Non Sola Scriptura

Essays on the Qur'an and Islam
in Honour of William A. Graham

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11 Does Pre-modern Islamic Thought Allow for a Secular Realm?

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At first the search for any possible analog to the Western dichotomy between the sacred and the secular or profane realms in pre-modern Islamic thought seems unpromising and even, if we are to believe some authorities, totally wrong-headed.[1] Bernard Lewis, the doyen of American specialists on the Islamic Middle East, tells us in an introductory essay published in 1984:

> For a traditional Muslim church and state are one and the same. They are not separate or separable institutions, and there is no way of cutting through the tangled web of human activities and allocating certain things to religion, others to politics, some to the state and some to a specifically religious authority. Such familiar pairs of words as lay and ecclesiastical, sacred and profane, spiritual and temporal, and the like, have no equivalents in classical Arabic and other Islamic languages, since the dichotomy which they express, deeply rooted in Christendom, was unknown in Islam until comparatively modern times, when its introduction was the result of external influences.[2]

A work in German, the *Lexikon Religiöser Grundbegriffe*, published in 1987 under the general editorship of an excellent Islamicist, Adel Khoury, puts this case

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1 A much earlier version of this chapter was delivered as a talk at the Harvard Divinity School in the late 1980s, and I revisited the topic for presentation at the 28 September 2018 conference in honour of William Graham's retirement. Three colleagues, Professors Intisar Rabb, Andras Hamori, and Sarah Bowen Savant, offered valuable comments. Long after this chapter was delivered to the editors, I discovered on 16 June 2021 that a recent Harvard PhD, Dr Rushain Abbasi, had written a 2020 dissertation on the religious and the secular. From this he published an essay, "Did Premodern Muslims Distinguish the Religious and Secular? The *Dīn-Dunyā* Binary in Medieval Islamic Thought," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 31/2 (May 2020): 185–225. This recent work may supercede what I have written here. I congratulate Dr Abbasi on his excellent work but cannot at this late stage integrate his findings into my own chapter.
2 Lewis, "Preface," 11, in Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and the Pharaoh* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985).

p 213 – 224