

## DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Whither the Spiritual? Rethinking Secularism's Legacy in post-Ottoman Art

# 'THEORIZING THE SPIRITUAL-SECULAR BINARY IN MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART OF- AND BY ARTISTS FROM- THE SWANA REGION'

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**Abstract** | The present article examines critically the spiritual-secular binary in modern and contemporary art from the SWANA region and by artists with heritage from that region who live(ed) elsewhere. Given this binary's origin in the European Enlightenment's view of religion and its epistemic canonization through post-Enlightenment ideas on art and culture in the colonial era, this examination is made from within the framework of current decolonizing art historical discourses and their postcolonial background. The reflection begins with a key moment of global modernism as it is underpinned by the colonial diffusion of secularism. It then proceeds to expound the cultural shifts in postmodernism and contemporaneity as marked by a renewed interest in spirituality across the region. This inspection allows for the identification and disentanglement of a knot of epistemic problems, theoretical misconceptions, and untenable contradictions in the decolonizing art historical literature. In particular, it uncovers the slip toward an anti-colonial ideology that attempts to rewrite history at the risk of minimizing foundational historical facts. Central to the entire problematic is the misconstrued concept of modernity linked, in an exclusive and reductive manner, to hegemonic Euro-American modernist thought and its brand of secularism. Offering a fresh look at the momentous cultural-artistic events of the modern and contemporary period and a much needed re-definition of the chief concepts at stake in them, this essay opens up new directions of research.

**Keywords** | Global modernism ; modern and contemporary art of the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia ; spirituality in art ; modernity ; coloniality and decoloniality.

**Résumé** | Le présent article examine de manière critique le binôme spirituel-profane dans l'art moderne et contemporain de la région du Moyen-Orient, de l'Afrique du Nord et de l'Asie du Sud-Ouest, et par des artistes issus de cette région mais qui ont principalement exercé ailleurs. Cet examen est effectué dans le cadre de la décolonisation actuelle de l'histoire de l'art et de son arrière-plan postcolonial, compte tenu de l'origine de ce binôme dans la vision de la religion de l'Europe des Lumières et de sa canonisation épistémique à travers les idées post-Lumières sur l'art et la culture à l'époque coloniale. La réflexion est initiée à partir du moment tournant du modernisme global sous-tendu par la diffusion coloniale de la laïcité. L'article s'efforce ensuite à exposer les mutations culturelles du postmodernisme et de la contemporanéité marquées par un regain d'intérêt pour la spiritualité. Cette inspection permet d'identifier et de démêler un nœud de problèmes épistémiques, d'idées théoriques erronées et de contradictions insoutenables dans l'histoire décolonial de l'art. En particulier, il révèle un glissement vers une idéologie anticoloniale tentant de réécrire l'histoire et de minimiser l'importance des faits historiques fondateurs. Au centre de cette problématique se trouve le concept méconnu de modernité lié, de manière exclusive et réductrice, à la pensée moderniste hégémonique euro-américaine et à sa conception de la laïcité. Offrant un regard neuf sur les événements culturels et artistiques marquants de la période concernée et une redéfinition bien nécessaire des principaux concepts qui y sont en jeu, cet essai ouvre de nouvelles directions de recherche sur le matériau discuté.

**Mots clés** | Modernisme global – Art contemporain – Art moderne au Moyen-Orient, en Afrique du Nord et en Asie du Sud – Spiritualité dans l'art – Islam – Modernité – Laïcité – Colonialisme et dé-colonialisme – Pensée des lumières.

## Preliminaries and Premises

This essay's title conveys some preliminary clarifications in relation to the present dossier on "rethinking secularism's heritage in post-Ottoman art."<sup>1</sup> First, I have chosen to expand the dossier's intended focus on the spatio-temporal category of post-Ottoman art to consider as well the geographic boundaries provided by the terms SWANA (South West Asia and North Africa). The reason for this shift is that my discussion concerns issues shared by all these lands, which saw the establishment of powerful Islamic kingdoms before the nineteenth and early twentieth century political dislocations.

Second, I have chosen to expand the conversation to include two types of artistic agency, that of "Art of" and "Artists from" even if they reside(d) elsewhere. Indeed, for the period from modernism onward, marked as it was by processes of colonialism and decolonization, postcolonialism and globalization, not to mention the migrations and displacements that these processes have occasioned, it is important to distinguish the agency located in that region from its kin counterparts located outside of it. This distinction points to significant differences in creative production in general, and in the attitude to spirituality and secularity in art making in particular, often depending on the practitioners' terrain of operation within or outside the SWANA geo-cultural space.

Third, even as I focus my remarks on an expanded region conjoined by Islamic histories, my title deliberately does not include the term "Islamic." Within the period concerned, I consider that both the role of Islam in these spaces' artistic cultures and the positioning toward faith by artists culturally connected to these spaces have changed in relation to the pre-colonial past. Although references to the Muslim creed remain central in twentieth and twenty-first century material, as we shall see, they also take on novel forms that do not necessarily fit the category of faith-based expressions. Furthermore, non-Muslim and non-declared Muslim artists equally represent the SWANA aesthetic sphere in what has become the modern form of art circuit invented by the West, namely the art market.

