

BOOK REVIEWS

Luca Mavelli. *Europe's Encounter with Islam: The Secular and the Postsecular.* London: Routledge, 2012 • 172 pp.

ISBN 978041569328 (cloth).

The present volume, based on the author's dissertation at Aberystwyth University, provides an accomplished philosophical account of Europe's encounter with Islam. It opens with cursory reference to well-known points of conflict (the Rushdie affair, *l'affaire du foulard*, the Danish cartoon caricatures) but telescopes out beyond the explanations commonly afforded by models based on political economy and identity politics. Such scholarship routinely poses Muslims as a threat to Europe's secular tradition and its attendant virtues (freedom, pluralism, tolerance). Setting aside these approaches, which by the end of his book appear symptomatic of the very analytical frame it addresses, Mavelli instead focuses on the political secular. Not political *secularism*, which already presumes the stability of certain categories (state, religion, law, majority/minority) and can be localized to a specific regime, but the political *secular*, that is, political-philosophical consequences of the discursive formation of European secularity. According to the grammar of this episteme, that is, the European "entrenchment" in a "secular space of subjectivity...deems the transformation of the self in the encounter with the other [to be] a potential loss of autonomy" (7). The problem of accommodating Muslims suddenly appears less a matter of problematic Muslims than a reactive process rooted in the analytic frame of that encounter. The secular mode of knowledge that "marked the progressive withdrawal from the transcendent Other/God," Mavelli concludes, "may also have contributed to a parallel progressive withdrawal from the empirical other" (7).

Chapter 1 ("Theorizing the Secular: Modernity and the Separation of Reason and Faith") lays out the stakes of the project by tracing implications of a well-known debate between anthropologist Talal Asad and sociologist José Casanova. For the former, the secular is an epistemic category through which modern experiences are constituted in particular ways (as opposed

to others). For the latter, the secular generates processes of differentiation and rationalization that contribute to an agonistic public pluralism. Mavelli grounds Casanova's understanding in a Kantian model of modern religion (as morality, between reason and faith) and secular knowledge (secured through the division between reason and faith). Then, drawing on Asad and Foucault, he notes the limited perspective such secularity affords. For if knowledge is attained only in the subject (as opposed to sought *beyond* the subject), the self need rely only on its rational faculties and not practices of spiritual transformation. The autonomous secular subject discovers knowledge in isolation.

Chapter 2 ("From Autonomy to Isolation: A Genealogy of European Secularity") develops the notion, hinted at in the earlier chapter, that the subject must transcend his sensuous nature to achieve secular knowledge. Mavelli traces its genealogy from Aquinas, Descartes, and Kant through Durkheim and Weber, concluding that the modern secular episteme fundamentally relies on the "progressive confinement of the individual into the self-enclosed space of rational consciousness.... By transcending his senses, the subject affirms sovereignty over his emotions and slowly replaces God as the foundation of knowledge and being" (59). This drama of isolation successively intensifies: Aquinas' balance between knowledge and faith, autonomy and sensibility, is "broken" by Descartes; Kant "amplifies" the confinement of the individual, even in the limited function he accords faith; Durkheim "dispossesses the individual of the process of subjectification" (60), attributing it instead to the corporate social body; and Weber reinscribes the isolation of the individual even as he attempts to recast it in heroic light as Occidental virtue. The stage is set to develop a parallel process distancing oneself from the empirical other.

Chapter 3 ("The Withdrawal from the Muslim Other") focuses more directly on the question of Islam in and of Europe. Rather than asking whether Muslims can develop liberal sensibilities congruent with those of Europe, Mavelli insists this question itself stems from the secular mode of knowledge explored earlier. He touches on the headscarf controversy to illustrate the state imbrications of faith and reason even in French political theology—a substitution made possible precisely by a Durkheimian understanding of "man as both 'object and follower' of his own faith" (63). Meanwhile, the unique place granted Europe in accounts that read secularity as grounded in Christianity, and the redemptive invitations for Muslims to transcend their sensuous religiosity, each echo Weber's civilizational fault-lines. Finally, drawing variously on Charles Taylor's reading of the modern secular "buffered self" and Roberto Esposito's paradigm of "immunity", Mavelli demonstrates—in one of the most

compelling moments of the book—that the European quest for immunity and thereby protection of life also comprises a loss of sensibility that is an impoverishment of life. That is, the construction of Muslims as deficient Europeans emerges as part of the reproduction of secular life.

Chapter 4 (“Islam and the European Search for Co-immunity”) evaluates efforts to rescue life from what Esposito terms the “constitutively exposed character of existence” (88). Habermas’s intersubjective proceduralism can be read as one such effort, yet the constitutional patriotism into which his discourse ethics translates may itself be implicated in a model of autonomous reproduction (as evident in the case of Turkey’s attempt to join the European Union). Further, however, this proceduralism is not only selective and ambiguous but is also politically counterproductive. For, considering Pope Benedict’s infamous 2006 Regensburg address, such proceduralism may foster reactionary and identitarian forces that essentially rest on that same paradigm of immunization. Mavelli is concerned, here, that secular or religious techniques of rescuing life reliant on this model “may not be building a community, but a co-immunity” (92).

Chapter 5 (“Imagining the Postsecular”) explores other ways of moving beyond the secular paradigm of immunization. If its expropriative operation is recursively secured by the simultaneous effort to transcend the senses, achieve human autonomy from God, and withdraw from the empirical other, can it be unsettled by a more thorough reappropriation? Here Mavelli first considers William Connolly’s ‘philosophy of becoming’ and its attempt to push secularization to embrace embodiment (against the figures surveyed in chapter 2). In light of Esposito’s work on the paradigm of immunization, however, Connolly somehow misses (as Habermas does not) that *communitas* and *immunitas* are mutually inscribed (not opposed). A more thorough reprisal of the secular episteme may be needed. Mavelli thus turns to Martin Buber’s philosophy of life as encounter, as offering a model in which the experience of exposed life may be weathered in fellowship mediated by God/a transcendental other. Postsecular possibilities to redress secular isolation, that is, may require an active embrace of alterity. As this conclusion shifts into a normative mode, however, Mavelli leaves open a number of provocative questions about the political prospects of this ethical relation. One way to address these might have been to consider Scholem and Levinas’ critiques of Buber, regarding his engagement with historical religious traditions and the effective force of his ethical claim.

The term “encounter” in the title is instructive and organizes much of the book. Yet Islam itself is largely absent the text, which emphasizes instead the modes of encounter possible for Europe in the secular episteme. (A

complementary project might offer Islamic responses to the experience of exposure and political community.) Although very wide ranging (Aquinas to Buber), Mavelli's close genealogical focus is not diffused. This account of the political secular (its formation in and as a paradigm of immunization) is highly welcome.

BASIT KAREEM IQBAL
TORONTO