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# A Return to the Questions: Azmi Bishara's New Intellectual Project

Mohammed Jamal Barout | July 2013

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## Introduction

*Religion and Religiosity* forms part one of Azmi Bishara's new and comprehensive intellectual project, which encompasses a three part series under one common title: *Religion and Secularism in Historical Context*. Part two centers on theorizations of secularism and secularization, as well as the historical and intellectual background of their development. Part three focuses on the categorization and analysis of Ottoman and Arab models, particularly those that developed during the Ottoman Tanzimat and after, when the state system grew out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. In this sense, Bishara's endeavor is intellectually comprehensive in terms of its premises, issues, and problematics, and places itself in the current moment of important change. Its significance, thus, can be found in the implicit relationship between ideas and major transformations. This intellectual project can be considered a continuation of Bishara's foundational project on the Arab nation, as expressed in his books *Civil Society* and *The Arab Question*.

Part one, *Religion and Religiosity*, therefore, represents the theoretical and analytical introduction to Bishara's wider project on religion and secularism in their historical contexts.<sup>1</sup> With the onset of modern ages, it would be impossible to understand secularism and secularization without understanding religiosity, with its composite nature and various dimensions, including, among others, its significant social and institutional role. Likewise, it is not presently possible to understand the continuation of the religious in its various manifestations or create new directions, visions, interpretations and systems, without having an understanding of secularism and secularization. Secularization, in this case, is considered a composite historical, socio-political process that challenges the theoretical or grounding systems in force. This allows one to talk of secularisms in the plural, not just of a single secularism. Thus, part one of the series centers on religion and religiosity while connecting to the issues of part two and three. The question is: is there a need for such a book in the context of a wider volume on religion and secularism in historical context?

Producing a new book on religion and religiosity, a field already saturated with research and the subject of major, wide-scale, and extensive debate within Western intellectual production, albeit to a relatively limited degree within Arab thought, can only be

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<sup>1</sup> Azmi Bishara, *Religion and Secularism in Historical Context, Part I: Religion and Religiosity* (Beirut: ACRPS, 2013), p. 9.

legitimized, intellectually and academically, provided there is a critical perspective on the material that has been accumulated. This accumulation may indeed be achieved, but its issues, problematics, and intellectual limits remain open to recurring examination. Perhaps the critical perspective that Bishara has chosen in dealing with this corpus allows him to consider part one as the “preface” of the project in the sense that it is a critique seeking to found a vision and avenues for understanding, analysis, and investigation. For this reason, the introduction is not restricted to a single chapter; rather, part one forms an introduction to the project as a whole. It is as though the author wishes to construct his project on foundations that he has rebuilt and reclaimed. This implies an ambition to lay the theoretical underpinnings of the study, such as the basis of Islamic jurisprudence, and to ground an epistemology, in the narrow sense of the fundamental principles of a discipline. The pure theoretician relies on the foundations they have formulated and from which they start, while the adherent to the school of thought works within the scope of the foundations.

This preface (or part one of the project) is formed out of this aspiration to re-ground the field, but without claiming to construct a philosophical theory. Because Bishara steps out a number of foundational concepts in this preface, it will not allow one to gauge just how productive of ideas it is until the project appears as a whole. Some of these concepts are: “...it is impossible to understand religiosity in our times without understanding secularism and secularization”;<sup>2</sup> “there is a religiosity without belief, but there is no religion without religiosity”;<sup>3</sup> “knowledge-based faith is different from mystical faith ... religious experience is distinct from the experience of the sacred”;<sup>4</sup> “religion is neither superstition nor widespread wrong ideas, and atheism is not a scientific theory”;<sup>5</sup> and “faith is not susceptible to refutation”.<sup>6</sup> Finally, he says, “the essence of the process of uncovering differences in thought and social spheres is the process of uncovering distinctions within religion itself and between religion and other phenomena. From this perspective, the process of differentiation begins with the separation of God and the world, which is then followed by mediation between them and their re-separation”<sup>7</sup> and “the distinction between secularism and secularization”.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.405.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.223.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.19.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 48-9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 405.

Some of these concepts are present in critical thought; the concepts' sources, as well as the dynamic relationship between the concepts and their sources, could easily be identified to see what has been adopted and what has been reconstructed. What gives Bishara's concepts the character of a foundational effort, however, is the construction of a grounding perspective that sets up conceptual, theoretical, and analytical tools capable of producing ideas. The seriousness of his project is latent in this perspective. In fact, there is no original thinker who has not tried to lay a theoretical grounding, which is what distinguishes the intellectual from the academic in the classical sense of the term. This also means that the author approaches the process of philosophy, in that the attempt to construct a philosophy consists in laying foundations at the most advanced level. The fact that "laying the ground" was an aspiration of Bishara in this project is clearly seen in his adoption of the writing style of modern foundational philosophers, such as Descartes, John Locke, and David Hume, particularly when using the formula, "In that..." which places questions and issues in the dense linguistic context of rationalist philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

In its attempt to establish fundamental principles and lay foundations, and follow the critical school's method and new directions in anthropology, history, and sociology of religion, this preface re-examines many prevalent theoretical concepts in an attempt to construct interpretive and analytical tools that demonstrate a rethinking of the religious, outside of the traditionalist doctrinal perspectives that block efforts to delve into the question. Equally, the approach is outside the naive "scientistic" perspectives, with their theoretical, intellectual, and philosophical deductions inherited from materialist and *dahrite*<sup>10</sup> (in al-Afghani's terms) trends of the 19th century philosophy of progress. This philosophy critiqued religion as if it were critiquing a collection of superstitions and myths, without dealing with the intellectual structure of faith or the social phenomena in human societies, including those that had been responsible for major strides in the process of modernity and secularization.