As to this essay's content, it re-argues the recently contested view about the shaping effect of the religious-secular binary in the said areas' art as the product of the cultural shifts brought forth by colonialism, in particular, in the founding moment of modernism.<sup>2</sup> In the nineteenth century, the introduction of the Western brand of secularism to the colonized's lives transformed (yet did not eradicate) the local traditional modes of plastic expression that had been dominated by

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1- I am most grateful to Kirsten Scheid and Hannah Feldman for their invitation to participate in this timely dossier and for their very helpful comments, insights and suggestions.

2- The semantic nuances of the diversified vocabulary referring to the spiritual at large such as religion, belief, faith, and the sacred will appear within the discussions' context.

Islamic aesthetics, leading over time to an extraordinary diversification of the artists' approach to religion in their practice. This dossier's diverse contributions give us a glimpse at this evolution that, today, manifests itself in radically new attitudes to religion.<sup>3</sup> This re-arguing endeavor includes addressing a knot of issues regarding both the problematization and interpretation of the history of non-Western modernity in the broad field of studies on Islamic art past and present. Although these studies have recently produced a subfield dedicated to the modern and contemporary period, this knot of issues affects scholarship in both fields. While unravelling this epistemic state of affairs, I will propose an alternative view of the artistic material, a sample of which is presented in the text's final part.

### **The Framework: Postcolonial Legacy and Contemporary Decolonization of World Art History**

Re-thinking spirituality in the SWANA region requires engaging in the current decolonization of the hegemonic Western parameters of cultural knowledge.<sup>4</sup> This is all the more pressing given that a particular decolonizing trend in Islamic art history has had problematic epistemic implications for the examination of modern and contemporary material, which cannot be severed or treated totally separately from the pre-colonial tradition.<sup>5</sup> Located in the West and dominating this scholarly field, this trend separates religion from culture and applies the secular-religious binary to interpret the arts in Islam before colonialism.<sup>6</sup> Even though this binary is a typical product of post-Enlightenment thought, scholars using this method nevertheless see themselves as decolonizers of Islamic art history as they perceive it to be essentializing—one of the Orientalist sins—the

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3- See Hamida Novakovitch's excellent unpublished thesis for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology and Sociology, School of Social and Cultural Studies, *The Creative Ummah, Exploring Identity and Religion through Contemporary Islamic Art*. It was presented in 2010 at the University of Western Australia. Related unpublished academic work by this scholar can be found in [https://api.research-repository.uwa.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/22070887/THESIS\\_MASTER\\_BY\\_RESEARCH\\_NOVAKOVICH\\_Hamida\\_2017\\_Part\\_1.pdf](https://api.research-repository.uwa.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/22070887/THESIS_MASTER_BY_RESEARCH_NOVAKOVICH_Hamida_2017_Part_1.pdf)

4- A very informative special number of the journal *Art History* gathers the latest ideas about decolonizing art history in the form of a questionnaire submitted to scholars: Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price (eds.), "Decolonizing Art History", *Art History*, February 2020, 1-66. <https://forarthistory.org.uk/latest-news/decolonizing-art-history/>.

5- While it is subject to debate, the modern category corresponds to a periodic that begins in the late nineteenth century; the contemporary to that which begins after, in, according to various views, either 1968, 1989, or 2001.

6- For a critique of the academic secularist mainstream, see Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam, the Importance of Being Islamic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), and the following article in which I provide examples of this thinking mode, "The Religious Plot in Museums or the Lack Thereof: The Case of Islamic Art Display," *Religions* 13, 281 (2022): 1-33 (open access), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040281>.

very idea of an all-embracing spiritual drive in pre-colonial Muslim societies.<sup>7</sup> The object of an intensifying disagreement, this mainstream secularist view bears equally on the complicated hermeneutics of the momentous colonialist-colonized cultural encounter associated with modernism's birth outside the West. This situation has had three major consequences in the scholarship.

The first consequence concerns the decolonial endeavor. In mainstream Islamic art history, the assumption that a secular space existed in precolonial Muslim cultures forms a supporting background to a questionable decolonializing current re-problematizing the double-edged question of secularism and modernism in the SWANA artworld. The premise of this re-problematization is that the external cultural forces of colonialism played only a small role in the modernist turn in this artworld, which is then seen as the result not so much of the colonial intrusion and influence as of an internal developmental dynamic toward a modernity conceptualized in non-Western terms. To be noted, these terms remain unclear. For example, in the dossier "Decolonizing Art History," a scholar of Modern "Arab" art, Nada Shabout, thus replies to the question about the difference between the postcolonial and the contemporary decolonial:

