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The adaptation of the terms ‘laicism’, ‘secularism’ and ‘laïcité’ in Arabic

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This article intends to study the adaptation of the terms *laicism*, *secularism* and *laïcité* in Arabic and the rendering of these three western terms into a single Arabic term: ‘*almāniyyah*’. The paper intends also to trace the etymology of ‘*almāniyyah*’ first through a scrutiny of its original concepts and significations in western languages, and then describe its incorporation into Arabic, its development and the development of its significations in this language.

Keywords: laicism, secularism, laïcité, profanity, secularization, laicization, Arab World, Muslim World, Syrian Christians.

1. Introduction

In his comprehensive work on secularism, the late Egyptian writer Abdulwahhab Al-Masiri wrote (the bracketed words are mine):

There are different translations of the words “secular” and “laic”¹ in the Arabic dictionary: (1) *al-ilmāniyyah*, derived from ‘ilm: [science]; (2) *al-almāniyyah*, derived from ‘ālam [world]; (3) *al-dunyawiyyah* [earthliness, mundaness]: the belief that there is nothing beyond this life; (4) *al-zamāniyyah*, the idea that all phenomena are related to/depend on time and life, and that they have no relation whatever with metaphysics; and (5) sometimes the word *lā’īkī* [laic, laical] and *lā’īkiyyah* [laicism] is used without any change, especially in Morocco and Lebanon (Al-Masiri 2002, vol. I, p. 61).

According to Al-Masiri, there are two western concepts (*secular* and *laic*) that have been interpreted as if they were one concept, which in turn was translated into Arabic with four synonyms. One of them, *lā’īkī*, is a transliteration of French

1. Sic. In fact he means English *secularism* and respectively French *laïcité* and not *secular* and *laic*.

laïque, which raises the number of the Arabic equivalents to five². The pronunciation of the Arabic word as *‘ilmāniyyah* instead of *‘almāniyyah* by the layman as well as the élite has given rise to a heated controversy. In this context, Al-Masiri quotes the Egyptian secular writer Fu’ad Zakaria who states:

“There is no doubt whatsoever that relating secularism to *‘ālam* [world] is more accurate than relating it to *‘ilam* [science]. If we want to be more accurate, the right translation of secularism would be *al-zamāniyyah* [temporality], because in foreign languages [sic] the word *secular*, to take English as an example, [secularism, rather] is derived from a [Latin] word that means century: ‘*saeculum*’ (Al-Masiri 2002, 61). From Fu’ad Zakaria’s words, we gather that he suggests that the term *al-zamāniyyah* ‘temporality’ — instead of *‘almāniyyah* — be based on the English term of Latin origin, *secularism*, not on the French term of Greek origin, *laïcité*, since ‘time’ is not one of the latter’s sense components. However, this suggestion is inapposite because the original meaning of *saeculum*, from which the term *secularism* originates, is ‘world,’ rather than ‘time,’ as we shall clarify subsequently. In the Arabic dictionary Al-Wasīṭ, issued by the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo, *‘almāniyyah* is defined as “relating to *‘ālam*”, i.e. the world, “as opposed to the religious or clerical” (Al-Wasīṭ 1965, 624). All Arabic sources relate *‘almāniyyah* to *‘ālam* ‘world’ rather than *‘ilm* ‘science’. Therefore, there is no need to expatiate on this point any further given its complete clarity. However, we do need to clarify the meanings of the original concepts designated by the western terms expressed in Arabic as *‘almāniyyah*.

2. The term *‘almāniyyah*

Nowadays, the term *‘almāniyyah* in Arabic is understood to be a translation of the English term *secularism* and the French term *laïcité*. It is important to realize that these terms are not synonymous in their historical meaning and modern signification. They are different in terms of signification. The first refers to the secular ideology which emerged in the aftermath of the French Revolution, whereas the second refers to “earthliness, mundaneness” in general (Taha 2012, 182). The first is an ideology adopted by a state, whereas the second is a generally civil and humanistic movement that is not ideologically committed. We will elaborate on this point later on, but now we shall focus on the original concepts designated by the western terms expressed in Arabic by the term *‘almāniyyah* as mentioned in western lexical sources. Then we will investigate its linguistic derivation in Arabic,

2. This phenomenon of many Arabic equivalents to a single western concept is a serious problem in current Arab culture. See (Alsulaiman A., 2009: 83).

tracing its incorporation into Arabic and the multiplicity of its concepts in Arabic with the aim of specifying the meanings of its various concepts.

2.1 The ancient concepts of the terms designed in Arabic by *‘almāniyyah*

In western languages, we distinguish between three terms which have roughly similar meanings all rendered into Arabic by *‘almāniyyah*. These are: (a) *laicism*, (b) *secularism* and (c) *profanity*.

2.1.1 *Laicism*

The term *laicism* is derived from the Greek *laïkós* (λαϊκός), an adjective derived from the noun *laós* (λαός) 'people'.³ *Laïkós* literally means 'popular'. This term acquired a new meaning after the emergence of Christian clergy after the spread of Christianity in the Byzantine Empire in the Fourth Century. It was then used to refer to the common people so as to distinguish them from the clergy who became then the élite. Thus *laïkós* no longer meant just 'popular', but also 'layman', i.e. the person who is not sacerdotal or a member of the clergy. The differentiation between the common people and the clergy became institutionalized and deepened further with the performance of religious sacraments such as baptism and marriage, for example, which are the exclusive job of ordained clergymen. From the Eleventh Century, this difference took another dimension with the introduction of celibacy which forbids clergy from marrying. Thus the difference between common believers and the priestly élite became greater.