The formulation of the issues in an effort to transcend these two perspectives, the "traditionalist" and the "scientistic," may have been influenced by the fact that both are

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 406.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> "The Dahrite system [...] does not acknowledge any Creator of the world." T.J. De Boer in [\*The History of Philosophy in Islam\*](#), trans. Edward R. Jones, (New York, Dover publications, Inc.: 1967, p. 80).  
[editor's note]

present in Arab culture to a greater extent than in Western culture, which by means of critique has gone beyond, and continues to surpass, them, toward new horizons and perspectives. From the outset, this points to the strategic location of intellectuals in their culture and society as they enter into a major new process of social transformation that might be comparable to the two previous ones. The first period of great change came after the collapse of the Ottoman state, and led to independence and the building of the nation state. This was followed by the collapse of the young independent, or post-colonial, states and has led to the fracturing of the new regimes. Their implosion marks the entry to the current stage.

The link between Bishara's project and Arab societies' entry into what one may term the third major social transformation is that the indicators and manifestations of this stage have, by means of a newly present and influential theoretical and political force, reopened questions about the religious, the civil, the secular, the political, and the institutional system required for a new model of the state, as well as the social contract understood outside of the perspectives inherited from the first and second stages of transformation and from the prior preparatory stage during the Ottoman Tanzimat. Even so, in the preface, Bishara breaks with the everyday history of contestation prevalent in the current stage of transformation concerning the relationship between religion, state, and secularization to approach these issues on a deeper level, thereby laying the ground to produce ideas that can operate over the long-term history of ideas. For this reason, Bishara's political outlook in this book appears bounded by his essential outlook as an intellectual, though he is practicing politics within the modern concept of the intelligentsia, where the intellectual is neither an "expert" nor an "academic" guarding the status quo, but a critical intellectual deeply involved in the process of transformation. To use Mohammed Arkoun's metaphor, the intellectual is no longer the village doctor confined to his clinic, but the village doctor immersed in all the town's problems. This does not mean that this preface is divorced from the latent concern of the intelligentsia, which is the concern for change starting with the liberation of the "abused and humiliated" majority oppressed by authoritarian Arab regimes, but it is an introduction to what is to come in the following parts of the work, on a profound, rather than day-to-day, political level.

## The Basic Issues

*Religion and Religiosity* is divided into five chapters, and the relationship between them might be described to a relative and interpretative degree by using a term from literary



criticism—enjambment. This term refers to the inner flow of an organic text, applying to the composite analytical approach whose critical power forms its driving spirit. In this review, the concept of enjambment derives its legitimacy from aesthetics, which provides one of the significant and latent entryways into Bishara's approach to religion and religiosity. This flow of ideas can be seen in the fact that the book does not act as a collection of chapters that are independent from the other, as is the case in traditional Arab poetics<sup>11</sup>, but as forming an organic unity characterized by the cohesion, interplay, and flow of interlinked ideas. This flow contains an intellectual force that is necessarily marked with the features of creative influence, which, in the broad sense of the term, is the intensity of thought.

Chapter one approaches the concepts of the sacred, mythical, religious, and ethical by examining the essential aspects of commonality and difference in the following issues: religious experience and the experience of the sacred; the conceptual distinctions between myth and meaning in narrative; religion and magic; religion and ethics; and the distinction between intellectual belief and mystical belief.

In chapter two, the discourse shifts to issues of religiosity. The lexicon in this chapter is derived from an investigation of dread, the sacred and the profane, and the particularity of an emotion of belief in that context. The question of belief is considered in its own terms, while dealing with Islamic examples and Jewish views to formulate a new perspective toward the existence of a religiosity that lacks belief, something close to a religiosity of "habit". Nevertheless, there is no religion without a practicing religiosity. Religiosity here is not religion, but its operation—how it is practiced by the religious.

From this focal point, Bishara moves on, in the third chapter, to a critical discussion deeply connected to his understanding of religiosity, focusing on the critique of religion in Western thought. He reflects on pivotal points, such as the ideas of Hegel, Kant, Marx, and Weber, and discusses related issues in classical Arab thought, including al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd's views. At this point, he forms his own view that breaks with the "scientific" heritage and its "scientific" discrediting of religion, which it considers as "unscientific and illogical superstition and nonsense". His thesis is that religion "is neither superstition nor prevalent erroneous ideas," and "atheism is not a scientific theory," but may become a form of what religious historians term "alternative religion". He distinguishes between the scientific critique of religion and the atheist critique, a

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<sup>11</sup> Also referred to as a unity of verse.

distinction that accompanied the development of thought in the history of philosophy. On the basis of a reading of Weber, using the primary texts and unmediated by other studies of him, Bishara lays a foundation for the critique of the presumed contradiction between religion and modernity, which he ostensibly takes up in detail in part two of the volume on religion and secularism.

Chapter four deals with “definitions,” as its title indicates. Bishara did not start the book with this as his intention; however, he tries to develop the understanding of definitions in light of the dynamic derivation of concepts out of the phenomena themselves in a way that results in a speculative process that is formative and not pre-formed or completed. This dynamic produces a new view of what has been achieved so far, adding a new approach that makes it theoretically productive in the context of the text; that is, it approaches the concepts using formative knowledge. This is precisely what Bishara means when he says he has been interested in “following the word ‘religion’ within the core of the Arab-Islamic tradition, not in search of definitions but seeking the significations linked to the word itself, particularly when it appears in structural contexts that deconstruct their meanings and formations or in contexts of terminological and conceptual definition”.<sup>12</sup> Hence, he takes from these defining texts that which is related to his perspective, analysis, and strategic approach. He seeks to intensify these elements in light of his strategy and locate them within it. Methodologically, his attempts rest on a powerful critical foundation as represented by the impossibility of defining religion as a reduction to elements external to it, although it is a social phenomenon maintaining a strong institutionalizing force in the life of societies and individuals.<sup>13</sup> Here, he relies on Mircea Eliade in that when religion becomes a self-standing phenomenon that merits definition, or can be defined, then it is the nature of religion that becomes the subject. This is the essential meaning of the definition of religion from the inside and not “the reduction of the essence of the phenomenon of religion to other factors”.<sup>14</sup>

In chapter five, Bishara shifts from discussing religion and religiosity to a discussion of secularism. In the context of the flow of problematics and issues in this preface, this concluding chapter serves to introduce the features of the following parts of Bishara’s volume on religion and secularism. In this chapter, Bishara differentiates between

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<sup>12</sup> Bishara, p. 305.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 348.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 351.

secularism and secularization, between secularism as an alternative religion and secularization as a historical context, and between secularism as a theoretical paradigm in the social and political sciences and in the history of ideas, on one hand, and as a normative or descriptive analytic paradigm on the other. He then considers the dangerous turn in the Islamic world's development represented by Atatürk's separation between sultanate and caliphate, which paved the way for the abolition of the caliphate and the creation of the republic, and in turn provoked the sharp polarizations of the 1920s and subsequent effects.

