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Major: *Religious Studies*
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Secularism in Egypt after the Arab Spring: An Ethnographic Approach

ABSTRACT

The following proposal outlines methods and approaches for examining the particular nature of Egyptian secularism in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring. It employs: 1) a theory of secularism developed by the preeminent scholars of secularism that include Saba Mahmood, Charles Taylor, and Talal Asad, and, 2) an International Relations perspective on Egypt's failed transition to democracy following the fall of the regime of Hosni Mubarak. Egypt's political landscape during 2011 and 2012 was dominated by two parties: the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood and the secularist National Salvation Front. More than merely parties or coalitions, these groups embrace incompatible worldviews that divide Egyptian society and plunged Egypt into political chaos, culminating in a new era of military rule. Ethnographic and qualitative methods will aim to understand what secularism means to Egyptians of various groups and the implications of post-Arab Spring conversations about secularism for Egyptian democracy.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Growing up, I loved to read. My favorite book was The Penderwicks by Jeanne Birdsall, which describes the adventurous life of a family of four daughters and a father, with emphasis on the varied personalities of the girls. The sisters symbolize confidence, and after reading the story, I had a burning desire to become as self-sure as the sisters. Entering high school, I realized that education is the means to develop the confidence of the Penderwicks. My junior year of high school was formative to my academic path. I took IB English and History, which opened my eyes to the excitement of learning. They were difficult courses, but my teacher led my class on an intellectual journey that covered ground from Chinua Achebe and multiculturalism to Arthur Miller and the history of political parties. While I was only just beginning to feel a sense of ownership over my beliefs, IB put me on a path towards confidence that education gives me.

In order to build confidence and find my place in the world, I knew it was important for me to choose the right college. Upon visiting Elon, I felt it was where I should be, so I declared Political Science as my major and committed. Hailing from Seattle, Elon was a big change for me. I had been sure that college would be an amazing experience where I would "find myself," but during my first semester, all I felt was out of place. That is until I was sitting in a classroom learning from Dr. Dalhouse about 9/11. He has a passion for teaching which transfers to his students, myself included. I wanted to feel like I belonged at Elon for more than one class, so I began attending Dr. Dalhouse's office hours regularly where he encouraged me to become an International Global Studies and Religious Studies double-major. Around the same time I decided to switch my major, I met Dr. Pennington. He advised me on course registration

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for classes and I felt (and still feel) so honored to have these incredible professors guiding my intellectual journey.

Through their mentorship, I registered for two classes that greatly influenced my current academic trajectory: Arabic and Approaches to the Study of Religion. Dr. Elgamal is my Arabic professor and she is an incredible teacher whose Egyptian background is one reason I came to the idea of studying Egypt. Learning Arabic has made me fall in love with and feel great passion for studying the Middle East. Dr. Marcus-Sells taught my Approaches course in which we read Judith Butler's Gender Trouble. In the book, Butler argues that external actions produce internal identity, that actions' "parodic repetition… exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction" (Butler, 179). When I read Gender Trouble, I awakened to the idea that we become ourselves through embodying, which had significant consequences for my feelings of confidence. I realized that "reality is created through sustained social performances," implying that I can create my own reality, achieve my goals, by embodying actions that symbolize who I want to be (Butler, 180). It is empowering to feel a sense of control over your own destiny; reading Judith Butler built my confidence, just as IB had once done.

The Lumen Scholarship would make the continued mentorship of my professors possible and offer the opportunity to study a region that I have come to feel personally connected to, furthering my path towards self-confidence the Penderwick sisters inspired me to believe was possible.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Focus

The Egyptian independence movement led by Gamal Abdul Nasser in 1952 sought to unite Egyptian citizens against British and French imperial control over the Suez Canal by promoting Arab Nationalism. Nasser (1918-1917) suppressed his political opposition, as did as his direct successors, Anwar Sadat (1918-1981) and Hosni Mubarak (1928-2011), during their respective reigns. Their primary opposition came from the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928 with the goal of shaping Egyptian society according to the Quran and Hadith (Scherer, 581). In 2011 as the Arab Spring spread from Tunisia to the surrounding Middle East, authoritarian rule that had gripped Egypt for over fifty years fell quickly subject to mass protests. Egyptians had a common demand: "Al-shab yurid isqat al-nizam!," (The people want the fall of the regime!). When Mubarak resigned, however, the protestors could not find common ground to build a government. Two rival groups emerged: Islamists and secularists—people who perceive society in two incompatible ways.