Consequently, in this context *laicism* means the act of downgrading a clergyman into a layman, or changing the clergy's property into a layman's ownership. Hence the name of *laic* or *layman* and *laity* in English, as the antonym of cleric; *laïque* in French, *laie* in German, *leek* and *ley* in Dutch. The same is applicable to the rest of European languages. Although these terms used to refer to ignorant plebeians, they were used in positive sense as well. Calvin used it to refer to judges in civil courts: *juges laïcs* 'civil judges' (De Ley 2007, 1–2). These meanings are as old in western languages as the Christian institutions themselves; they have not been recently coined. In the Oxford English Dictionary (Murray et al., 1961–1970, 134) the English term *layman* can be traced up to 1432–1450. In the same dictionary, the term *layman* is traced to its old French origins back to the year of its formation in 1330, which is originally from the Latin *laïcus*, the term which is — in turn — borrowed from the Greek *laïkós*.

On the basis of what has been stated above, the meaning of *laicism* (i.e. making something/someone a layman or a layman's property, as opposed to clerical)

3. Murray J.A.H. et al., 1961–1970, vol. VI, p. 28 (laic).

goes back to the beginning of the Christian era. Thence forth, the word referred to popular mundane issues, in contrast to clerical, sacerdotal ones. Probably this term emerged after Constantine announced Christianity as the official religion of the Byzantine Empire in the Fourth Century, which witnessed a strong presence of Patriarchs and the Church in Byzantine political and social life (Alsulaiman, 2013, 142).

The later French *laïcité* was also coined from Greek *laós* (see 2.2.).

2.1.2 *Secularism*

The Greek word *aioon* (αἰών) means “eternity, generation, time, era, this life” (Lewis Ch. & Short Ch. 1975, 56). It is the latter that we are interested in, i.e. ‘this life’. In the Bible this word was mentioned many times to designate both opposite meanings: ‘eternity’ and ‘this transient, temporary life’, exactly like the Hebrew word *‘ōlām* (עולם) which is found in the Old Testament with both meanings: ‘eternity’ and ‘this transient life’.

We find *‘ōlām* ‘eternity’ in Psalm 45:7: וְעַד כְּסֵאֵי אֱלֹהִים עוֹלָם וָעַד “Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever”⁴. And we find it with the sense of ‘temporary life’ in Ecclesiastes 3:11: וְגַם אֵת-הָעוֹלָם הִתְּנָה בְּלִבָּם “also he hath set the world in their heart’, because *‘ōlām* here means ‘world’, ‘this life’, and not ‘eternity’⁵.

The word *aioon* (αἰών) in the Gospel of Matthew (25:46) means ‘eternal life’: ‘And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal’. ‘Eternal life’ here is a translation of ζῶσιν αἰώνιον. The Vulgate translated this expression into Latin as *vitam aeternam*, which is ‘eternal life’ as well. Also, αἰών in the Gospel of Matthew 28:20 means ‘this life’: ‘Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world’. ‘The end of the world’ here is a translation of συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος. The Vulgate translated it into Latin as *consummationem saeculi*. *Saeculi*, which is a genitive form of *saeculum*, is what interests us here. It does not have the polysemy that is found in the Greek word αἰών, which means both ‘the eternal life’ and ‘this life’. *Aioon* (αἰών) has taken this polysemy from the Hebrew word *‘ōlām* which means both ‘the eternal life’ and ‘this life’. The Vulgate rendered ‘the eternal life’ into *vitam aeternam* as we have already mentioned, whereas it translated ‘the

4. Hebrew verses are quoted from the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (Elliger K. & Rudolph W. 1977). Translations are quoted from the “Official King James Bible online: www.kingjamesbible-online.org.

5. The word *‘ōlām* in this verse does not mean “eternity” as the translator of the Old Testament into Arabic mistakenly thought when translating וְגַם אֵת-הָעוֹלָם, הִתְּנָה בְּלִבָּם as “and He has also set eternity in their hearts”, making the meaning of the whole verse unclear. (Arabic Bible 2011). See also Klein E. (1987), the entry עולם, (p 473).

mortal life' into *consummationem saeculi*. Consequently, the Latin word does not mean only 'time' and 'century', but also 'this mortal life' in the religious sense of the expression in Christianity and Islam. This is clear from the context of the Bible.⁶