## A Cross-Disciplinary Approach

This particular intellectual approach to the religious in *Religion and Religiosity*, an approach that aspires to set the work's theoretical foundations as can be understood from its terminology—taken from the social sciences—remains within an overall view of religion and secularism in their historical and social context. The author adopts the position of a critical and analytic thinker who treats religion and religiosity as concepts to be interrogated, deconstructed, and revised rather than pre-formed and conclusive. This means that they can be radically critiqued in the lead-up to their being challenged and transcended to construct innovative conceptual and theoretical tools able to generate new ideas and approaches toward religious concepts, as well as toward religious, social, and political realities in their historical contexts.

With a conceptual apparatus that governs his thought, Bishara starts by making distinctions between the sacred and the mundane, religion and religiosity, religion and the temporal, religion and theology, belief and progress, secularism as a creed and secularism as a process, religion and alternative religion, the moral and the religious, philosophy and myth, truth and metaphor, language and poetic language, the prosaic and the poetic, and the individual and the social. He emerges from these dichotomies, on the basis of which we must begin our reflection on the first level, to break them open and access the difference (or the tension in the Hegelian sense) latent in a single phenomenon that forms the drive for its development. This tension, however, exists within the same phenomenon, not between two phenomena, and includes, by necessity, the discovery of what has subsequently been termed nuances, which reveal the fine and subtle tensions within a single phenomenon. Bishara does not deal with a phenomenon as a solid and fixed agglomeration, but as an agglomeration surging with movement and internal tensions in the Hegelian sense. This serves to explain the complexity of Bishara's theoretical language in his approach to differences and nuance,

and forms one of the main mechanisms that generates critical ideas in his attempt to understand the complexity of the single phenomenon and its subjective dynamics, and to reveal its own self-understanding. Breaking open these dichotomies enables an understanding of the internal displacements that take place on various levels within a single experience, such as the experience of the sense of the sacred.

What is the essence of the relationship between religion and religiosity? Bishara handles this problematic issue by asking whether religiosity is an epiphenomenon of religion; that is, whether it maintains the relationship of a root (religion) to a branch (religiosity), or whether it creates a type of social religion as a practice with its own independent dynamics of evolution. If religiosity is to be understood in the first sense, this dynamic encompasses a general theory of religion, meaning that there is no religion without religiosity and belief.<sup>15</sup> Whereas in the second understanding, religiosity is susceptible to transforming into "a self-standing phenomenon,"<sup>16</sup> which is the focus of the book's position, though at this point, the question arises as to whether we are confronted by a new origin, divorced from the original and evolving along its own lines. What should we call the system of perceptions, habits, experiences, and rituals that this settling of religion into patterns entails? Should it be described as an example of a type of new religion that reproduces religion? The concept of difference, which represents one of Bishara's concepts for guiding investigation and generating ideas, explains the development of the view of religion and religiosity from the simple to the complex.

In fact, the book's methodology is very specifically delimited by its coordinated cross-disciplinary approach. Such a methodology does not mean that general knowledge is assembled around the topic and its mediation, but that it is a seminal new methodology initially born out of the crisis of narrow specialization in the social sciences. Perhaps the *Annales* School was the most visible exponent of this view, which was then adopted in a clearer fashion by various methodological approaches, with forward looking sciences being at the forefront, all of which needed holistic, partial approaches to formulate its vision. The deep impulse behind the birth of this methodology is the overcoming of the sterility of historicist philosophy, its legacy, and the institutional backgrounds that influenced its formation; from the perspective of the central importance of human liberation, this impulse is also rooted in the discovery of its limitations and the intellectual, methodological, and even ethical challenges posed to it by semiology. This

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

is also apparent in any reflection upon its behavioral effects that were destructive toward human life when applied instrumentally. Whatever the case, it represents here one of the chief factors in the birth of the critical school of modern thought.

The cross-disciplinary methodology is fundamental to Bishara's approach to the complex relationship between religion and religiosity, and hence to secularization and secularism, where he moves from a simple to complex interpretation of the phenomenon of religion. In this context, the conceptual apparatus mentioned above is transferred to composite anthropological, intellectual, historical, semiotic, philosophical, theological, sociological, linguistic, and narratological approaches. To these may be added aesthetics, particularly aesthetic ideals, such as the sublime, and theories of metaphor. For example, Bishara approaches religion from an anthropological perspective, viewing religion as a human practice rather than an institutionalized "religious belief" found in the texts. This move interprets and analyzes the concept of "religiosity" as a complex social form of knowledge that possesses its own evolutionary dynamic and drive in human life. What Bishara calls the possibility of "religiosity without belief" is exactly "religion as habit".<sup>17</sup> This explains the prevalent ordinary pattern of religion, in Arab societies at least, in as much as it permits the distinction to be drawn between this practice and the fundamentalist religiosity that has encroached upon "religion as habit," or to put it more clearly, upon the social form of religion as practiced by believers and people. It also opens up the issue of how private matters are given a cover of modern secularism, and serve political or social functions particular to the group in question. Bishara's project focuses upon the influence of ideas on realities and the influence of realities on the formulation or proposal of ideas; given this, it is expected that in the latter two parts of the project, he will discuss the "archaeological" roots of modern, local, and regional nationalisms, especially in Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. These appear to be secular phenomena, even though they are essentially confessional and particularist.