The Muslim Brotherhood and the National Salvation Front were the organizations to champion the competing visions of the nation. The Brotherhood nominated Mohamed Morsi to run for President after Mubarak's resignation. From 2011 to 2012, Egyptians voted five times on presidential candidates and revisions to the constitution, as secularists and Islamists declared results invalid when they did not align with their respective political goals. During those campaigns, Egyptians clearly saw the competitive nature of the different worldviews presented by the two parties, a detriment to the unification of a young democracy (Brown, 49). Morsi eventually won the presidency by a slim margin in June of 2012, elevating the Brotherhood into power for the first time.

In late 2012, Morsi made an infamous statement, declaring "going around in a vicious circle in a transitional period has to end" and making an illegal power grab (Kirkpatrick). Morsi usurped the military who had not relinquished some of the power they held under Mubarak. Secular leaning politicians classified Morsi's actions as "Islamic," cementing opposition to the Brotherhood among secularist

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Egyptians (Aftandilian, 9). Middle Eastern scholar Nathan Brown argues that Egypt's transition from autocracy to democracy had strong potential for success, but politicians on both sides exhibited "bad behavior" that prohibited a successful transition (Brown, 50). Brown maintains that Morsi's decree was not religious in nature but merely nefarious politics.

Informed by that understanding of the failure of Egypt's democracy, this project will explore why secularists and Islamists felt so divided. We commonly think of secularism as the separation of church and state. Thinking about secularism simply as separation, however, does not account for the many nuances of the secular in varied societies. Anthropologist Saba Mahmood examined the relationship between politics and piety among Muslim women in Egypt, discovering that secularism is always in negotiation with religion (Mahmood, 78). Other scholars like Charles Taylor, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Talal Asad, also imagine secularism as more than a separation of spheres. Operating with a theory of secularism that has come out of the work of these scholars reveals that secularism has its own values and methods of social organization. Asad describes secularism as, "a particular conception of the world," exposing secularism as more than the absence of something; secularism is something itself (Asad, 191). Their work, coupled with field research to understand how people perceive secularism, will help me think about Egyptian secularism. Juergensmeyer refers to secular nationalism and religion as two modes of social organization, what he calls competing "ideologies of order" (Juergensmeyer, 18). With his argument as a framework for seeing Egypt's political differences as options of equal weight, I will ask the questions, "What is the particular nature of Egyptian secularism?," "What role did it play in the fall of Mubarak and Morsi?," "How were conversations regarding secularism framed during the transition," and "What were the implications of those conversations on Egyptian democracy?"

Scholarly Process

The framework that will guide my research is a theory of secularism developed by the scholars named above—a theory that seeks to explain what secularism means in a multicultural sense. Charles Taylor shows us secularism can be understood in at least three ways: as public space emptied of God; as the cultural turning away from God (such as no longer going to church); and as seeing belief in God as one choice among many, implying that there are alternatives to religion (Taylor, 2-3). A key concept depicted in this theory is that religion and secularism are framed in opposition (Juergensmeyer, 22). Moreover, to articulate the conditions of secularism, I need to pay attention to the "different kind of lived experience involved in understanding [one's] life in one way or another," that is, to recognize "what it's like to live as a believer or a nonbeliever" (Taylor, 5). A pious Egyptian woman told Mahmood, "It is the project of the government and the secularists to transform religion into conventions or customs" (Mahmood, 50). Mahmood describes the implications of such a project on religion: "practices that are supposed to be part of a larger program for shaping ethical capacities lose this function and become little more than markers of identity" (Mahmood, 51). What Mahmood is able to show as an anthropologist is how everyday lives and practices are shaped by and resist the secular. Mahmood goes on to say that the daily actions of Muslims are "a necessary means to a virtuous life," which exemplifies Judith Butler's idea that performativity creates internal essence, such as faith for Muslims (Mahmood, 50). Mahmood shows how secularism isolates religion from daily life, showing ways to be in conversation with devout Muslims about how they see secularism.

In light of the understanding of secularism developed by these scholars, my project will aim to comprehend the distinctive characteristics of secularism in an Egyptian context. With the tools of Global Studies, I hope to understand the motives, causes, and results of the Arab Spring in Egypt. With the tools of Religious Studies, I will investigate what it means to have a secular and an a-secular worldview in Egypt.