The main difference, however, is that the decolonial calls for abandoning Europe as the point of reference, and hence in essence is a calling to decolonize the postcolonial... It seems that art history starts by accepting modernism as a European event and accomplishment and then extends back and forth in history with an understanding of European primacy... There will be no denying the colonial reference, but it should not be allowed to continue as the main and central point of reference... Modernism is not a European condition... All spaces must start with moving away from Europe as the center and the reference... Mostly they [cultural practitioners and curators] are still struggling with how to shed the reference of Europe while operating within a context of art history that has not yet been decolonized.<sup>8</sup>

Shabout's radical project to rewrite the history of Arab/global modernism by displacing Europe from the picture amounts to an anti-West ideological

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7- Just to be precise, post-Enlightenment thought is the product of the thinking and elaboration of scientific progress that took place in the nineteenth-century after the advent of events and ideas during the Enlightenment. Post-Enlightenment thought formed the basis of the views on civilization propagated through colonialism and is also the historical foundation of academic practices in their current disciplinary configurations.

8- Nada Shabout, "Decolonizing Art History," p. 53. See her book, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

revisionism rather than a productive decolonial endeavor.<sup>9</sup> For one cannot change history, as painful as it may be, in particular the fact that global modernism is built upon the transformational advent of secularism brought about by Europe. But to avoid any confusion, recalling what secularism consists of is necessary prior to proceeding with the argument.

Secularism is one of the pillars of the specific modernity that caused the formation of global modernism under the force of both colonialism and the interested reception of certain Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment ideas in some parts of the world.<sup>10</sup> Secularism, namely secularity erected as system, is more exactly the social-philosophical organizational principle that had been incubating in Europe since the Renaissance and that then became instituted following the Enlightenment's separation of church and state. This separation led to the creation of a secular public space no longer managed by clerical institutions and produced decisive shifts in the mode of being, among them the "privatization" of religious belief and the removal of religion as the governing potency of both society and the individual.<sup>11</sup> However, by no means did the secularist philosophical-organizational shift signify the disappearance of spirituality. Instead of the collective habituality it constituted in the pre-Enlightenment context, the spiritual became an intimate affair and, thereby the subject of inner questioning, letting the self's subjectivity free to question and find answers. The empowerment of subjectivity and the self indeed was another pivotal element of secularism.

In the European aesthetic sphere, secularization progressively changed the main function of art that, from having previously served the representation of religion and of the Janus political-clerical body, now turned into the expressive instrument of subjectivity, naturally causing the infinite expansion of artistic subject matter no longer focused on Christian and Christianity-related topics. In non-Western global modernism, the influence of European secularism manifested itself in the foregrounding of the colonized or formerly colonizeds' subjectivities

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9- There is no space in this essay for engaging further in the conversation on decolonizing art history; therefore, I will only point out that this enterprise should not amount to rejecting altogether the Euro-American modalities of practice for the inquiry on global art. Instead, to me, an efficient decolonizing method should aim at two goals: correcting these modalities so as to eliminate the inadequate and unacceptable Eurocentric patterns in them, and broadening the thus "purified" analytical framework with new concepts able to describe sensibly the non-hierarchical and non-othering transregional mosaic of worldly cultures. Decolonizing also should not allow affect and personal inclination to interfere in the critical process, as they often entail the risk of losing sight of the facts and lapsing into ideology or wishful thinking.

10- For example, the political paradigm of the constitution is an example of these ideas that found some echo and application in the Ottoman empire, marked by the two historical episodes of the First and Second Constitution.

11- See the whole of Michel Foucault's work, as well as the singular commentaries of Holland, Nancy J., "Truth as Force": Michel Foucault on Religion, State Power, and the Law," *Journal of Law and Religion* 18, no. 1 (2002): 79–97. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1051495>, and Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Religion* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000).

in multiple directions: the expression of the colonial trauma and anxieties generated by political decolonization; the preoccupation with purely aesthetic matters centered on the dialectic of abstraction-figuration; the assertion of identity and national construct; and, finally, the question of spirituality versus secularity.

To return to Shabout's vision of Arab and *a fortiori* SWANA modernism free of Western ties, her argument has the support of the secularist interpretation of historical Islamic culture in the sense that the latter provides this vision with some kind of logic without which it simply collapses.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the secular condition necessary to global modernism's formation would have had to have been already present locally and ready to flourish, somehow naturally, as a parallel phenomenon to European secularism. Otherwise, without this presumed secularity existing at some level within SWANA culture, how could these non-Western modernisms have come about as autonomous events? For in factual reality, prior to the spread of the European secularist ideas, no historical event shows that the region had its own project of secularizing society or engaged in a consequential deconstruction of the religious that would have yielded this process. What history shows us is that, until the late nineteenth century, in the empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, Qajars and Mughals, faith, politics and culture were indissociable. In the face of such historical evidence and considering the questionability of the secularist trend of Islamic art history, the supposedly decolonizing discourse by Shabout and her peers professing similar ideations is untenable.