The notion of the 'last time' in the Bible (John, Chapter 2, verse 18), which is a translation of Greek ἐσχάτη ὥρα, refers to the approach of Jesus' return after his Crucifixion, so as to establish 'the Kingdom of Heaven'. This is called in Christian theology 'the Second Coming' (De Ley 2007, 1) The Bible names this period between the first coming of Jesus and his Crucifixion, and his second coming after establishing 'the Kingdom of Heaven' as *aioon* (αἰών) in Greek, which the Vulgate rendered into Latin as *saeculum*, the word in which we are interested in the context of our investigation of the term *secularism*. It — *saeculum* — designates the period between the first coming of Jesus and his return afterwards to establish 'the Kingdom of Heaven', that is 'this life'. Therefore, *saeculum* — precisely — means 'this life'. We shall overlook the other meanings designated by the word and will focus on this sense, 'this life'. What clarifies this point further is the antonymy between *saecularis*, namely the commoner who is not a sacerdotal, and *regularis*, which refers to every person who conforms to a specific religious system (*regula*) and abides by its internal norms like priests, pastors and monastery residents such as monks, nuns and those in a similar position.⁷

From *saeculum*, the Latin transitive verb *saecularisatio* was derived to designate the process of making something earthly or mundane by extricating it from sacerdotal exclusiveness and ownership into the commoners' property and commonality. It is originally a technical term belonging to the Church terminology designating the latter's property which princes and kings used to appropriate for their own use or for the public's. According to De ley (De Ley 2007, 2), the first usage of the term *saecularisatio* in this sense dates back to 1648, in the aftermath of Westphalen Reconciliation.

2.1.3 Profanity

The term *profanity* is derived from the Latin *profanes*, which is composed of *fanum*, i.e. the place consecrated as a sacred temple by priests, and *pro* 'before; in front of'. In its original sense, *profanus* refers to everything that is taken out of the sacred place into the public use such as the meat that is offered at the temple as an oblation, and then it is taken out to be given as a charity. Also the Latin transitive verb *profanare* is derived from it (*profanus*) to mean 'secularize' (to make mundane, earthly), 'deprive' of sacredness, 'expel from the clergy' into the commoners.

6. See John, Chapter 2, verses 15–18.

7. The Coran (IX:38) indicates *aioon* (αἰών) *saeculum* in the sense of this mortal life with *al-hayāt al-dunyā* (الحياة الدنيا). Yusuf Ali (1946:451).

In general, it means excluding a person from the sacred and making him a commoner or layman, or taking something out of religious use (land or buildings) and dedicating it to mundane utilization. The early Christians used the adjective *profanus* to refer to heretics and everything they considered profane⁸. As to the Jews, they use it for ‘blasphemy’. Since articulating the name of Jehovah is forbidden in Judaism, the Jews consider this act as an instance of profanity⁹.

2.2 The modern concepts of the terms designed in Arabic by *‘almāniyyah*

We discussed the old concepts of the terms designating *‘almāniyyah* in Arabic as an act of excluding a person from the sacred and making him a commoner or layman, and taking something out of religious use (land or buildings) and dedicating it to mundane utilization (see 2.1.1. and 2.1.2.). Generally, this was the old meaning of *secularism* until the French Revolution (1789–1799). Now we shall discuss the modern concepts of the term *secularism*, the concepts that emerged after the French Revolution. We are using ‘modern’ here in the wider sense of the word, since the French Revolution is more than two centuries old now. Yet it remains a landmark in the history of *secularism* and a founding movement for the laic ideology which was developed towards the end of Ninetieth Century, i.e. a century after the outbreak of the French Revolution.

2.2.1 *Secularism*

The second concept that the Arabic term *‘almāniyyah* has acquired is *secularism*, not the ancient concept treated in 2.1.2., but the concept which was introduced in 1851 by the Englishman George Holyoake. By *secularism*, Holyoake did not mean the old concept as mentioned above, but the separation between religion and society. While the Latin term *saecularisatio* was understood as to take people and property from the religious domain into the irreligious sphere, from the sacerdotal world into the commoners, the term *secularism*, which was introduced by George Holyoake, became understood as limiting the influence of religion on society and

8. Murray J.A.H. et al., 1961–1970, vol. VIII, p. 1424–1425.

9. The proper name /YHWH/ is mentioned as the name of God in Judaism. Since it is forbidden to pronounce the word /YHWH/ in Judaism, no one knows how it should be pronounced. That is why in their recital of the Torah, the Jews substitute it by either *השם*: *hashshem* “The Name” par excellence, or *אדני*: *adonāy* “The Lord”. In scriptural literature, this name is referred to as Tetragrammaton “the four letters” (from Greek Τετραγράμματο). As for pronouncing it as (Jehovah), this presupposes that /YHWH/ is the present tense form of the verb *הוה*: *hwh* in Hebrew, which means the verb “to be” “it was”. This presupposition is based on Exodus 3:14: *וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֲהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה* “And God said unto Moses, “I AM THAT I AM”.

social relationships in general. Ancient *secularism* is relatively limited since it concerns the clergy and their property which was taken from their sacerdotal world into the layman's society mostly through oppression and exaction, whereas the *secularism* of George Holyoake intended as a thorough movement because it aims at the opposite: reducing the influence of the clergy from society constricting them in their churches and synagogues. However, George Holyoake's movement did not develop to become an organized movement with a far reaching impact like the French *laïcité*; it was not adopted by the British government as in France, but it turned into a general civil movement, alongside the religious movement — which is present in British politics and society¹⁰ — and contributed considerably to the secularization of numerous groups of society and the creation of new values which were subsequently termed as 'civil religion'. Yet, this transpired without institutionalizing secularism, ideologizing and imposing it on the people by law as happened in France.