In his exploration of myth and meaning in narrative, Bishara turns to narratology. This theory was born out of the changes within linguistics at the heart of its relationship with semiotics. Following Roland Barthes, this shifted from the view that linguistics was part of a general science of signs that viewed semiotics as a part of the science of language. Narratology became a science not of the literary text alone, but of all phenomena on the basis that they themselves constitute texts—"all is text [and] writing". To this may

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

be added the idea that “all is narrative,” calling for interpretation, reproduction, and explanation. In this form, modern thought speaks of grand narratives in the history of thought, the grandest of them being the historicist narrative that governed sociology for a long period, from the perspective of its supposed discovery of the hidden laws of society and its definition of their aim. Similarly, this narrative governed the self-understanding of large groups, above all the narratives of nations and peoples. As the term implies, narratives include an element of the imaginary, and though there is no question that they have their limits, they concentrate, in essence, around the property of narration and its connection with the imaginary, which transforms perceptions into truth. Then, critical thought deconstructs this, and divests it of its magical and naive character.

The approaches to research and analysis in Bishara’s work are effective and productive. The aesthetic approach is quite astonishing as it links the theory of the dynamic symbol derived from 19<sup>th</sup> century Symbolist poetry with the theory of analogy as used technically by philosophers. Dynamic poetic images (symbols) lead to the creation of new relationships, while analogy leads to fixed absolutes. Bishara may be the second person to approach the relationship between the symbolically dynamic image and analogy after Majid Fakhri, who touched upon it in the 1960s. Unlike Fakhri, Bishara is not concerned with an absolute poetic image, but sees in the image the epistemological means to understand the dynamic poetic symbol that solves the problem of the poetic logos according to the creative, cosmic dynamic. “In the beginning was the word,” and this logos or symbolic poetic action, is an action that creates a new world rather than expressing an existing world. Its function is creative and formative, not just expressive. The poetic image here is not simply an expressive image, but a knowledge-based one. In light of Bishara’s discussions, the methodological and critical entryway he provides permits the discovery of the links between dynamic symbols and the religious experience in general, and between such symbols and the experience of the sense of the sacred in particular, as they are viewed as more all-inclusive than religious experience in its relationship with the absolute. In fact, the experience of knowing and discovering the world, as well as the quest for the absolute in theories and praxes of poetics, fundamentally aligns with the experience of the sense of the sacred. Moreover, the poetic is one of its manifestations that has developed in the shift from the perspective of poetry to the perspective of subjective representation.

Bishara’s use of aesthetic ideals as tools and theoretical concepts is unusual in modern Arab thought that is not narrowly academic. The major aesthetic ideals that are part of

the experience of the sense of the sacred, or the sense of the sacred in Bishara's formulation, are themselves central in an intensive form within dynamic symbols. Furthermore, while we cannot think outside templates for thought, we can continually deconstruct and transcend them, for they are the ideals of the beautiful, the sublime, and the awesome—the manifestations of the unseen or absolute. In this context, Bishara's text might seem truncated even though it is self-standing and does not need applications in the first instance. If it goes beyond this apparent truncation, a continuing investigation of this issue will open up the possibility for experiences of the sense of the sacred that are alternative to that of traditional religion. In this context lies what Bishara has left unsaid. It seems he could not state everything he has to say regarding this distinction as one of the impulses for the birth of modern Arabic poetry, in the sense that it is "visionary," and experiences the sacred according to the direct individual vision of the poet. This is something akin to a mystical faith, which sees in the poetic a path to knowledge of the absolute and a means to attain a glimpse of it. This absence might find its justification in Bishara's decision to write a preface instead of diving into an entire history. Another edition might call for revealing this aspect so vitally linked with his issues and questions.

The visionary experience, which is the higher name within poetry for the experience of the sense of the sacred, represents the effort of re-creation at the heart of the great, visionary, aesthetic, intellectual, and creative visions in modern aesthetic works, and in this context restores the reinterpretation of mythic symbols. Bishara's detailed attention to myth as narrative with meaning must be noted, as should his interpretation of the sense of meaning. This transcends the traditional and iconic concept of meaning to become meta-meaning. Bishara clearly refers to this level in his shift from meaning to meta-meaning. This is not intended to be a form of Gnosticism, as might be inferred by superficial thinking that is familiar with marginalia, chapter headings, and received ideas, but unfamiliar with the substance. This approach lies rather at the heart of the basic and seminal concepts of modern directions in linguistics and semantics and in the understanding and interpretation of texts.

In this review, there is a determination to transcend the perspective that views the different areas of thought, creativity, and culture as if they were patchwork, like a leopard's skin, with prominent, disconnected spots. Thought here is viewed as an integral fabric that is only patterned with these spots. By beginning with an introduction concerned with foundations, Bishara's approach puts forward effective theoretical and methodological tools that enable one to see the fabric that underlies these spots. This



work is marked by critical, productive, and dynamic thinking that does not submit to any ready-made or settled supposition or formula without subjecting it to review or critical effort. When all texts in the series have been completed, by transcending what appears to have been truncated, it will be able to connect approaches that envisage fundamental change in interpretation, investigation, and analysis. It provides the tools to create a vision in modern Arab thought regarding the concepts of religiosity, religion, secularism, and modernity. With regard to state secularism, the text will be able to assess what has been achieved in the history of Arab thought, or literature, which is included in the French sense of the term “thought”.

In his criticism of functional definitions of religion, and in light of his critical perspective on religion and the manifestations of religiosity in societies, Bishara attempts to see the interpretive, theoretical limits of these definitions. For as long as societies exist, religion will exist, which means that religion has no precisely defined function that can be ultimately specified. Rather, it is one of the component parts of humanity. This is the reason students of the history and sociology of religion have failed to agree upon a goal or essential function for religion. On this point, similar to René Girard, Bishara delineates his fundamental observations about these functional definitions: “Even if there were agreement over the function of religion in a specific social and cultural context, the function is so variable that we cannot consider it as a general definition of religion as a phenomenon, except to say that religion has a function without defining it.”<sup>18</sup>

Regarding the link between the idea of the leopard-skin patchwork and the idea of the critique of functional definitions, Bishara subtly indicates that the evolution of cognitive skills and tools, as well as the social sciences, has led to a decline in the functions of religion with regard to knowledge, and consequently, the possibility of the secularization of these functional areas, or doing away with the traditional religious mechanisms for their understanding, to answer the questions they pose. This is a significant methodological and theoretical entryway marked with extraordinary critical power. It fits with Bishara’s statement that “the person in mass society seeks individual and group meaning in practices other than religion”. He goes on to say that “undoubtedly, moral, aesthetic, spiritual, intellectual, political, and artistic fields other than religion have evolved in the modern age. They have helped humanity find answers in its quest