The second consequence of the academic secularist trend is that it has somehow stigmatized religion and spirituality at large, making both *sujets taboo* in contemporary practice and discourse alike.<sup>13</sup> This shunning "of religion as an ontological category," to use Nasser Rabbat's words, rests upon the Enlightenment epistemology of the sacred; and yet, that same epistemology systematically provokes Orientalist suspicion when scholars dare ascribe this concept its validity and due value in non-Western cultures.<sup>14</sup> Symptomatic of this unsettling epistemic paradox with profound Eurocentric roots and postcolonial

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12- A sample of studies on non-Western modernism includes, alongside Shabout's aforementioned works: Silvia Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité* (Geneve: Editions Slatkine, 1996) and "Reexploring Islamic Art: Modern and Contemporary Creation in the Arab World and its Relation to the Artistic Past," *Res* 43, 2003, 163-174; Ali Wijdan Wijdan, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997); "Other Modernities', Art, Visual Culture and Patrimony Outside the West," Silvia Naef, Irene Maffi and Wendy Shaw (eds.), *Artl@s Bulletin*, Vol. 9, 1 (2020); and Finbarr Barry Flood, "From the Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art," In *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions*, Elizabeth Mansfield (ed.), (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 31-53.

13- I tackle this issue in "The Religious Plot in Museums or the Lack Thereof".

14- Nasser Rabbat, "What is Islamic Architecture Anyway?" online *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 6 June 2012, p. 4, [https://www.academia.edu/22544503/What\\_Is\\_Islamic\\_Architecture\\_Anyway](https://www.academia.edu/22544503/What_Is_Islamic_Architecture_Anyway). [[TK: Please confirm AU's footnote style is compatible with journal style guidelines]].

accents is the discomfort expressed by Alistair Hicks who, confronted with significant manifestations of spirituality in African and Middle East contemporary art, writes in his monograph:

The concept underpinning *The Global Art Compass* — that we try to activate our bearings to relate to ‘the other’ — opens me up to the accusation of being a ‘a latent Orientalist’: Said’s texts inform me that, as the offspring of imperialists, I cannot help but see Africa and the Middle East as sensual, *spiritual* (my emphasis) and ‘other’... I believe there has been no adequate development of the critique articulated in Said’s *Orientalism* (1978).<sup>15</sup>

At last, the third consequence of the secularist dominance by the scholarship in question concerns the emphatic privileging of the contextual socio-political reading of the material at the expense of the aesthetic-critical inquiry. Experts in the modern and contemporary period have only accentuated this epistemic pattern as they are even more immersed in the heavily socio-political postcolonial and neo-postcolonial critique.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the religious question in the modernist context has been only superficially addressed, whereas the secularist epistemology again appears at odds with the evidence of SWANA art that itself consistently refers to sacred themes, as shown in this dossier’s case studies. How then to account for this phenomenon? Is it just a new thing or does it prove that religion and culture have always fused in this vast part of the world despite the contacts with Europe, the colonial cultural violence and the global spread of secular modernity that ensued? Answers to this question depend on a focused investigation into the ontology of global modernism, therefore it is time to reconsider what modernity in this period had consisted of.

### **What Exactly Do We Mean when We Talk about Modernity?**

Reading the literature on SWANA, or South Asian art for that matter, it strikes me that the meaning of the terms “modernist”, “modern” and “modernity” are, themselves, taken for granted and loosely used, if not misused. Although the conceptual distinction between these terms has great importance for building a solid hermeneutics of art production, the scholarship employs them interchangeably, even in decolonizing texts. For example, Iftikhar Dadi introduces his book on South Asian modernism thus: “Modern artistic practice unceasingly seeks adequate discursive and aesthetic ground but never quite secures it; this crisis-ridden quest characterizes an important facet of its modernism and

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15- Alistair Hicks, *Global Art Compass*, 55.

16- I differentiate between “neo-postcolonial” and decolonizing critique. In my view, neo-postcolonial discourse, just touched upon, is more ideological than efficiently decolonizing. If, in its original context postcolonial criticism made much sense, the test of time has revealed its flaws and excesses. However, part of the scholarly literature does not heed these flaws and excesses, instead feeding on the postcoloniality of the seventies. One may judge of that oneself by consulting the aforementioned special number of *Art History*, “Decolonizing *Art History*,” in which the great variety of thought on this thorny subject is nicely exposed.



contributes to its ongoing development.”<sup>17</sup> To dissipate the ambiguity generated by this terminological interchangeability, I recall that modernism designates the historical intellectual-artistic movement that arose in Europe in the late nineteenth century and spread globally under the double dynamic of European imperialism and the process of decolonization against it, cross-fertilizing with the colonized cultures. This modernist movement lasted until the seventies and eighties, marking the subsequent era of postmodernism, which itself constitutes a fluid and still debatable notion. On the other hand, modernity generically designates the transformational state of newness in relation to a tradition become obsolete or relegated in a bygone past. Therefore, while modernity is the condition of modernism and modernism is a non-reproducible historical and localized moment of modernity, the modern itself is not tethered to any particular history or location. A fluid, infinitely metamorphic and fundamentally open concept, modernity can emerge or disappear anywhere at any time, and, *a fortiori*, can convey an infinite range of meanings depending on the milieu in which it arises. By inference, although cultural studies routinely employs modernity in the Western secularist sense as stemming from the Western art history that I have previously evoked, by no means does the West have the monopoly on its meaning.<sup>18</sup>