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My mentor and I have conceived of this research in four overlapping phases:

1. Literature Review: reading scholarship on secularism, the Arab Spring, and Morsi's presidency. This review is already underway via a 499 research hour with my mentor and will extend through the Fall of 2021.

2. Knowing Egypt Better: in constant conversation with Professor Shereen Elgamal, who maintains deep personal connections to Egypt and has agreed to help with this project, I will work to learn all I can about contemporary Egyptian life and culture in preparation for field research there. I have been watching Egyptian movies and TV shows and reading newspapers. I will continue Arabic study with Dr. Elgamal and in Rabat, Morocco during my Fall 2021 semester abroad.

3. Guided Fieldwork: I will conduct interviews with individuals while in Egypt to learn how people recall and understand the events of 2011, the deep divide over Egyptian secularism, and the role of important actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the National Salvation Front, prominent imams, and intellectuals. I will meet with professors at Egyptian universities on both sides of the issues about what the conversations regarding secularism and Islamism looked like during the transition from Mubarak to Morsi. I am inspired by Saba Mahmood's work among women in Egypt, and I will aim to emulate her ethnographic model and get to know the participants of my research. In order to develop trust and the relationships necessary to do good ethnographic work, I plan to visit Egypt twice—January Term 2022 and summer 2023.

4. Writing: The final step of my research project will be to synthesize my data, put it in conversation with the scholarly literature, and think about the relationship between religion and democracy in Egypt. I will work throughout the next two years towards publishing an article in a peer-reviewed journal.

Because I am not currently part of any cohort that funds research, receiving a Lumen Scholarship is essential to my project as outlined, which will require travel to Egypt after the pandemic has abated. If necessary, I could conduct interviews via Zoom, but the personal relationships I would form, the experience of living among families, and the opportunity to converse with scholars and students at the famous Egyptian universities that influenced both secular and Islamist thinking in Egypt would all add immense value to my research. The scholarship from Lumen would allow me to fulfill my research goals in a way that no other program available to me can. This project will advance my intellectual development by expanding my knowledge of lived religion outside of the classroom and giving me experience in the various stages of the research process. Further, the opportunity to work for two years and eight credits with my mentor, Dr. Pennington, who is an experienced field researcher and has written extensively about religion and modernity, will teach me a great deal about academic writing and research as well as the general process of
scholarship.

Proposed Products
•   Article for peer-reviewed journal
•   Presentation at the American Academy of Religion Southeastern regional meeting
•   SURF Presentations
•   Online article for general audiences (e.g., Religion Dispatches)
•   Other: reciprocity with communities I work with is an important consideration as I imagine other products. I will be in conversation with my mentors about what will be meaningful to give back to those who have helped me with research

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FEASIBILITY

Feasibility Statement

One potential challenge to my project is my lack of field research experience. Although I do not yet have the skills to conduct interviews, under the guidance of my mentor, who has extensive experience conducting field research, and using the skills I will gain from the Research Methods class I will take while studying abroad in Morocco in Fall Semester 2021, I will work to acquire the tools necessary to conduct this research project. I have also thought about the challenge of finding interview subjects in a country I have never visited. Dr. Shereen Elgamal—my Arabic professor for the next couple of years—was born and raised in Egypt and has graciously offered to help connect me with her many contacts in Cairo when I visit. Further, through Shereen's class at Elon, I have come to know Professor Shahinaz, who teaches at American University in Cairo. Shahinaz said that she would be happy to meet me in Egypt and help me meet students and other professors at one of the renowned Egyptian universities.

My connections to both Dr. Elgamal and Professor Shahinaz directly relate to the IRB process. I will submit an IRB proposal in Summer 2021 so that I may begin preliminary research in Egypt during Winter Term 2022 immediately following my semester in Morocco. On my return to Elon in Spring 2022 I will submit a revised protocol based on what I have learned in January to refine the objectives of my Summer 2022 research. Dr. Pennington, Professor Elgamal, and I will all strategize ways to network in Cairo. I will work to develop a network of personal contacts that will start with Dr. Elgamal and university contacts that will start with Professor Shahinaz. During Winter Term 2022, I will go to Egypt and begin developing personal relationships that I will continue building once I return to Egypt during the summer of 2022. To help me think further about the ethical implications of this work, I will join the Fair Trade Learning workshops hosted by the Periclean Scholars Mar. 8-12, 2021, which will enhance my community-based research practices. Dr. Pennington has previously mentored four Elon fellows (Lumen, Multifaith Scholars, and ECF) who conducted field research abroad.