2.2.2 *Laïcité*

As to the third and last concept designated by the term *ʿalmāniyyah* in Arabic, it is the concept that emerged in France a century — approximately — after the French Revolution: *laïcité*, which is etymologically traced back to Greek *laós* as we mentioned above. The term *laïcité* was first introduced into the French dictionary in 1871, according to Le Grand Robert dictionary¹¹. The laic movement started developing into a movement for the laicization of education only because laicism, as a French dynamic ideology, reached its final stage of development after the 1905 law Separation of Church and State. This laicization of education led to the exclusion of priests and monks from governmental primary education. From that time on, the French laicism has completely dominated two institutions which are considered as its most important pillars: state and school (in Turkey: army and school).

3. History of the term *ʿalmāniyyah* in Arabic

As mentioned above, the word *ʿalm* in Arabic — from which the term *ʿalmāniyyah* is derived — means 'the world'. It is noteworthy the way Al-Wasit dictionary (Al-Wasit 1965, 624) defines it, especially the following: 'relating to *al-ʿalm*, that is

10. In England 26 diocesan bishops have seats in the House of the Lords, and are known as the "Lords Spiritual". See Bown Francis (1994), pages 105–119.

11. Rey A., 1985, Le Grand Robert, volume 5, p 915. Jean Baubérot (Baubérot 1996:13) states that this term first appeared in a dictionary issued in volumes, the last volume of which was published in 1887, by the French Nobel Laureate Ferdinand Buisson (1882–1887). This contradicts what is mentioned in Le Grand Robert, the most important reference for the French language.

al-‘ālam [world]’, and more specifically explaining the word *‘alm* as *‘ālam*. Al-Wasīt Dictionary and the Arabic Language Academy both consider it necessary to explain the word *‘alm*. This means that it is an unfamiliar word for the general readership. On many occasions, we noticed that it was unfamiliar even for the elite, which makes us wonder: is *‘alm* an Arabic word? Was it mentioned in this sense in older sources?

The answer is no. The word *‘alm* ‘world’ is not an Arabic word and was not mentioned in older sources and dictionaries¹². It is a word of Syriac origins, from *‘alm-ā* ‘world’¹³. It is noteworthy to mention that the root composed of the three letters /*‘ l m*/ in all Semitic languages means ‘time’, ‘this life’, ‘the world’ and ‘the infinite time’ (Klein E. 1987, 473). There is alliteration amongst the word *‘ālam* in Arabic, in Hebrew *‘ōlām*, and in Abyssinian (Ge‘ez) *‘ālam*. The common sense of this word amongst the Semitic languages designates ‘the world’, like in Arabic, Hebrew and the Ethiopian language as mentioned above. As to *‘alm-ā*, it is not a common Semitic word; it is a Syriac word that was borrowed into Hebrew as explicitly acknowledged by Hebrew lexicographers such as Klein (see supra). It was also introduced into Arabic — or more precisely — it was utilized in Arabic to coin the word *‘almāniyyah*, as shall be explained later. The evidence proving this is the fact that *‘alm-ā* – ‘world’ — is not used in Arabic, except as a root from which the term *‘almāniyyah* is derived.¹⁴

In order to understand how this Syriac word was introduced into Arabic, we need first to note that ancient Syrians were Christians who, like other Christians, distinguish between the clergy and common believers, between pastors and

12. The word *‘alm* “world” was not mentioned in older Arabic sources because it is not a genuine Arabic one, but has been borrowed from Syriac. The first Arabic dictionary to have included it is Muhit Al-Muhit (Al-Bustani 1987, *علم/‘alm*). It (*‘alm*) was also mentioned in the Lexicon Arabico-Latinum of Freytag (Freytag 1830–1837. See *‘alm* (*علم*), where Freytag it defines as follows: “*‘alm* (*علم*): creatae, mundus”. Likewise it was mentioned by Kazimirski in his Dictionnaire arabe–français (Kazimirski A., 1860, the entry *‘alm* (*علم*)).

13. Both in the Aramaic and Syriac languages, the definite article /ā/ is attached to the end of the word. The pattern of this word is *‘alm-*.

14. If the Syriac *‘alm-ā* belongs to the common Semitic vocabulary of the Semitic languages, its Hebrew equivalent would be in then one of the so called “Nomina Segolata”. This is because each Syriac word with the following morphological pattern *fa‘l-ā* corresponds etymologically in Arabic with the pattern *fa‘l-un* and in Hebrew and with the pattern *fe‘el* (compare Syriac *kalb-ā* “dog”; Arabic *kalb-un* and Hebrew *ke‘leb*). This is morphological as well as etymological evidence that the Syriac word *‘alm-ā* is not a part of the common Semitic vocabulary and that the Arabic *‘ālam* is of Syriac origin. See Moscati S. (1969).