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 387.



for meaning. Here, religiosity is confronted with the choice to withdraw from these areas for other strongholds.”<sup>19</sup>

This critical entryway provided by the founding preface *Religion and Religiosity* is conceptually powerful. However, in order to grant the intellectual entryways their interactive sense and power in dealing with their issues, Bishara is concerned with aesthetics, poetics, and non-rationalist visions of the world. This constitutes an effort to seek in poetry an alternative to traditional institutional religion, an alternative that has established the myths it relies or is founded upon. This is the essence of T. S. Eliot’s work in his poems *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*. T.S. Eliot, a believer, felt that the evolution of knowledge was eroding traditional religion, and tried to find an alternative to it in poetry. In this sense, poetry reflects what Bishara calls mystical belief, although it occurs in new contexts and with new functions. This effort to search for the relationship of poetry with myth, for the replication of myth in institutional religion, or for the restoration of this relationship by the poet in the knowledge-language of the world that breaks with the institutionalized tradition of reading, is apparent in the poetic quest, or in what Bishara terms “ethical and aesthetic artistic fields that have evolved in the modern age”. In the crucible of Arab artistic and intellectual creative modernism during the 1950s and 1960s, before the Sovietized Left and New Left took hold of the minds of Arab intellectuals, there was a major attempt to seek non-religious ways to apprehend the absolute, or God, within poetry, the arts, and creativity. Under the influence of Eliot perhaps, this search was proposed as an alternative to the institutionalized knowledge of religion. Without elaborating on this aspect, which deserves a separate discussion, it is important to note that the remaining section of Bishara’s foundational introduction is in comparison to Arab thought and its vitality during that period. This may find its place in the subsequent volumes forming part of Bishara’s project on religion and secularism.

## Between the Sacred and “Managing the Sacred”

As a starting point, Bishara views the sense of the sacred as a formative element of religion, but does not accept the reduction of religion to it because religion is an institutional social phenomenon, as described in the sociological tradition of Durkheim, or a behavior influenced by the imperatives inherent within the religious creed. The essence of the relationship between this and the experience of the sacred is that it

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 394.

institutionalizes and regulates it in a way that Caillouis calls the “administration of the sacred,”<sup>20</sup> which encompasses institutional elements, regulation, and management. The book intends to understand in all its complexity the phenomenon of the relationship between the sacred and what it terms “the social instinct” that arises from the human necessity for society and its preservation, and points to the conceptual distinction between the experience of the sense of the sacred and its social and institutional management in religion. This is because the sense of the sacred is “one of the characteristics of human consciousness”.<sup>21</sup> Bishara gives a clear definition of this as “an individual faculty where the religious, aesthetic, and moral domains intersect,” and refers to the essence of the sense of the sacred as being found in the intuition of the absolute and infinite.<sup>22</sup>

The text’s internal conceptual system insists on this subtle implicit difference between the sense of the sacred and religion, in the sense of distinguishing between two phenomena and in the Hegelian sense of the hidden or latent tension within a phenomenon that drives its evolution. This insistence is at work in the conceptual system by which Bishara generates his ideas, although it is latent in the approach, analysis, and production of ideas more than it is present on the defined conceptual and analytical levels. This is a key that enables one to understand the experience of connection or separation between, on the one hand, *the sacred* (the experience of the sense of the sacred), which transforms into an “individual instinct” unhampered by institutional regulation based on emotion and arousal, as well as their displacements, and, on the other hand, *religion*, which organizes the sacred and transforms it into an institutional social phenomenon. This difference exists in the strategy of distinguishing, in that, as Bishara states: “The important thing with respect to sociological research is not just commonality, but also difference. For the evolution from one stage to another depends upon difference.”<sup>23</sup> If we are capable of understanding the two pivotal meanings of difference—distinguishing between phenomena and internal or latent tensions—to the formation of all the relations between the sacred and religion, this will form a theoretical tool for understanding the broad changes in the patterns of religiosity within a single religion. Most prominent among these is the difference between the religiosity of the Jewish, Christian, or Islamic mystical brotherhoods and the Jewish,

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<sup>20</sup> Roger Caillouis, *Man and the Sacred*, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana: University Press, 2001), p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> Bishara, pp.20-1.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.21.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.22.

Christian, and Islamic institutional arrangements of these forms of the sacred, as well as the dynamics of the conflict within them. It is possible, however, to state that the sense of the sacred itself may be transformed within this conflict, from the realm of the individual to the realm of organized heresy, from the perspective of the orthodox religious institutions, and that the individual experience arising from individual emotion is transformed into the institutional.

Religion, however, organizes the sacred within institutions where worship can be transformed into habit, a social pattern that the social individual reproduces in fixed fashion as the member of a group. Institutionalized experiences of the sacred enable personal communion with the absolute outside of the legal and ritual rules of the system by an individual person whose experience of the sacred rests upon the production of direct visionary knowledge of the world, based on Bergson's notions. At the same time that the management of the sacred curbs the latent difference, the individual experience of the sacred takes it beyond this management into what Bishara terms "religious feeling being the state of extreme emotion,"<sup>24</sup> by transforming Mircea Eliade's idea that the religious consciousness is the absolute structure of emotion. This emotion is the basis of what Bishara calls the "pure faith" that cannot be refuted by rationalist philosophy. "Religious experience" can be understood in the context of this "pure faith". It is a response to the prior need to seek the absolute and is "existential," aiming to be in contact with all beings. It is the "most intense human experience" and a behavioral experience that "impels action".<sup>25</sup>

## Knowledge-Based Faith and Mystical Faith

Given that this "pure faith" can neither be proven nor refuted, one may ask whether it itself constitutes the "mystical faith" dealt with in chapter two, or whether it is more akin to "mystic" religious faith that Bishara contrasts with knowledge-based faith.<sup>26</sup> "Mystical faith" seems closer to the model of "pure faith," and consequently shares in its unprovable and irrefutable quality in Bishara's concept of "mystical faith". In this, it is more akin to faith regulated in terms of belief, as it appears in Islamic thought in the field of "the science of belief" or "speculative theology," distinguished by its equating of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.27.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 48-9.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

faith and existence in order for us to be able to comprehend “knowledge-based faith”. Likewise, mystical equates belief in God with His existence.