In this light, modernity associated with the secular, as it is presumed in the universal canonization of art history's chronology beginning with “the early modern” in the Renaissance, constitutes only a European construct localized in a certain spatio-temporality. The problem is that the hegemonistic imposition of this construct has led to the neglect of other potential and suspected precolonial global modernities. Yet, if eighteenth century Europe had posited the secularization of society as the path to modernity, paving the way to what I call *modernist modernity*, other cultures might well have conceived of modernity in terms that were perfectly ready to accommodate the sacred, whether as a feature of tradition uncontested, and/or individually cultivated and valued. We actually have the proof of modernity's conceptual openness just before our eyes, so to speak, with the return of spirituality and religion *en force* in global art today. This point deserves elaboration.

Although the point bears further research, I contend that global-, secularist-*modernist modernity* did not suppress the sacred but intertwined it even while foregrounding secular and religiously indetermined metaphysical

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17- Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 2.

18- See the latest outcome of the literature on SWANA modernism, Sarah Neel-Smith, *Metrics of Modernity, Art and Development in Post-War Turkey* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022). A very good and serious book in other respects, the title itself is revealing of this entrenched Western definition of modernity in art history. See also, Okwui Enwezor, Nancy Condee and Terry Smith, eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture, Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 2009.

preoccupations.<sup>19</sup> In other words, in *modernist modernity*, the sacred became the instrument of choice to articulate these preoccupations as they reflected the period's historical challenges. In the SWANA region, it served in particular as an instrument of resistance to colonialism. Although Iftikhar Dadi writes in 2010, "it may be noted that academic work on *modern* Islamic art is lacking" (emphasis is his), this dossier casts light on this *religious* modern pattern with case studies examining the articulation of faith and nationalism, such as the Sudanese artistic practice analyzed in Noah Salomon's essay.<sup>20</sup> By contrast to this approach to the sacred, *contemporary modernity*, to give it a proper name, re-positions the sacred as an autonomous object of concern in the subject and society's life *per se*, in short as a question.<sup>21</sup> We may say that, in re-foregrounding religion in this way, *contemporary modernity* reintegrates religion fully in the modern, and that religion constitutes a major "modern preoccupation," a phenomenon of society re-inscribed in societal habits. There is no lack of social-political and aesthetic events attesting to this conception of a modern that is inclusive of faith today, but global art speaks for itself. Together with their counterparts hailing from the SWANA region, well-known Western artists like the Cuban-American Andres Serrano, the Italian Michelangelo Pistoletto and the American Ryan Mendoza evoke, question or frankly stage the religious in their practice. Thus, depictions of the Kaaba and Arabic calligraphic artworks infallibly recalling the sacred gesture of copying the Qur'an coexist with variegated imageries of Tantra, Christ, the Golden Calf and other faith-based manifestations.<sup>22</sup>

This terminological clarification about the modern and modernity as open concepts allows us to proceed further with debunking both the assertion about modernism's not being a European condition, and the myth that modernism can be detached from Euro-American culture. Thus, when Shabout says, "I do know

19- Intuiting great differences in the attitude to faith in modernism and contemporaneity forces us to confront the question of the exact nature of the spiritual expression in the modernist era as it was shaped by secularism both in the West and outside it. In Europe itself, in the very beginning of modernism, some artists like Maurice Denis and Paul Gauguin were still pictorializing their own spiritual concerns in explicit Christian imageries in the old fashioned mode (Denis' s *The Offertory at Calvary* and Gauguin's Christ-like self-portrait). Soon enough, however, religious expression turned more implicitly symbolic like in Suprematism (Kasimir Malevitch's *Black Square*, for example) and yielded to forms conveying a religiously indetermined spirituality on the order of the metaphysical quest or the spiritual metaphor. Therefore, while Marc Chagall can undoubtedly be called a modernist Jewish artist, for instance, applying the category of Jewish art to Marc Rothko and Barnett Newman's paintings remains highly problematic. Similarly, the spiritual in art from Kandinsky to Mondrian and far beyond extends a metaphysics beyond faith and belief.

20- Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 2. Note again the problematic ambiguity of the term "modern" in Dadi's sentence that does not indicate whether he talks about what I am calling the "modern modernist" or the "contemporary modern," or both.

21- I situate the initial phase of this phenomenon of the repositioning of religion in the Euro-American societies in postmodernism with, for example, Andy Warhol's *Last Supper* (1986). The process incrementally intensified in the course of the twenty-first century.