flocks.¹⁵ They were the conveyors of Greek knowledge in the middle ages, and they translated from Greek into Syriac centuries before Arabs. Since they were Christians, they had priests and monks who were closely related to Greece. Thus the concept *ʿalmāniyyah* — namely making something part of the laity, as opposed to the clerical — was taken from Christian theology, much of which was written in Greek at that time. Likewise, this term was transferred into other Christian nations¹⁶ like the France (1330) and Great Britain (1432), as mentioned in the Oxford English Dictionary (see 2.1.1.). They expressed the Greek concept *laikós*, which emerged with the rise of the Christian clergy — as distinct from the rest of the people — from the beginning of the Fourth Century, with the term *ʿalmāyā* (عالمية) ‘earthly’, ‘mundane’, which is derived from *ʿalm-ā* ‘world’. They started using *ʿalmāyā* to designate ‘of the world’, ‘of this life’ and ‘layman’ or ‘commoner’. The ancient Syrians Arabized the term — once they had become Arabized during the Abbasid era (750–1258) first into *ʿālamānī*, on the ground that Arabic *ʿālam* ‘world’ is the functional, lexicographic and semantic equivalent to the Syriac *ʿalm-ā* ‘world’. Then they introduced *ʿalm-ā* into Arabic and arabized it as *ʿalm* (علم) to derive *ʿalmānī* (علماني) ‘layman’ from it, given its ease at the level of pronunciation¹⁷. From the Syrians, this meaning was transferred into the Arabs through the Christian Arab writers who knew Syriac like Ibn Al-Muqaffaʿ (died in 987)¹⁸. Further, this word is not used — up to the present — except as a root from which the term *ʿalmāniyyah* was derived, as already mentioned. Then *ʿalmāniyyah* was derived from this Syriac word on orality basis, not on morphological one. This is because morphological norms would require deriving *ʿalmiyyah* (علمية) instead of *ʿalmāniyyah* (علمانية) with the addition of the suffixes /a/ and /n/. It seems obvious from the word *ʿālamī* (عالمي) which Dozy mentions in his dictionary (see infra)

15. The Druze also distinguish between the ‘sagacious’ (عقال *ʿuqqāl*) who are the pick, and the ‘ignorant’ (جهال *ḡuhhāl*) who are the commoners.

16. This is a historical and linguistic fact mentioned also by Bernard Lewis in his book “What Went Wrong” (in Chapter 5 “Secularism and Civil Society”. (Bernard Lewis, 2002).

17. Relating to *ʿalm-ā*, see Goshen-Gottstein (1970:58) and Brockelmann (1928) the entry *ʿalm-ā* (عالم). See also Brockelmann (1925) and the entry *ʿalm-ā* (عالم) in the glossary.

18. On page 3 of “The Political Language of Islam” regarding the introduction of the term into usage, Bernard Lewis says: “during the 19th and 20th centuries, and under the influence of western ideas and institutions, new terms emerged in Islam to signify the concept of the movement of mundaneness in Turkish first, and then in Arabic. In Turkish the term *ladini* “nonreligious” was used, and then it was changed into *layk* [*laïque*] borrowing it from French. In Arabic, the word was taken from Christian Arabs. In their own linguistic usage, Christian Arabs derived the word *ʿalmānī* [“layman”] from *ʿalm-ā* “world”. Then the pronunciation of the word was changed into *ʿilmānī* from *ʿilm* “science”. (cited in: Alexander, K. (ed.), 1998, 35–36).

and translates it as ‘*séculier*’, ‘*laïque*’, that the suggested words ‘*ālamī*’ (علمي) and ‘*ālamānī*’ (علماني) were not then well established in Arabic; they disappeared completely on behalf of the originally and derivationally Syriac word ‘*almānī*’, (علماني) given its close lexical and conceptual relatedness to Christianity and the Syriac linguistic heritage.

As a result of our research in early Arabic sources we have found that the earliest mention of the term ‘*almāniyyah*’ in Arabic sources was in the Tenth Century, in a book written by Ibn Al-Muqaffa^c Sawiras¹⁹, who died in 987, as follows:

Marriage is different as far as priests are concerned, given the fact that we are bound by conditions detailed by the Bible. They must not marry a widow, a divorced or an adulteress. A priest must not marry, after his first wife, another woman. This is unanimously agreed upon by all Christians, except for the Patriarch Tematheos’s heterodoxy allowing Nestorian [priests] to marry, after the first wife, as many as seven, and the Patriarch Ibrahim of Nubia. The priest includes: the vicar, the bishop and the deacon. Yet they are different in another respect: deacons may get married after deaconship, whereas bishops and vicars cannot, except for the two denominations mentioned earlier, i.e. Patriarch Tematheos and the Patriarch Ibrahim, who allowed this for deacons and vicars, as stated above. More recent scholars had a different opinion concerning bishops. The Egyptians required that the bishop, especially in Alexandria, should be a virgin who never married during his layman’s life.²⁰ As for the Nestorians and Syrians, the bishop should not have been married before being ordained. The Nubians are on the first view (Ibn Al-Muqaffa^c 1978, 92).

To the best of our knowledge, this is the earliest record of the term ‘*almāniyyah*’ in Arabic. Ibn Al-Muqaffa^c uses ‘*almāniyyah*’ as the opposite of ‘*usqufiyyah*’²¹ ‘episcopate’, ‘bishopry’, namely priesthood, without any explanation. This presupposes that readers were quite familiar with its meaning and that Ibn Al-Muqaffa^c was not the first to use it. This also means that the repertoire of Arabic Christian texts, which is gradually emerging, should contain texts older than Ibn Al-Muqaffa^c’s in which this term of Syriac origin and Christian signification, was mentioned.