While I am aware that some might have concerns about a twenty-year-old single woman conducting research in a patriarchal society, many western perceptions of Egypt are based on antiquated and orientalist views of the Middle East. The GEC has recognized that conditions are safe for students in Egypt, as just last spring they added a study abroad program in Cairo. Working with personal contacts made by Dr. Elgamal and Professor Shahinaz as well as living with families, I will be well advised about local customs and well cared for. I will remain in communication with Dr. Dalhouse from the GEC on the safety conditions in Egypt and continue to monitor US State Department travel advisories.

My mentor and I have discussed alternative plans if public health conditions do not allow me to travel. While I plan and hope to go to Egypt in order to conduct research, this project can be adapted to a Covid-19 world if necessary. My existing connections in Egypt through Professor Elgamal and Professor Shahinaz would be a great jumping-off point for interviews I could conduct over Zoom. I could replace my Winter Term trip to Egypt with an intensive period of studying Egyptian culture through film, television, music, and language study. I also can continue to build my connections by talking to other Elon students who have been to Egypt (many of whom I am connected to through my Arabic classes). In addition, if travel to Egypt is not possible, but travel is open to other Muslim countries in the region, the understanding of secularism that this project employs could be tested in such places as Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria (i.e. North African Muslim countries with secular constitutions). Strategizing about potential interruptions of research plans have been part of my conversations with my mentor from the beginning.

TRAVEL OUTSIDE THE US

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PROPOSED TRAVEL: Egypt

During January Term 2022, I plan to visit Cairo, Egypt to conduct interviews with locals and become familiar with the culture. Again in summer of 2022, I plan to live in Cairo for a couple of months to conduct reserach, primarily through interviews.

GEC PREASSESSMENT: YELLOW

As of March 2021, the US Dept of State still recommends travelers reconsider travel to Egypt because of Covid. Please note:
all airline passengers to the United States ages two years and older must provide a negative COVID-19 viral test taken within three calendar days of travel. Alternatively, travelers to the U.S. may provide documentation from a licensed health care provider of having recovered from COVID-19 in the 90 days preceding travel. Check the CDC website for additional information.
Assessed by: Mark Dalhouse

BUDGET

Supplies
-Books for literature review: $400
-Pencils, pens, notebooks, etc: $200
-External hard drive: $55
-Recording device: $250
-Laptop: $1,200

Tuition
-General Tuition: $6,345
-Egyptian colloquial Arabic language training: $400
-Tuition for 498 summer hours: $1,250

Conference Expenses
-Poster and other presentation materials: $200
AAR SE Conference:
-Travel: $300
-Room and board: $600
-Registration: $50

Research Travel and Expenses
Egypt January 2022
-Roundtrip flights: $800
-Housing: $350
-Food and daily travel: $250
-Translator: $70 an hour for around 10 hours=$700
Egypt Summer 2022
-Roundtrip flights: $800
-Transportation around Egypt: $500
-Housing: $700
-Food and daily travel: $500

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-Translator: $70 an hour for around 45 hours=$3,150

Future Plans
   -Law school applications: $1,000

Total: $20,000

PROPOSED EXPERIENCES and PRODUCTS

	Experiences	Products
Summer 2021	-Read scholarship on secularism	-Annotated bibliography
Fall 2021	-Take Research Methods -Study abroad in Morocco -Take 498 research credit	-Literature review
Winter 2022	-Travel to Cairo, Egypt -Take 498 research credit	-Interview transcripts -Established relationships
Spring 2022	-Take 498 research credit -Take online Egyptian Arabic course	-Research paper -Knowledge of colloquial Arabic
Summer 2022	-Travel to Cairo, Egypt -Take two 498 research credits or SURE	-Interview transcripts -Coded data set
Fall 2022	-Apply for Fulbright -Apply for law school -Take 498 research credit	-Research Paper
Winter 2023	-Take 498 research credit	-First draft of journal article
Spring 2023	-Present at AAR SE conference -Present at SURF -Take 498 research credit	-Final draft of article building on earlier papers

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