22- As an example, see the catalogue of the exhibition held at the Kapil Jariwala Gallery in New York, *Tantra and Tantric Resonance in Modern Art*, September, 2015. [https://issuu.com/kapiljariwalagallery/docs/parcours\\_des\\_mondes\\_catalogue\\_2015\\_5790b4579ce038](https://issuu.com/kapiljariwalagallery/docs/parcours_des_mondes_catalogue_2015_5790b4579ce038).

that I would be happy to be able to abandon having to assert Arab modernity and focus instead on writing its history," she does not differentiate between the different "modernities" that this concept of Arab modernity may involve.<sup>23</sup> But if we do differentiate these modernities, an Arab history of the modern as distinct from an Arab history of modernism should be clear. Although it indeed has yet to be written, from the birth of Islam onward, the Arab and Muslim world at large has had its own history of intellectual-aesthetic breakthroughs that no doubt constitute events of modernity again understood as advancing newness in relation to static tradition. For example, considering their reconceptualization of the figure and pictorial space, cannot the extraordinary *Ilkhanid* and post-*Ilkhanid* book painting in Iraq and Iran be considered a modern aesthetic moment? Can not the same question be asked about the intellectual blossoming in tenth-century Baghdad? Equally, as I argue in a recent article, in the Levant, the Umayyads generated artistic changes genuinely describable in terms of "aesthetic revolution" or "avant-garde" that fit the generic modernity category and could be called "Umayyad modernity" as distinct from "the modernist modernity" and any other identified and localized modernity.<sup>24</sup>

However, to continue with Shabout's concerns, we might say that among the diverse Arab historical "modernities" within this long history, the one that emerged in the context of aesthetic modernism cannot be similarly asserted as an intracultural Islamic phenomenon. If an Arab modernist modernity possesses a unique identity shaped by both the Arab-Islamic heritage and this history of past modernities beginning with the Umayyad vanguard artistic production, then, like many of its South Asian or African counterparts, Arab modernism is the hybrid product of transcultural colonial phenomenon. It is the understanding of this transcultural fact that still remains to be understood, based on the acknowledgment that modernism arose in a newly globalized world profoundly transformed by technology and crossed by a tide of powerful socio-intellectual forces, all indisputably elaborated in Europe but certainly responded to in the colonies.<sup>25</sup> Recalling the main among these forces will make the point clear. Inaugurated by the industrial revolution, the rapidly evolving technological era of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century precipitated the global development of materialism and capitalism alongside colonialist expansionist policy. In the wake of such expansions, Marxism awoke and theorized the global political conscious by exposing the traps of class and power relations. Empowered by the potency of more accessible economies for citizens in the age of nation-states, individualism became a social-philosophical motor. Metaphysically derived from the egoism

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23- Shabout, "Decolonizing Art History," p. 53.

24- See Valerie Gonzalez, "Aporia in Umayyad Art or the Degree Zero of the Visual Forms' Meaning in Early Islam," *Journal of Material Cultures in the Muslim World*, 1(1-2), 2021, 6-33. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/26666286-12340002>.

25- This fact by no means implies a hierarchy of value that would place Western modernism above non-Western ones. As postcolonial and decolonial thought has already well established, the imperialist Eurocentric system of aesthetic values is a fallacy that no longer holds relevance.

of the Cartesian philosophy of being, and later self-consciously reinforced by the psychoanalytic revelation of the unconscious, the turn to the primacy of the self then gave the subject's subjectivities free rein to express themselves in the creative domain. Finally, the complex European history of religious contestation, begun in the eighteenth-century and whose most extreme form is French *laïcité*, was accompanied by the empowerment of reason and rationalism.

To elucidate this transculturalism at the source of global modernism, the method is not to deny or minimize Western forces' role in shaping the dynamics of "modernist modernity" as it played out in the former colonies, but to confront critically its effects on the colonized or formerly colonized's own socio-symbolic order and modalities of art practice. Not, of course, to say that these effects resulted from the colonized or formerly colonized's passive attitude; on the contrary, they formed the creative and reactive response to cultural coloniality, to its violence but also to the innovations it brought forth. In this complex and multidirectional process, the response to the particular place attributed to the sacred by secularism plays a central part. For in the SWANA region, secularism created a challenging situation for the colonized or formerly colonized who had a long-established relation to religion, now unprecedentedly put to the test.

### **The Sacred in Art by Artists of the SWANA Region or Connected to It, from Modernism to Today: Research Directions**

To begin, a *mise au point* is necessary. As we know, non-Western modernist artists shared the Western methods, media and techniques of art making that were taught in the colonies. These included canvas easel painting, oil painting, illusionism in figurative representation and the rise of abstraction against it. Even the idiom of abstraction that the SWANA modernist artists implemented in this period does not emulate but draws from—is inspired or informed by—Euro-American aesthetic developments. About the latter point, it is worth underscoring that this idiom indeed did not simply revive or effect a return to the heritage of Muslim aniconic and geometric designs because abstraction was *au goût du jour*. The encounter with Western abstract aesthetics produced a novel modernist abstract art by the artists in this part of the world that differs sensibly from the local artistic heritage, although the divergences as well as the convergences between the two trends remain to be identified and explained.<sup>26</sup> However, this non-Western modernist art history that depends on Western art history by no means validates Wendy M.K. Shaw's pinpointing the Christianness of the ideas of visuality that she asserts undergird imperialist Western aesthetics