Further research showed that the first bilingual dictionary to include the Arabic equivalent to the French *laïque* is the ‘*Dictionnaire francais-arabe*’ by the

19. Ibn Al-Muqaffa^c Sawiras (<Severus.) was known in Islamic sources as Abū l-Bisher Sāwiras Ibn Al-Muqaffa^c. He was a Coptic pontiff who worked as the Secretary of the State (a high ranking ministerial position at that time) during the rule of the Ikshidid Dynasty in Egypt (935–969).

20. Original: *Fī hāli ‘almāniyyatihi* (في حال علمانيته). Ibn Al-Muqaffa^c 1978:92.

21. Arabic *usqufiyyah* “dignity of bishop” is derived from *usquf* “bishop”, which is borrowed from Greek *épiskopos* (ἐπίσκοπος). See Alsulaiman, A. (2012).

Copt Ellious Bocthor 1828 (Bocthor 1828–1829). To translate French *laïque* into Arabic, Bocthor, who was well acquainted with the Christian Arab tradition, used in his dictionary a term from this tradition, namely the term *‘almānī* which was a loan translation of the Syriac *‘almāyā*, as mentioned earlier. We consider Ellious Bocthor to be the first to introduce the term *‘almānī*, which belonged exclusively to the Christian Arab tradition, into the general linguistic usage of standard Arabic by using it as a translation of the French term *laïque*. This is because his dictionary became a reference for all of those who used the term afterwards, the earliest of whom to have used it was Butrus Al-Bustani in his Arabic dictionary *Muhit Al-Muhit* which is considered as the first Arabic dictionary (issued in 1870) to give a definition of the word: *‘almānī* as ‘a layman who is not ecclesiastic’ (Al-Bustani 1987, علم). This is a very important definition because it is the earliest definition in an authentic Arabic source and because Al-Bustani did not mean, by his definition, the French secular ideology (laïcité) which developed towards the end of the Ninetieth Century and the beginning of the Twentieth Century, i.e. more than two decades after the publication of Al-Bustani’s dictionary, approximately. Besides, he gave the oldest concept designated by the term as already explained, that is to say *laïcism*.²²

The Egyptian Ellious Bocthor’s dictionary was the source for every author of bilingual dictionaries which mentioned the entry *‘almānī* in Arabic. The earliest of these dictionaries is Barthélemy’s dictionary (Barthélemy A., 1935). This is an Arabic (the Syrian dialects) French dictionary containing *‘almānī* translated as ‘*laïque*’, ‘*séculier*’. There is also Reinhart Dozy, the author of the well-known ‘*Supplement aux Dictionnaires Arabes*’²³ including most of the expressions

22. What is noticeable is that Abdullah Al-Bustani, the author of *Al-Bustan Dictionary* (Al-Bustani 1927), which is similar to *Muhit Al-Muhit* by Butros Al-Bustani in terms of its size and content, mentioned *‘alm* “world” without mentioning *‘almānī*. This is worth considering: it means that in 1927, the word was not localized in Arabic (except for the linguistic usage specific to Arab Christians).

23. Dozy’s dictionary was published in 1881, the period which witnessed the birth of the French term *laïcité*. This date is as important as the dictionary itself. The reason for this importance is that the Dutch Dozy included in his Arabic-French dictionary most of the Arabic words that were not mentioned in Arabic dictionaries, not because they were ignored inadvertently, but because they were not part of the standard system of discourse as conceived of and practiced by Arab lexicographers. Examples of the language which was not part of the system of standard language are: texts of quasi-colloquial, popular literature (like the *Arabian Nights*, the life of *‘Antarah*, the life of Banū Hilāl and so on), the Arabic texts written by Christians, Jews and followers of other religions and sects in topics specific to their religions and history, and so on. Those writers did not conform to the rules of Arabic as Muslims did; instead they wrote Arabic in approximately the same way they would speak it. Their texts — in this context — are a linguistic treasure for studying the development of Arabic dialects during the middle ages. Only a few

neglected by authors of Arabic dictionaries such as *‘almānī*. In it we find the following: *‘ālamī* from *‘ālam* ‘world’ — which translates into *‘laique*, *‘séculier*; *‘ālamānī* — from *‘ālam* — which translates into *‘laique*, *‘séculier*; then *‘almānī* — from *‘alm* — which translates into *‘laique*, *‘séculier* as well (Dozy 1881, entry علم). After treating this entry, Dozy refers to Ellious Bocthor’s dictionary as the source from which he took the word *‘almāniyyah* (Dozy 1881, 165). The source which Dozy used is not an Arabic one; it is the French Arabic dictionary of Bocthor, which is strange in itself. All subsequent lexicographers followed suit like Gasselin Edouard in his French Arabic dictionary (Gasselin 1886, entry *laique*), and others. However, Gasselin Edouard, who was French but born in Algeria, was more accurate than others through his translation of *laique* into Arabic as *‘āmmī*²⁴ ‘layman’ rather than *‘almānī*. Perhaps this was because the Christian Arabic heritage was prevalent in the Middle East, but unknown in Algeria at that time.

