



## *In Saecula Saeculorum*

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The old Latin liturgical phrase ‘*in saecula saeculorum*’ means, loosely interpreted, something like ‘the world and a whole lot more of the same!’ In English it is tersely expressed by the colorless phrase, ‘world without end’. Where it actually comes from I’ve not the foggiest idea. It’s certainly not biblical. But there it is, firmly imbedded in the Church’s liturgy from a very, very long time ago, and when we sing the Doxology we belt it out with great gusto just before the double ‘Amen’.

But what on earth does it mean apart from being a dolled up synonym for ‘forever’?

I think, at the very least, it means that this physical world — this *saeculum* — matters and has eternal significance as a manifestation of divine glory. We’re none of us here by happenstance and this whole thing has something to do with ‘destiny’ (in a Christian term, ‘Providence’). And that’s glorious.

But the discussion is brought down to earth by the derived English word, secularism, a modern philosophical notion about how to take this *saeculum* seriously.

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We speak about the ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ and the ordering of society, pointing out that the two spheres must be distinguished from each other. They are major pivots of our personal, intellectual, economic, political, cultural and spiritual lives with quite different functions, both of them necessary. But in the West they have often been commingled. The Medieval Catholic Church vigorously asserted its authority over the secular realm and for centuries commanded ubiquitous intelligence apparatuses, religious police and armies to enforce its will. Simple people in their brief and desperate lives were terrified at the prospect of eternal hellfire, graphically portrayed, if they did not knuckle under to the dictates of the Church. Emperors trembled on their thrones and even knelt in the snow when a Pope frowned upon them. In historical terms, that wasn’t so very long ago. (And it’s all seemingly coming back.)

What interests me is an essay I’ve recently labored over written by a Mauritanian scholar who identifies himself as the ‘son of his parents’ (*Walad-Abâ-hu*). That’s kind of cute in and of itself. I rather like it. His language has the torturous and intricate style of the French intellectual milieu into which he was acculturated as an academic. But I’ve managed somehow to battle through to the end and it was well worth the effort.

Walad-Abâ-hu is a magnificent scholar, a thinker of the first water. The questions he asks have to do with how Muslims are dealing with the rise of the modern state and where secularism in its various permutations blends into the mix. He points out that our modern political format assumes one of two contrasting viewpoints. The one says that the

modern state co-opts for itself the absolutist religious role, and dictates the terms of social conformity (the totalitarian states of a Fascist or a Communist ilk come to mind ... of which there are still far too many ... more of the former than the latter). The other says that the state is the servant of civil society, remains neutral with respect to questions of meaning and value (religious questions), strives to maintain social equilibrium, and keeps the peace (the liberal democracies built upon the humanism of the Enlightenment are the model here). This latter, historically speaking, is the truly revolutionary perspective, but it is both fragile and vulnerable, even though it is insidiously persistent.

What Walad-Abâ-hu wants us to understand is that, within the Muslim context, as in other contexts throughout the world, not least of all because of the very way the modern state is configured, there's an almost irresistible drift toward what he calls 'political secularism'. It has to do with the emergence of the citizen and of the modern nation state as factors. Extremism notwithstanding, we are gradually seeing something emerge at the grassroots that holds promise not only for individual states but for our whole global civilization as well. In a word, it is that ordinary folk want to coexist, make a little money, send their kids to college, become neighbors whose kids play together and who, every now and then, enjoy inviting each other over for a barbecue. And, with his incurable optimism as a historian and philosopher, Walad-Abâ-hu thinks that these voices 'will out'.

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Walad-Abâ-hu takes on the formidable American Jewish (since 1967 committed Zionist) scholar Bernard Lewis. Lewis, with the knee-jerk support of Thomas Friedman and other high profile western publicists who are putatively 'Middle East specialists', has emerged as the western media's darling on things Islamic. What Walad-Abâ-hu has shown is that Lewis hasn't done his homework for a long time but has rather coasted on his reputation as a prominent 'Orientalist'. Lewis's main thesis is that Islam integrates the political and the religious and thereby sanctifies the use of violence in the prosecution of its religious agenda. This is utterly facetious and even mendacious. (Always use big words when the little ones might wind you up in court!)

Lewis aside (and the further aside these days the better), Walad-Abâ-hu is consistent with other serious Muslim scholars in noting that government in the period of the classic Muslim empire was pragmatic. A ruler did what worked. Furthermore, the religious establishment called him to account particularly when the interests of the populace were at stake. As a ruler he didn't have *carte blanche*. The 'Men of the Pen' had the inside track with the ordinary folk. And experience taught that without a 'flock' amenable to a ruler's government, his power as a 'Man of the Sword' would not hold up for long.

But the vertically integrated state of the classical period eventually yielded to the modern state that presumed the participation of the 'citizen' and the 'secularization' of the social and political environment. With the earlier degradation of the Muslim religious institution, in the modern period checks-and-balances on power were transferred to internal factors within any given state. That is, citizens had to come up with new institutions of advocacy summed up in what we're now calling 'civil society' whose

format is curiously reminiscent of the old Muslim religious institution. Were it not for the interference of western forces — that have consistently and quite artificially propped up autocracies and dictatorships — we would long ago have witnessed a fruitful change in the political dynamics of the Middle East and other heretofore ‘Muslim’ states. Of this I am convinced. Muslim realists like Walad-Abâ-hu, however, are more sanguine: It’s *their* problem; *they’ll* deal with it.

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We are in a day when religious extremisms are striving to occupy center stage and capture or at least cause extreme discomfort for existing political entities. They seem to have become the anarchists of our day primarily because — apart from their flamboyant, assertive and repressive religious baggage — they don’t seem to have any substantive political agenda of their own. This applies East and West, North and South, within Islam and within societies conditioned by Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and the other religions. Some expressions are more violent than others, but all seem to reserve the right to what an old Palestinian friend, Nabîl Sha‘ath, once characterized as ‘mental violence’ — that posture of the mind that makes overt violence not only feasible but desirable. Religious anarchism in our global age is a serious corruption and a threat. In the end it will wind up on history’s compost heap, but in the meantime people can get badly hurt.

What I appreciated in Walad-Abâ-hu’s scholarly article (apart from his deftly critique of Bernard Lewis) is that he didn’t let any of this confuse his discussion. He kept his focus upon fundamental issues, both Islamic and global. And I do think he’s right. The groundswell ... the momentum ... is toward a resolution that’s ‘user friendly’ for the ordinary citizen. It may take time to realize, but it’s coming. You who see this as a desirable goal ought not loose heart. This world ... this *saeculum* ... is still worth the battle.

‘*In saecula saeculorum!*’ Indeed!

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.