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26- This modernist meeting of these two conceptions of non-representational art has yet to be studied with an apt critical methodology. As a first step, however, see Tromp, "From Classroom to Gallery Floor," this issue. See also, Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2012) for a stimulating alternative account, although one may agree with its premises, namely the idea of an Islamic genealogy of non-objective Western art. Just to tease with an interesting possibility of exploration, in my view it is the later postmodernist abstract movements of conceptual art and Minimalism that have remarkable affinities with Islamic aniconic art.

as they became canonical in the nineteenth century. Her unmistakably derogatory and ultra-simplifying remark, “what we call Western art is ‘European Christian art’ by a new name,” basically disregards history.<sup>27</sup> Even if we acknowledge that the ‘tableau on the wall’ adopted in the colonized world was originally created to represent Christian iconography and employed to proselytize Christianity globally at the dawn of European colonization in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, by the nineteenth century this model of the tableau had lost its iconological power as the medium of Christian imagery. Thanks to the progression of secularism, it had become a standard medium of painting, namely an open, neutral site of plastic expression inherently free of any symbolism, which artists could use and manipulate as desired, to represent a Napoleonic death squad firing at a Spanish resistant (Francisco Goya) or a neo-pagan *Dejeuner sur l’herbe* (Edouard Manet), or, indeed, to evoke the traditional icon on the wall’s corner (Kasimir Malevitch).<sup>28</sup> In fact, the representation of the Christian creed was no longer a significant component of the imperialist aesthetics globally diffused in the nineteenth century. This aesthetic promoted a general conception of art based on the metaphysics of representation as a modality of plastic expression, regardless of the type of iconography, the period’s style and aesthetics, or the self-based system of artistic agency (as opposed to socially normed collective agency of traditional society). Importantly, this globalized aesthetics reflected the post-Enlightenment institutionalized spatio-aesthetic separation of the religious and the secular to which we must turn now.

The modernist secularization of the SWANA region’s visual aesthetics occasioned profound and irreversible shifts in relation to the local traditional modalities of art making. At the center of these transformations are the unprecedented empowerment of this agency of the self or *le moi* in the psychoanalytical sense, and the new mode of artistic validation relying on what is called “the art market.” No longer regulated by traditional local aesthetic norms, art

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27- Wendy M.K. Shaw, *What Is Islamic Art? Between Religion and Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 10; see my review of this book in *Al-Masāq*, January 2020, DOI: 10.1080/09503110.2020.1712811. A flavor of the anti-Christian discourses Shaw treats as decolonial arguments throughout her book appears on the introduction’s first page in which she tells personal stories to suggest her denunciation of Western cultural imperialism. One story unfolds thusly (summarized with quotations): Shaw and her daughter are strolling through a museum’s galleries. Shaw “happily described the serenity of the Buddha and Shiva Nataraja’s dance of creation and destruction” to her daughter, and then, thinking that the latter might “find the medieval European section boring... ushered her through.” But the daughter stopped, and questioned her mother about “naked men with their arms out”, provoking Shaw to react: “I laughed; the sheer impossibility of thinking that (original emphasis). Sweetheart, that’s not such a good story for children,’ I said. Not wanting her to conclude that so many people we know, followers of the largest religion in the world, believe the rather peculiar story of a violent God killing his own son, I kept silent”. 1. Such Christaophobic description parallels the Islamophobic descriptions of a violent Prophet Muhammad and an intrinsically violent Islam that we may hear today in the Western public media and popular discourse.

28- This neutrality of the canvas is similar to the neutrality of the museum that I amply discuss in “The Religious Plot or the Lack of Thereoff”, 3-11. Both are neutral for the same reason that they can be the recipient of any type of content, religious or secular.

making now followed a normativity emanating from the fundamentally secular, pluridisciplinary body of museum curators, gallerists and private collectors.<sup>29</sup> The organization of this art market itself, which has a history on its own, basically rested upon a channel of institutions comprising the private studio, the *salon*, the gallery, the museum and other public art spaces. What the intervention of the artist-ego and the market have entailed over time for artists with a heritage from the SWANA region is an unprecedented and ever-increasing plurality of aesthetic possibilities for dealing with faith, in tune with the infinite plurality of subjectivities that an individual agency authorizes. Alongside multiple spiritual expressions by declared believers — and particularly by the global community of Muslim artists that Hamida Novakovitch aptly calls “the creative Ummah”— these possibilities include quasi-secular poetizations (see below) and more or less irreverent presentations of the sacred. The latter were unauthorized or unthinkable in the traditional frameworks of art display and circulation, and still are so in countries that restrict the freedom of subjectivity and hold a strict view of religion like Saudi Arabia, Iran or Pakistan.<sup>30</sup>

As a conclusion to this essay, I will mention two among these variegated approaches to the sacred that seem to me particularly powerful but that have not received the attention they deserve. The first approach is a religious contestation that ranges from subtle, politically resonant challenges to spirituality, to the desacralization of the faith, and even to the point of outright blasphemy. This approach inscribes itself in the broad context of a global contemporary current of thought-provoking religious art perceived as sacrilegious in relation to conventional religious ethics: take Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* or Sandow Birk’s *American Qur’an*. Regarding SWANA-related creation, Muslim feminist art occupies a remarkable position in this particular current. For example, the British artist Sara Mapple and Zoulikha Bouabdellah, Russian-born of Algerian descent living in Casablanca, frankly engage in religious transgression to assert their view on gender issues in Islam with daring imageries such as self-portraits with hijab and exposed breasts or carrying a piglet and a prayer carpet covered with stiletto shoes.