amongst those writers form the exception such as the Jewish linguist Marwan Ibn Janah (died in 1050) and the man of letters Mosa Ibn Ezra (died in 1138) and others. Given the specialness and the numerous linguistic characteristics of these texts, they were labeled in the specific fields of research as Judaeo-Arabic and Christian Arabic. Some of the distinguishing features of these two types of Arabic are that they used to be written in Arabic, Hebrew, Syriac, Greek and Latin alphabets. They did not respect grammatical rules such as word ending (which is case governed, i.e. indicating number, gender, agent, patient etc.) and they did not mark the dualis of the pronoun “they” in Arabic, which is gender sensitive. In fact, Dozy’s dictionary collects most of the words in the texts in Judaeo-Arabic and Christian-Arabic. Many of these words, which were specific to Christianity and Judaism, were not Arabic words; they were from their languages, especially Hebrew, Aramaic/Syriac (e.g. *‘alm*). They were localized in the Arabic that they used, the Arabic that lexicographers did not treat, either because it was not standard in their judgment (since the criteria of standardness as conceived of by Arab traditional lexicographers were very sophisticated), or because they did not read it since most of these texts were written in other alphabets than the Arabic. Interesting studies in the field of “Judaeo-Arabic” and “Christian-Arabic” are: Blau, J. (1988); Blau, J. (1981) en Blau, J. (1967).

24. In his book on France, the Egyptian traveler Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi (1801–1873) wrote in the twelfth chapter on “Parisian habits”. It seems that he translated the French word *laique* into *‘āmmah* “laity” as opposed to the clergy. He wrote: “some of the obnoxious traits are: priests believe that the layman should confess before them to all their sins so that priests will forgive them their sins. Thus the priest remains at the church in what they call ‘confessional’” (Al-Tahtawi 1993, vol. II:256). This is the original meaning of the French word. Also al-Tahtawi has an Islamic education; that is why he uses *‘āmmah* “laity” — the singular of which is a *‘āmmī* “layman” — to denote members of the Catholic Faith who are not members of the clergy. Edouard Gasselin (Gasselin 1886, entry *laique*) might have read al-Tahtawi’s book and preferred his term to the term *‘almānī*.

4. Secularism: the term and the concepts

The term *‘almāniyyah* in present-day Arabic designates three original concepts:

1. The old concept of *laicism*, that is, making something part of the laity as opposed to the clergy (see 2.1.1. and 2.1.2.).
2. The concept of *secularism*, which originated in England in 1851 (see 2.2.1.).
3. The concept of the laic ideology *laïcité*, which started being used in 1882 in France to denote this ideology in this country (see 2.2.2.).

As we have seen above, the term *‘almāniyyah* in Arabic is a complex term; as is the case in western languages. On the one hand, this complexity in this term derives from the fact that these languages bore witness to an intellectual western movement whose development was spread over centuries. Therefore, it is but normal that in the terms that designate such movements — like *laicism*, *secularism* and *laïcité* — a variety of complex concepts and significations have been accumulated as well. On the other hand, another source of confusion is the way the term is mistakenly pronounced as *‘ilmāniyyah*, which makes us wonder why most Arabs and Arabic speaking people relate this term to *‘ilm* ‘science’. This mistaken pronunciation has led to the belief that *‘almāniyyah* is a scientific approach par excellence. How did this confusion start in the first place? What does science have to do with the historical movement of secularism, in the west, whose aim was to sever the Church from anything else?

First of all, there is no doubt that one of the reasons for this mistaken pronunciation which led to the creation of the non-existing term *‘ilmāniyyah*, is the strangeness of the word from a morphological perspective. The word, as we explained, is a loan from Syriac *‘almāyā* ‘layman’ from *‘alm-ā* ‘world’. It was borrowed into Arabic through the addition of the adjectival suffix of attribution /nī/ so that it would appear in Arabic as if it was derived following the morphological pattern found in Arabic words like *rūhānī* ‘spiritual’, *naḥsānī* ‘psychological’ and even *siriānī* ‘Syriac’. But since in Arabic there is no such word as *‘alm* ‘world’, they first started using *‘ālamānī*; then it became *‘almānī*. It is beyond any doubt that the Syriac word *‘alm-ā* and not the Arabic *‘ālam* ‘world’ was in mind when this shortening of the word from *‘ālamānī* into *‘almānī* occurred. This shortening of the form is, therefore, a back formation because of the Syriac word *‘alm-ā* ‘world’, which played three morphological roles — so to speak — in this context: (1) a direct role in the formation of the term *‘almāyā* (حَلَاكَة) ‘layman’, from *‘alm-ā* (حَلَاكَة) ‘the world’, (2) an indirect role in the translation of the term *‘almāyā* (حَلَاكَة) ‘layman’ literally into Arabic as *‘ālamānī* (عالماني) and *‘almānī* (علماني), and its formation in this language after the affixation of the attributional morpheme /nī/ to *‘almā*, and (3) a direct role in modifying *‘ālamānī* (عالماني) into *‘almānī* (علماني).

As to the question of whether the third role was the result of back formation, or of the introduction of *‘alm-ā* ‘world’ into Arabic, the answer is that both options are true: on the one hand, *‘alm-ā* was introduced into Arabic; on the other hand, the reformation of *‘ālamānī* into *‘almānī* was under the influence of the Syriac adjective *‘almāyā* ‘layman’. As to which of the two options occurred first, this is not really relevant to our context.

