics be led by Islamically-ordained commitments to the *ummah*, most American Muslims preemptively and unimaginatively dismiss their capacity to effect change outside

³² Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2016), 67.

of secular parameters. Our political vision and priorities are often reactionary, our hopes for change dictated by the systems of injustice we so desperately seek to engage with. We wait for genocide before deciding to abandon our leaders. Unaware of our cognitive dissonance, we attempt to envision an activism devoid of Islamic ethics. We accept the role of playing monkey in the middle between the Left and Right, overlooking the fact that our Islamic commitments to justice will never be actualized by either. Dabbling in representation politics to secure perceived short-term wins may be *a* means, but it should never be internalized as *the* means to societal upliftment.³³

This sobering truth is further confirmed by RAND, the government-funded American think tank, and their infamous proposal for building the “moderate Muslim.” In efforts to create Muslims palatable to the state’s fancy, RAND suggested establishing Muslim networks comprising “liberal and secular Muslim academics and intellectuals; young, moderate religious scholars; community activists, women’s groups engaged in gender equality campaigns; and moderate journalists and writers.”³⁴ This web of grassroots engagement was to be established in hopes of “affecting the war of ideas” in the Muslim world and beyond.³⁵ This is how the nation-state establishes itself as a “de facto theologian,” ready to “transform Islam from within” by “unearthing, identifying, and buttressing existing organizations that the US government deems moderate, tolerant, and prone to democratic values.”³⁶ This mission was also accomplished abroad via the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), introduced under the Clinton administration. The IRFA gave “unprecedented powers to the US federal government to expand its regulation of religious life on an international scale in the name of enforcing and protecting religious freedoms.”³⁷ Not only did this signify

³³ This is not to suggest Muslims should not engage with the current political system. Rather, it is the questioning of efficacy when desiring to solve ummatic suffering. And on a more fundamental note, reassessing whether ummatic commitments shape our political vision to begin with.

³⁴ Angel Rabasa, et. al., “RAND Proposes Blueprint for Building Moderate Muslim Networks,” RAND, March 8, 2007, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9251.html.

³⁵ “RAND Proposes Blueprint.”

³⁶ Saba Mahmood, “Secularism, Hermeneutics and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (May 2006): 323–47.

³⁷ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (22 USC 6401 note),

the United States' global power, but it also reflected its material and metaphysical sovereignty "over the entirety of the geopolitical landscape."³⁸

Though the RAND document is now almost two decades old, and the IRFA even older, both capture the approach still taken by the US government (and the West more broadly) towards Muslim populations globally. Homeland Security's Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiative is a continuation of colonial power's desire to construct narratives on the 'Good Muslim' vs. 'Bad Muslim.' The billion-dollar Islamophobia industry³⁹ recognizes the power in shaping narratives and works in tandem to create the Muslim bogeyman.⁴⁰ The 'Bad Muslim' in theory and practice describes the Muslim who is unwilling to secularize Islam—that is, the Muslim who recognizes the legitimacy and authority of Islam as encompassing the public and private spheres alike. This chapter of colonial effort is undoubtedly one marked by an intellectual power struggle—the modus operandi of which requires the careful filtering of values, sentiments, and behavior in conflict with Western ethics and principles.

What Islamic ethics call us to do is to think beyond the confines of enforced systems of oppression and injustice. While details of such alternatives are beyond the scope of this paper, it is imperative that we avoid naively placing our aspirations for individual and collective empowerment in the systems designed to subjugate us. Islamic activism demands that we creatively and thoughtfully keep our eye on the prize: to proactively self-organize, mobilize, and embrace strategies that allow us to see the horizon of self-actualization. Strength is in the ability to reimagine and synchronize our movement as a collective toward an alternative politics, rather than complacently situate ourselves and our inherent power in the

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/105th-congress/house-bill/2431#:~:text=International%20Religious%20Freedom%20Act%20of%201998%20%2D%20Declares%20it%20to%20be.and%20development%20assistance%20to%20governments>.

³⁸ Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics and Empire."

³⁹ Nasim Ahmed, "Islamophobia Is a Billion-Dollar Industry in the US; It's Time to Uproot It," Middle East Monitor, January 12, 2022,

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220112-islamophobia-is-a-billion-dollar-industry-in-the-us-its-time-to-uproot-it/>.

⁴⁰ For more information on state-sponsored efforts to create a Muslim archetype, see Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism and the Domestic War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2014).

sphere of minority engagement.⁴¹ Racializing Islam incapacitates the Muslim from operating authentically toward the Islamic self.