The second approach entails commentary on religion without necessarily involving the artist’s intimate relation to belief. For example, in both his installations and his choice of iconographic references, the French-Algerian creator Kader Attia distills his thinking on Islam with the detachment of the proverbial anthropologist or social-cultural critic. Spiritual affect circumvents his religious representations, be they veiled Muslim women or the Kaaba. In this case, we may talk about a

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29- See my argument about the gallery and the museum as neutral, not secular, exhibitory spaces, in “The Religious Plot or the Lack of Thereof.”

30- See the aforementioned unpublished thesis, “The Creative Ummah” by this scholar. See also, Rui Oliveira Lopes copes, Giulia Lamoni, Margarida Brito Alves, eds. *Global Trends in Modern and Contemporary Art* (Lisbon: Centro de Investigacao e Estudos em Belas-Artes (CIEBA), 2015).

secularization of the religious theme. Yet, some of Attia's works may fall under the sign of the aforementioned quasi-secular poetizations of these themes, such as his representation of the religious Ibadi city of Ghardaia in Southern Algeria's desert that he presented at the Tate Modern in London few years ago. The three-dimensional cityscape emerges from a mound made of couscous, the grain used to prepare the traditional North African dish that here, spread on a platform, forms fading edges that make the city appear to be slowly disappearing like a sand castle.

All in all, from modernism to contemporaneity, the twists and turns of spirituality in the art of the SWANA region and by artists living in that region or with a connection to it by heritage, affirm that rethinking the religious-secular binary ought to be a constant endeavor.

**ملخص** | تتبحث هذه المقالة بشكل نقدي في الثنائية الروحانية العلمانية في الفن الحديث والمعاصر من منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا ومنطقة جنوب شرق آسيا ومن قبل فنانين لديهم تراث من تلك المنطقة يعيشون في مكان آخر. يتم إجراء هذا الفحص في إطار إنهاء الاستعمار الحالي لتاريخ الفن وخلفيته ما بعد الاستعمار، نظرًا لأصل هذا الثنائي في رؤية أوروبا للتنوير للدين وتقديسه المعرفي من خلال أفكار ما بعد التنوير حول الفن والثقافة في الحقبة الاستعمارية. يبدأ التأمل في اللحظة الأساسية للحدث العالمية ويتعمق فيها، مدعومة بالانتشار الاستعماري للعلمانية. ثم يبدأ في شرح التحولات الثقافية في ما بعد الحدث والمعاصرة التي تميزت باهتمام متجدد بالروحانية. يسمح هذا الفحص بتحديد وفك تشابك عقدة المشاكل المعرفية والمفاهيم النظرية الخاطئة والتناقضات التي لا يمكن الدفاع عنها في الأدب التاريخي الفني لإنهاء الاستعمار. على وجه الخصوص، يكشف عن انزلاق نحو أيديولوجية مناهضة للاستعمار تحاول إعادة كتابة التاريخ وتقليل أهمية الحقائق التاريخية التأسيسية. يكمن جوهر الإشكالية بأكملها في المفهوم الخاطئ للحدث المرتبط، بطريقة حصرية واختزالية، بالفكر الحدائي الأوروبي الأمريكي المهيمن وعلامته التجارية العلمانية. يقدم هذا المقال نظرة جديدة على الأحداث الثقافية-الفنية الهامة في الفترة المعنية وإعادة تعريف المفاهيم الرئيسية التي هي على المحك، والتي تشتد الحاجة إليها، ويفتح هذا المقال اتجاهات جديدة للبحث في المواد التي تمت مناقشتها.

**كلمات مفتاحية** | الحدث العالمية - الفن المعاصر - الفن الحديث في الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا وجنوب آسيا - الروحانيات في الفن - الإسلام - الحدث - العلمانية - الاستعمار ونزع الاستعمار - فكر التنوير.

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See among her books: *Aesthetic Hybridity in Mughal Painting, 1526-1658*, (Ashgate 2015); *Le piège de Salomon, La pensée de l'art dans le Coran* (Albin Michel, 2002), and *Beauty and Islam, Aesthetics of Islamic Art and Architecture* IBTauris, 2001 (translated in Bosnian and Turkish). In 2004, her article "The Comares Hall in the Alhambra and James Turrell's Space that Sees: A comparison of Aesthetic Phenomenology" (*Muqarnas*, 20) won the Eisenstein Prize. Vg13@soas.ace.uk