Afsaruddin’s primary purpose is to counter the narrow military conceptualizations of jihad diffused in the literature on Islamic terrorism and in most Islamic legal texts. To do this, she also touches on side-arguments that are worthy of attention. In particular, she compares early Islamic equivalents of jus ad bellum and jus in bello with Islamic and Christian legal and religious doctrines of war. Equally thought-provoking is the parallel made between Islamic fundamentalism and Soviet Communism as revolutionary ideologies. Although similar associations are not new (for example, in the work of the Iranian thinker Ali Shari’ati), they still recur in certain contemporary Islamic discourse, for example in Russia. Despite the book’s analytical richness, however, the growing phenomenon of female terrorists and martyrs is mentioned only briefly among the final questions of the postscript. A more extensive discussion of the interpretations of the role of women in military jihad, in relation both to jihād per se and to Qur’anic pacifism, would have made the book even more relevant in the contemporary debate on political Islam, especially for Western readers.

In conclusion, Afsaruddin’s book is commendable for its rigorous, but at the same time accessible treatment of an impressive body of sources. Not only does it represent a valuable source of alternative, authoritative interpretations of jihad, martyrdom and related topics. It also frames them within broader Islamic doctrinal debates on how single believers and the Islamic community as a whole should relate to non-Muslims. Both as a treasure of punctual quotations or as argumentative background, it provides political scientists and commentators with a solid support to a rigorous (counter) argument to extremist and terrorist stances.

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Hussein Ali Agrama’s riveting ethnography of Egyptian personal-status courts and the Fatwa Council of Al-Azhar makes manifold contributions to our understanding of the changing nature of Islamic authority; the transformation undergone by the shari’a as it is subsumed under the structure of state law; the role of the mufti and the fatwa; and the nature of state power and political protests. However, Agrama’s most significant contribution is to our conceptualizations of secularism. Interweaving findings from his two years of fieldwork on juridical practices in Cairo with analyses of law, legal changes, court judgments, case reasoning and the work of Islamist lawyers, Agrama investigates the nature of secular power in Egypt and beyond. Explaining the relevance of Egypt to broader theorizations of secularism, Agama asserts that the question of whether Egypt is a religious or a secular state can be asked not just of Egypt but of a multitude of other states, including Western
ones ordinarily considered as the epitome of liberal secularity. In alerting us to the similarities between Egypt and Western states, Agrama provokes us to rethink our broader understandings of secularism, irrespective of geographical context.

While acknowledging his intellectual debt to scholars of secularism such as Talal Asad, Agrama rightly asserts that recent writings on the subject have added little to our theoretical grasp of this concept. Instead they have reiterated now-established notions: secularism comes in a variety of flavours dependent on context; its foundations are Protestant; rather than ensuring freedom of belief and practice, it operates through control and constraint; it fails to treat religions neutrally or keep them out of politics. However, the most troubling aspect of these recent studies, Agrama asserts, is that they theorize secularism in a manner consistent with secularism's self-definition. In other words, they collapse secularism's normative categories into the analytic ones used to assess and study it. In so doing, these works partake in secularism's discourses instead of analyzing them while remaining embroiled in secularism's vantage point and framework and the modalities of power they articulate.

Agrama's vital intervention in the terrain of studies on secularism is to theorize secularism in a manner not beholden to its own categories and criteria. He moves away from examining the norms imposed by secularism to investigating how secularism works and how it acts upon our behaviours, attitudes and ways of knowing. By way of answer, Agrama asserts that secularism's power lies not just in the norms it imposes but also in the high-stake questions it continuously provokes and pushes us to ask and answer. Consequently, he argues that secularism should be understood as a problem-space – a space defined by long-standing questions and stakes with mutating and contested answers. The two questions at the heart of secularism are: 1) what is the limit to which religion should impact society? And, 2) where should one draw the line between religion and politics? The stakes are rights and liberties such as freedom of belief, equality and tolerance. Exploring his formulation of secularism as a problem-space, Agrama contends that the power of secularism is sustained through the questioning it creates. This questioning is such that it undermines its own answers as well as the very categories that it establishes. It provokes indeterminacies which contribute to the gap between secularism's ideals and the attitudes associated with them. In sum, Agrama highlights how secularism works through the paradoxes and ambiguities it generates.

Among the book's many strengths is Agrama's deft demonstration of how secular power enables state sovereignty to constantly infringe on our social life in increasingly invasive ways. Moreover, secularism allows the state to maintain a monopoly over politics and to regulate it just as it regulates religion while making it into an object of politics. Defining secularism, Agrama asserts, 'secularism is ... an ongoing, deepening entanglement in the question of religion and politics... This ongoing entanglement is a feature of the expanding regulatory capacities of
the modern state...’ (p. 29). The state’s right to decide questions at the heart of secularism’s problem-space is an expression of its sovereign power, which in turn is vested in the state’s legal authority and juridical structures. In fact, the legal concept of public order props up secularism’s active principle – i.e. the state's authority to decide what is religion/religious and to determine the impact of religion on social life.

Despite the pervasiveness of secular power and state sovereignty, Agrama argues that there exist practices, spaces and movements that evade this power and are indifferent to it. His discussion of these apertures – which he terms asecular – is arguably the most compelling aspect of his project. Sovereignty becomes central to Agrama’s analysis as he contends that state sovereignty sustains secularism while bare sovereignty (that is the pure popular sovereignty evident in Egypt’s recent mass protests) is utterly unconcerned with the questions central to secularism. These protests are defined by asecular power – a power outside of the problem-space of secularism. Asecularity takes a multiplicity of forms ranging from the practice and space of protest movements to that of the Fatwa Council. Despite being easily identifiable as religious, the Council, like the protest movements, is indifferent to the stakes and questions of secularism and avoids the ‘conceptual-affective structures through which secular power’ works (231).

Highlighting the significance of asecularity, Agrama asserts that the bare sovereignty of the protest movements demonstrates that an ethos of democratic sensibilities can be expressed without care for secularism and without identifying politics as intractably linked to the terms of the sovereign state. This intriguing possibility of resistance to state sovereignty and secular power is only explored briefly in Agrama’s work. This is unfortunate given the significance of such resistance, since, as Agrama reminds us, the state’s invasiveness in our social lives and its control over politics and religion are arguably on the rise due to the global dominance of the national-security paradigm.

Although Agrama’s brief discussion of asecularity might leave the reader wanting, this possible weakness pales in comparison to his path-breaking book’s contributions. Through shifting the established paradigm of scholarly discourse from what secularism is to what secularism does, Agrama poses a formidable challenge to recent theorizations on the subject. His book’s brilliant and incisive arguments must be grappled with seriously by all those engaged in studies of religion and secularity.

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Mediated representations of marginalized minority groups are perhaps one of the most widely explored topics in social-science research. Studies show that