The Islamic self

Lā ilāha illah Allāh—this is the backbone of the Islamic worldview, the foundational building block of Muslim thinking and commitment. This declaration is much more than an assertion of the divinity of The Creator, The Master, and True King: Allah ﷻ. It uniquely begins with a negation of other notions of sovereignty and clear rejection (*la ilāha*) of competing worldviews and alternate systems of belief. The Qur'an asserts Islam's monopoly on Truth when Allah ﷻ says,

إِنَّ الدِّينَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الْإِسْلَامُ ۚ

The true religion with Allah is Islam.⁴²

Allah ﷻ also says,

وَمَنْ يَبْتَغِ غَيْرَ الْإِسْلَامِ دِينًا فَلَنْ يُقْبَلَ مِنْهُ وَهُوَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ

Whoever seeks a way other than Islam, it will never be accepted from them and in the Hereafter they will be among the losers.⁴³

The Islamic self is predicated on the unwavering conviction in the truth and authority of Islam in life. It is Islam that dictates how the Muslim understands the *wāqi'* (reality) around us and provides us the ability to assess the legitimacy of prevalent thought. It is Islam that shapes the self's ideas, sensibilities, and actions.

⁴¹ For further insight on Islamic activism and a proposed methodology of alternative politics, see Asim Qureshi's *A Virtue of Disobedience*.

⁴² Qur'an 3:19.

⁴³ Qur'an 3:85.

The Islamic self is committed to obedience (*tā'ah*) to Allah ﷻ, content and eager to be led by the Divine rather than blindly leading itself. After all, the Muslim recognizes that being in the driver's seat to determine guidance is akin to driving with one's eyes closed. These sentiments are affirmed when Allah ﷻ says,

أَفَرَأَيْتَ مَنِ اتَّخَذَ إِلَهَهُ هَوَاهُ وَأَضَلَّهُ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ وَخَتَمَ عَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِ وَقَلْبِهِ وَجَعَلَ عَلَىٰ بَصَرِهِ غِشَاوَةً
فَمَنْ يَهْدِيهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ اللَّهِ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ

Have you seen those who have taken their own desires as their god? [And so] Allah left them to stray knowingly, sealed their hearing and hearts, and placed a cover on their sight. Who then can guide them after Allah? Will you not take heed?⁴⁴

Allah ﷻ also reminds us:

أَفَمَنْ يَمْشِي مُكِبًّا عَلَىٰ وَجْهِهِ أَهْدَىٰ أَمَّنْ يَمْشِي سَوِيًّا عَلَىٰ صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ

Who is [rightly] guided: the one who crawls facedown or the one who walks upright on the Straight Path?⁴⁵

The secular order that seeks to domesticate religion cannot loosen the Islamic self's grip on its vision and purpose. The Islamic worldview produces a self that has a deeply-rooted inclination toward worship of and submission to the Creator. For the Muslim, the desire to align one's feelings and actions with God's desire supersedes individual inclination. This is not to suggest that Islam rids the individual of independent feeling. Rather, it is via Islam that feelings are guided to and aligned with what is wanted from us by the Creator of feelings. Unlike the secular self that views religion as an individual pursuit of feeling, the Islamic self is defined by its pursuit of His Majesty ﷻ—where fulfillment, contentment, and gratitude are gifted through obedience. Whereas the secular self is on a quest to feel something in a world numbed by individualism and consumerism, the Islamic self is sincere

⁴⁴ Qur'an 45:23.

⁴⁵ Qur'an 67:22.

and persistent in its aim to serve the Divine. The secular self assumes its inherent sincerity and the legitimacy of its ‘inner truths,’ while the Islamic self always interrogates its intentions, and its ultimate fidelity toward the Ultimate Truth. This completely shifts the way in which the Islamic self views religious prohibitions and commands. Rather than perceiving God and the self as on the same moral plane, the Islamic self recognizes and is grateful for God’s omnipotence. Rather than indulging a delusion of complete autonomy over one’s actions and sentiments, the Islamic self recognizes its inherent insufficiency and celebrates submission to God and His Shari’ah.

Living Islam is not the superficial confinement of religion to the individual sphere. Rather, it is the acknowledgment that Islam permeates all aspects of the human experience: the individual and the collective. It is the understanding that to truly be grounded in Islam, the self must see Islam as present and operative in the world around and within it. This understanding can only take root if the self identifies and appreciates Islam’s intrinsic ability to practically address lived experience, which includes the personal and social, the political and economic. Thus, being selective in how one defines and practices the *deen* is alien to the awakened Muslim consciousness. To truly be one who lives life in line with *lā ilāha illah Allāh* is to embrace unconditional obedience, independent of fleeting feelings.