The confusion in pronouncing the word *‘alm* (علم) is attributed to the fact that in Arabic such noun denoting ‘world’ does not exist. Because the Arabic alphabet does not note short vowels, Arabic *‘ilm* ‘science’ is written in the Arabic alphabet exactly the same as *‘alm* ‘world’, namely (علم). Each Arab would pronounce the word علم as *‘ilm* and not as *‘alm* because *‘alm* is not an Arabic word but a Syriac one. It was introduced into the Arabic official dictionary at the beginning of Nineteenth Century and was not localized in this language to designate ‘world’, nor was it commonly used in Arabic except in the term *‘almāniyyah*. That is why this term was so unfamiliar that Arab readers constantly pronounced it — and still do — as *‘ilmāniyyah*. It is unlikely that this pronunciation of the word might be intended to promote secularism as a scientific approach calling for rationalism in every aspect of life. Whatever the case might be, the illusion in pronouncing *‘almāniyyah* as *‘ilmāniyyah* is evident as the mistaken relating of *‘almāniyyah* to *‘ilm* ‘science’ is.

5. Conclusion

We conclude that the term *‘almāniyyah* was coined in Arabic to designate first: (1) the old concept of *laicism*, i.e. making something part of the laity as opposed to the sacerdotal or clerical. Then the term *‘almāniyyah* acquired (2) the signification of *secularism* which originated in England in 1851, and (3) the concept of the *laïcité* which started being used in France in 1871 to designate the French laic ideology developed after the French Revolution. Later on, the term acquired amongst the majority of Arab people other meanings such as ‘atheism’. Giving *‘almāniyyah* this meaning of atheism is an interpretation by the common Arab people analogous to attributing *‘almāniyyah* to science by secular Arabs. Most secular Arabs interpret *‘almāniyyah* as a scientific approach and apply the conflict amongst western scientists and the western Church to Islam.

In fact Arabs — including the highly educated — interpret *‘almāniyyah* as atheism, miscreancy and even western heresy. They do not trust secularism much, whether they know its history and original significations or not. The reasons for this distrust go beyond the scope of this article. We can, however, mention some of these reasons like: the relative variety within the western secular experience, from

its inception to the present time, especially the distinction between two types of secularism. The first type is a humanistic civil movement calling for abolition of church domination, without disposing of the church or religion altogether (which Al-Masiri names 'Partial Secularism'). This type is found in all western countries with varying degrees. The other type is a political ideology (named by Al-Masiri as 'Total Secularism') adopted by the state. We find this kind of 'Total Secularism' in France, Portugal and Turkey. They are three of the very few states applying secularism in a totalitarian mode with the aim of neutralizing any role for religion in society. It is experienced in the Arab World as an 'anti-religious' movement.²⁵ Perhaps accusing secular Arabs of atheism by many Arabs and Muslims is the result of the fact that the majority of the active secular Arabs are disciples of the French secular ideology, i.e. the total secularism advocating the exclusion of religion from the public life by law. Disciples of the Arab secular and laic movements have failed to read the Islamic heritage in a way enabling them to develop the rationality that is prevalent in it. They also have failed to read the other European secular traditions (especially the British and the American traditions) in a useful way instead of focusing on the French secular ideology which had a historic justification in France, but not in the Arab World. They have really failed to establish or improve a democratic tradition in the Arab World. Especially the last point does not bring them and their ideals closer the common people, because the Arab seculars, with regard to democracy and human rights, do not differ a lot from Muslim extremists and Arab dictators, which they always backed.

On the basis of what has been explained, it seems obvious that there is no relation whatsoever between the term al *'almāniyyah* and science. It might be useful to look into the Arabic magazines that were issued between the second half of Nineteenth Century and the first quarter of Twentieth Century — like Al-Muqtataf, Al-Muqattam and others — so as to explore the semantic expansion that the term *'almāniyyah* then underwent to encompass — beside the ancient 'laicism' — 'secularism' and 'laïcité'. In the meantime we suggest differentiating the three significations subsumed under the word *'almāniyyah* using three different terms as follows:

1. Using the term *'almāniyyah* to exclusively designate the old concept of 'laicism' (2.1.1.), which means 'making something part of the laity'. (As an Arabic equivalent to this term in this sense we suggest: *'awmanah* or عَوْمَانَة).

25. The Turks even used the term (*ladini* = irreligious) for a while to designate the secular ideology before borrowing the French word *laïque* into Turkish (*layk*, also *Laiklik*), because it sounds less offensive to Muslim Turks than (*ladini* = irreligious), which was used at the beginning of Twentieth Century. Alexander, K. (ed.), 1998: 35.

2. Using the term *al-dunyawiyyah* to signify the concept of ‘secularism’ (2.1.2.) which George Holyoake called for in 1851. (The Arabic equivalent to this term in this sense is: *al-dahriyyah* or الدهرية).
3. Using the transcribed term *lā’ikiyyah* to designate the French secular ideology designated by ‘*laïcité*’ (2.2.2.) which was introduced into usage in France in 1871. (The Arabic equivalent to this term in this sense is: *al-lādīniyyah* or اللادينية).

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