The second aspect of this equivalence is cognitive par excellence, where the knowledge held by the intellectual believer appears to be a definite knowledge to him or her, “yet it cannot be proved, nor can its error be proved scientifically”.<sup>27</sup> Consequentially, it is a form of “certainty arising from its acceptance as true, not its scientific proof”.<sup>28</sup> This is merely submission in Judaism and Islam. In the context of difference in the Hegelian sense, Bishara does not reduce Islam to “submission,” but sees that it comprises two forms of belief, the absolute and the cognitive. It is not possible, however, to differentiate these two forms without understanding their connection with issues of exegesis and interpretation. Exegesis is to knowledge-based faith what interpretation is to absolute, or mystical faith, which believes in the path of direct internal knowledge of God or “the utmost” as Bishara prefers to put it in the language of mystics.

The distinction between “knowledge-based faith” and “mystical faith” is reinforced by Bishara’s own vision in tracing the concepts, in that he observes the discomfiture experienced by mystical faith when dealing with scientific discoveries that have shaken the beliefs that form the fundamental definition of mystical faith. This heavily philosophical concept in Bishara’s discourse puts forward—with respect to historians, anthropologists, and thinkers—a productive, analytical, interpretive, and conceptual tool that explains this discomfiture in the face of the sweep of scientific discoveries and the uncovering of the laws of nature. This is exemplified by the history of Christian doctrine, whereas Islamic reformism tried to patch up the problem by using selective, and at times concocted, synthesis between religion and science. In this sense, Islamic reformism rather defended belief during the period dominated by materialism more than it took to reformulating doctrine, as was the case with Protestantism. This theoretical and conceptual tool contains emancipatory potential from a perspective of knowledge when investigating religious beliefs. This means the reformulation of the understanding of these beliefs outside of the naive normative, scientific concepts, which imagine that by undermining some perspectives of the creed, one has demonstrated that the tenets of faith are mere superstition. However, for the most part, atheism is formed from the mediation of the same dichotomies as religious belief itself, thus producing an atheist belief as a counterpart to the belief within faith. Here,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

Bishara suggests a revolutionary idea that runs counter to the decades-long consolidation of materialist-dialectic edifices and various scientific trends in the first half of the twentieth century in the minds of the Arab elites. He rejects the idea that it is a function of science to refute faith or religion. Science rationalizes social and economic life in the areas of the material and daily conditions of life, but just as science is not called upon to take the magic out of art, or glee from music, there is "no need for it to refute religion or faith".<sup>29</sup>

One might be faced with some tension between the understanding of religious experience as an experience "outside of time"<sup>30</sup> and its understanding as a behavioral experience. This applies specifically to the transformation of religious experience into fundamentalisms or extremist brotherhoods of faith that desire to put into practice "the Kingdom of God" within "the Earthly Kingdom". This opens a discussion of the conditions and dynamics with which religious experience, which is individual-existential, is transformed into a collective experience institutionalized in brotherhoods.

For Bishara, rationalism means the hard rationalism that has been elevated to the rank of a theoretical belief system that takes religion out of the sphere of secularization, and perhaps, at specific historical periods such as the Enlightenment, has become a kind of alternative religion. This contrast, with soft or open rationalism implicit in the text, allows one to understand Bishara's insistence that "the function of rationality hinges upon the aim of analysis, theoretical understanding, experimental research, rational planning, and practice, but it does not aim to eliminate the specific emotion of religion, in the realm of politics, for example".<sup>31</sup> Rationalism cannot refute religious faith, which is related to the absolute and transcendent. It may, however, refute or disprove "that faith which rests upon rational deductions that are not scientific but appear scientific [...] it is easy to refute the instances of faith based upon the view of religious statements as an explanation of the world [that is] a kind of primitive science. Inferences about religion are not made with empirical reason, nor with abstract formal reason, even if the proof of the inference seems to be a rational proof. On the other hand, neither are they disproved or revoked by reason."<sup>32</sup> Bishara defines such faith as "pure religious belief or belief in the absolute,"<sup>33</sup> or "mysticism," even though he makes

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.50.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 32 and 44-5.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

it clear—perhaps to distance himself from al-Jabri’s ideas on mysticism contrasted with proof—that he does not intend “the mysticism of the Sufis to contrast with rationalist philosophy”.

This clarification requires conceptualization since Sufi mysticism is a pure religious belief that endorses the direct path to knowledge of God, not in the verbal meaning of “direct” but in the Sufi meaning, whereby intuition and vision transfer direct inner knowledge of God, who is the world. The method of the poet using his visionary sensibility of the world is no different from the method of the Sufi or mystic. Bishara refers to Pascal in reference to “pure faith”. In fact, Pascal’s view of faith is what Bishara means by Sufi mysticism and its inner direct approach to knowledge of the absolute. Bishara’s implicit critical method here is more significant than the analytical perspective for understanding faith and the impossibility of its refutation. This falls into the realm of what is called the “critique of modernity” and its equivalent or philosophical base, rationalism. This does not equate to post-modernism, even if it is open to it. He critiques modernity from the inside, revealing the degeneration of reason to the level of instrumental use, or an instrumentalist reason.

At the epistemological core of this reflection lies the differentiation between areas of knowledge and the importance of not allowing them to mix. In this sense, this is a critical, epistemic approach to modernity and rationalism. It is possible to connect it with the modern epistemological movement and its grounding in modern physics, which shares the Sufi, mystical understanding of the world at many junctures. If the history of modern Arab thought in the second-half of the twentieth century is rewritten, on an initial level it will reveal the seeds of the critique of modernity and the directions it has taken, or the ideology of modernism in various forms. Bishara, however, takes the philosophical entryways to this critique to an advanced level in his research on religion and religiosity, and hence secularism and secularization.