A way forward: Safeguarding the Islamic self

Isolate, insulate, or assimilate—these are the categories, Dr. Ihsan Bagby argues, that describe how most American Muslims choose to interact with broader society. Bagby states that more often than not, American Muslims strive to “insulate,” meaning, they are “unanimous in their desire to be involved in society and to be recognized as a respected part of the mosaic of American life” while upholding their Islamic principles and values.⁴⁶ While Bagby’s claim does nuance the often polarized take on whether the Other simply rejects conformity or embraces it, it

⁴⁶ Ihsan Bagby, *The Mosque In America: A National Portrait; A Report from the Mosque Study Project* (Washington, DC: Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2001), 23.

falls short in its ability to address the extent to which Muslims can *successfully* insulate. To be truly “insulated”—that is, for the individual to establish Islam as their frame of reference and to navigate the world accordingly—demands awareness and action. It not only necessitates the individual swim upstream, but on a foundational level to be aware that they are in a stream in the first place.

Where does this leave us? What action plan might we have to preserve and protect the Islamic self? Disentangling ourselves from secular influence requires engaging with soft power and reclaiming the narrative. The precondition for decolonizing the Islamic self is an awareness of how secular power operates and a simultaneous interrogation of its proposed norms. Muslims must reorient their worldview and actively realign their vision, aspirations, sentiments, and understanding of reality itself via Islam. Allah ﷻ elucidates the importance of anchoring ourselves to an awareness of our religion when He ﷻ says,

قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

Say, “Are those who know equal to those who do not know?”⁴⁷

The Muslim who passively approaches understanding Islam risks losing the essence of what the Islamic self ought to be. The necessity of creating an ecosystem conducive to Muslim growth individually and collectively is evident. Cultivating a renewed commitment to fulfilling one’s individual and collective obligations is essential to safeguarding the Islamic self. The Prophet ﷺ emphasized the network of responsibility that the Muslim is enmeshed in when he ﷺ said, “Every one of you is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock. The leader of people is a guardian and is responsible for his subjects. A man is the guardian of his family and he is responsible for them. A woman is the guardian of her husband’s home and his children and she is responsible for them. The servant

⁴⁷ Qur’an 39:9.

of a man is a guardian of the property of his master and he is responsible for it. No doubt, every one of you is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock.”⁴⁸

This is further illustrated when the Prophet ﷺ said, “He is not a believer whose stomach is full while the neighbor to his side is starving.”⁴⁹ These narrations showcase a Muslim’s responsibility to those around them. It is impossible for the Islamic self to thrive when it turns a blind eye to the collective. This is demonstrated in the Prophet’s ﷺ well-known narration, “The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever.”⁵⁰ This fundamentally demands the Muslim not only have an awareness of the affairs of the *ummah* at large, but to remedy any affliction with action.

It is vital for individual commitment to work in tandem with efforts to safeguard and nurture our Muslim communities. Part of this demands a level of institution building, where Muslims can preserve and protect their intellectual loyalties. The continued establishment of Muslim think tanks, independent media companies, and educational institutions is needed. All efforts must be unified in their goal to respond to hegemonic thought and provide a system of enculturation where the veracity and superiority of the Islamic worldview is demonstrated through practice and not merely theory. Muslims must also expand our horizon of thought, ensuring we reestablish and rekindle what it means to belong to a transnational *ummah* that transcends the confines of secular order.

Reconnecting with Islam while simultaneously recognizing and safeguarding our selves against secular influence calls for action and intentionality. Recognizing the enormity of such an undertaking requires us to deconstruct secular assumptions, which in turn will allow us to reclaim our Islamic worldview. It is only then that we can walk with a clear vision, using Islam to reorient our aspirations for ourselves and the world around us.

⁴⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 7138.

⁴⁹ *Al-Adab al-Mufrad*, no. 112. Classified as *sahih* by Al-Albani.

⁵⁰ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6011.

The Muslim who, with conviction, adopts the Islamic creed as the basis for their worldview poses a very real challenge to the colonial project as he or she recognizes Islam's role in shaping their identity and the reality they live in. In other words, *living* Islam necessitates that the Muslim traverse life as a Truth seeker, firmly committed to disentangling truth from falsehood—whether it be in the arena of their own psyche or the temporal sphere. Allah ﷻ says,

وَأَنَّ هَذَا صِرَاطِي مُسْتَقِيمًا فَاتَّبِعُوهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا السُّبُلَ فَتَفَرَّقَ بِكُمْ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ

Indeed that is My Path—perfectly straight. So follow it and do not follow other ways, for they will lead you away from His Way.⁵¹

⁵¹ Qur'an 6:153.