The theoretical and methodological importance of this critical method lies in that it opens up a detailed critique of the scientistic tendency of the Islamic school of reform, and goes on to reveal the methodological and theoretical bases for what can be called the school of the “Islamicization of knowledge” as the latest outcome in Arab thought. This outcome has not yet been thoroughly critiqued, especially on the level of the conceptual system of the Islamic school of reform and its subsequent trend in the “Islamicization of knowledge,” mixing the debate between areas of knowledge and reducing the level of the sacred to scientistic in interpreting the world. A classic example of this is Imam Mohammed Abdu’s interpretation of “flights of birds” [Sura

105] as a kind of bacteria the modern world had discovered. This trend reaches its peak with the “Islamicization of knowledge” school, which not even Ibn Taymiyya spoke of. Some Arab intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s criticized this mixing of the areas of knowledge from an epistemological perspective. Taha Hussein was at the forefront of this with his famous series of articles on science and religion published in the mid-1920s. However, this early epistemological effort was a cover for a hidden ideological agenda of modernism, and did not succeed in becoming the dominant paradigm for Arab intellectuals. Its place was taken by naive Arab perspectives on Sovietized dialectical materialism and its simplified, spoon-fed historicism that disparaged the religious and the sacred both epistemologically and politically. The most naive version of this is to be found in the effects of Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* during the leftist and Sovietized period of Arab thought. Bishara continues on Taha Hussein’s path on the epistemological level—having discarded his implicit modernist ideological background—by refusing to mix religious and scientific modes of knowledge and their respective fields and functions. He takes this further in light of the critical theoretical spirit, or the critique of modernity, to deconstruct the materialist theses that see religion as a kind of philosophy or primitive theory of knowledge, under the influence of the legacy of the scientistic view from the first Enlightenment and in the sway of the belief in progress in the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

## The Sacred, Myth, and Secularization

This review focuses on some key aspects and issues of the book in light of the above delimitation of its methodological and theoretical approaches. Alternative earthly religions have grown out of religion, elevating what religion considers to be “unrevealed truths”—those not divinely dictated—to the level of “truths of faith” that in their turn are organized into rituals and ceremonies that arouse the sense of the sacred and compete with “orthodox” religion. Examples of this include major phenomena, such as nationalism, patriotism, and the “worship” of martyrs.<sup>35</sup> In light of this, Bishara raises the question of secularization: Is the receding of the metaphysical sacred in favor of the expansion of the earthly sacred the very process of secularization? Is the secularization of the sacred at the heart of the secularization process? Bishara resolves the problematic directly, as if he were implicitly taking the opposite course to Max Weber’s

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 45-6.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-6.



view of modernity and secularization as the removal of magic from the world. He states that “this is not what is meant by secularization in general, since the possibility of transferring the sacred from the transcendent metaphysical to the earthly is the basis of the secularization of the sacred, but it is not the basis of the secularization of society, thought, or the state, nor of secularization in general”.<sup>36</sup> Bishara approaches secularization as a process, intersecting with rationality, but not necessarily corresponding to it. “There remain many secular or secularized domains where the experience of the sacred flourishes, within which the practice of collective rites and rituals of a quasi-religious character continues”. For this reason, “rationalism still faces challenges in secularized domains from which religion has been banished”.<sup>37</sup>

The foundational role of science among the constitutive elements of secularization is found in the removal of magic from the world and in making the world self-explanatory. However, scientific, materialist, and rationalist theories will produce new mythologies that might be described, in the terms of the history of religions, as historicist, racial, or scientific “alternative religions”.<sup>38</sup> The process of secularization has taken magic out of the world, but has failed to take it out of the human heart. As both a process and a transformation into belief that goes from explaining the world to changing it, in light of the laws of this scientific “belief,” his critical understanding of secularization reveals it to be the great force behind modernity’s degeneration at the instrumental level. In Bishara’s system, science negates myth, but secularization in itself does not negate myth, though it might indeed create new myths. Bishara involve himself with the realm of critical thought that considers the idea of the mythical as a time period in the history of thought. He examines myth in light of modern theories of narrative that describe it as timeless, like art, continuing with vitality and having content full of meanings and interpretations that go beyond the surface. In religions categorized as primitive or early, the sacred and the mundane are fused in an expression of cosmic unity: man is the universe and the universe is man. Elsewhere in the book, there is a profound idea linked to this view that locates these religions in the poetic age of the world, characterized by the unity of what we term the sacred and the mundane. The formation of social institutionalized religions and the shift from the simple religion supposed by the age of poetry might be connected to the growth of the age of prose or the age of society. These religions are linked to the age of poetry in terms of the representation of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 61.



the sacred and its transformation into a central element of belief, but this sacred is “separated” from the “mundane,” which engenders a theological or speculative mentality to mediate. Myth remains a component of belief, but loses its centrality and function, while remaining alive in popular religion. Bishara’s approach here raises questions about why popular religions—meaning the beliefs firmly rooted in the religious consciousness of believers in an institutionalized religion—are so saturated with mythology. This fact makes popular religions problematic for the belief systems and norms of institutionalized religions. Popular religion’s saturation with mythology characterizes the history of popular Christianity and Islam, and explains the bitter history of conflict between the religious institution and those religions or systems of mystical faith that go beyond the religious-law systems.

Bishara borrows from the essential figures of critical theory, particularly Karl Popper who has a clear presence in Bishara’s approach. The essence of his critical theory is the critique of modernity, particularly in his way of following the method of this school and, to a certain extent, what came after it, by linking historicism and forms of total social engineering, in his implicit stance against rationalist philosophy on the latent level of analysis, and in his description of the rationalist understanding of religion as false consciousness and “a naive, scientistic understanding”.<sup>39</sup> This critique of rationalism might perhaps be an inspiration for critical directions in modern anthropology, which is known as being descriptive rather than normative, particularly as it appears with Balandier in his perspective that there is no society without its vault of heaven.

In this context, Bishara is clear that scientific progress has undermined the cognitive and instrumental function of traditional mythology, having secularized it in this sense, but it has not been able to finish it off entirely. To develop this view, it is possible to speak of new mythologies produced by the modern world, without their growth undermining traditional myth and the exclusion of its ceremonies from popular religion or from what could be termed public religiosity. Included in this context are all the ceremonies of the popular religious holidays, the basis of which relies, in fact, on the myths of origins that the rationalist school thought it had put an end to. In addition to the sediment of old myths in festive ceremonies, there are new myths that have been formed and are continually being formed. This explains Balandier’s statement that “there is no society without its vault of heaven,” understood as a vault of mythology whose most significant features are religion, alternative religion, and all similar

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

perspectives. Arab anthropological research produced by academics comprises a rich library founded upon the results of archaeology, though the quantity of this research is extremely limited in comparison to the quantity and significance of the new questions that have arisen concerning the makeup of the mythic vision of these societies. This is all the more so when regional or local nationalists have attempted to appropriate this vision ideologically, attempting to develop the findings of archaeology into nationalist views. Bishara's effort here is a valuable one in a leading area of anthropology: the discussion of myth from a perspective of solid, scientific anthropology.

## From Religion and Religiosity to Secularism

The final chapter of *Religion and Religiosity* paves the way for the remaining two parts of the project. From the outset, Bishara is more inclined to view secularization as the state's neutrality toward religion instead of a reduction to their separation. In any event, this topic will appear in the latter parts of the series and other books on religion and secularism, but in this introduction he is determined to leap straight to what is meant by the secularization of the state, grounding this in his anthropological and historical approaches. To do so, he starts with the concept of differentiation.

The operation of secularization, here understood in its deep sense as a process, goes back to the operation of differentiation within religion, as well as between religion and other phenomena. He holds that this process of differentiation begins with the separation of God from the world, followed by a mediation between them and their renewed separation. In this view, the institutionalization and differentiation of the functions of religions within religion itself, and the growth of sects, groups, and doctrines, are all an expression of this process of differentiation. It is clear that Bishara is making a distinction between secularism and secularization. In this perspective, secularization is a historical process that impinges upon numerous social domains and human thought. It is likewise the ongoing process of differentiation between sectors that are redefined by differentiation, such as science and myth, the sacred and the mundane, and religion and state.<sup>40</sup> Here, secularization becomes the outcome of a process of structural and social differentiation and the change in patterns of consciousness as a historical process. Bishara's point is that this process has been known to all human societies, and is part of a historical process that predates

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp.406-7.

modernity, except modernity has called this process secularism or secularization.<sup>41</sup> The process of separating the sacred from the mundane, which was enabled simply by defining religion as a self-standing social sphere, is the beginning of the process of differentiation that has gone through a long social-historical process. The growth and evolution of the monotheistic religions can be seen as part of these major stages of differentiation in that it also requires, at a historical stage, the separation of God from the world, or that a distinction be made between them to a degree equal to their separation.

There is a strong relationship between the course of monotheism and the course of differentiation. It is not accurate, though, to say that the problem of the relationship between religion and state developed with the monotheistic religions, with earlier religions not knowing of such a problem. In fact, in cultures where non-monotheistic religions held sway, struggles developed between their institutions and sources of legitimacy and the state. Monotheism, however, was distinguished by the fact that it stripped kings of their divinity. At the same time, these kings (ordinary mortals) tried to find sacred sources for their rule within religion or elsewhere, in accordance with monotheism.<sup>42</sup> The king's embrace of monotheistic religion, his construction of sources of legitimacy on its basis, and his acquiring sanctity through this was at its height in Christianity and Islam.

In preparation for the other parts of his project, Bishara ends with the Kemalists' 1922 separation between the caliphate and the sultanate. This an opportune stopping point for part one, both chronologically and thematically, because from that date onwards, the writings of modern Arab thought roll out with intensifying cases of sifting and polarization, within the general space of the reformists and the school of Islamic reform in particular, between the liberal nationalists (in the European, and more clearly French, sense) and the appearance of the early Salafi trend among the previous reformers. The move to separate the caliphate from the sultanate, legitimated in effect by religious law, interests, and history, and a fundamental issue at the time, only led to the second move, which was the abolition of the caliphate and Mustafa's Kemal's complete separation of religion and state. This compressed into a limited number of years what it took the evolution of the French Republic some 115 years to achieve. This discussion makes one eager and interested for the other parts of Bishara's work in order to hear

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 407.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 409-12.

what he will say about the period of the Tanzimat and the Arab and Ottoman models leading up to the issue of state secularism. What has been reviewed here is a foundational preface or stepping stone. While waiting for the other two parts, one may observe that, on the methodological level, the cross-disciplinary methodology should be expanded to take in knowledge, research, conclusions, and accumulations related to these sensitive topics. These are the issues that still govern the theses, writings, and conflicts of thought, politics, and the state, and, in this third great stage of transformation, the revolutions whose future directions no one can predict with certainty. In this context, this preface represents a work to inspire what comes after.

## Re-reading Bishara

This review has not sought to provide a study or to present research, but to offer a reading to stimulate interest in the process of thought and speculation into the major developments in modern Arab thought. Bishara has been a major proponent and producer of this by creating profound research, not opinion, through his complementary project, *Civil Society*, which came out at the stage of quickening transformation within the consciousness of active elites, intellectuals, and public opinion, in the shift from authoritarianism to democracy. This was followed by *The Arab Question* in which Bishara suggested a new coherent system of basic concepts concerning nationalism. This reading has taken into account the questions raised within its relative maintenance of traditional criteria for understanding the issues of the book. The aim of re-reading Bishara's intellectual endeavor has been achieved within the daily politics in which everyone is currently submerged, as well as outside of it. This book, the background of which provides glimpses into the issues of day-to-day politics, has assumed the role of instituting a profound idea of what is guiding day-to-day consciousness and giving politics its deep meaning. This is the meaning of Khaldounian civilization, with its pioneering understandings of sociology and early anthropology from a methodological perspective, and political economy from the visionary viewpoint, which remains a project in progress. Bishara's intellectual project seems to link us with the great questions of human civilization in a new context—the third major social transformation currently underway in the Arab world today. Just as Bishara's major intellectual works appeared at junctures of transformation, his new work has also come out at this turning point. Let us re-read Bishara.