Art as an Escape from Secularity: the Maryamiyya Case

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Abstract

Islamic art is a narrowly defined field with a tight canon and limited set of themes for contemporary practitioners. This article traces the modern framing of this field in the World of Islam Festival in London 1976, and the Sufi Maryamiyya traditionalist paradigm that was constructed there. The Sheikh of the Maryamiyya order and one important inspiration for the contemporary presentation of Islamic art is Seyyed Hossein Nasr. The traditionalist understanding of art sees it as an expression of a perennial truth that stands in stark opposition to the dividing forces of modernity and secularity.

Rather than trying to politically defy secularity, the Maryamiyya use art as an escape from secularity—itself a very secular move with roots in European Romanticism. Islamic art is seldom presented as the aesthetic expressions of contemporary Muslims, but rather as a timeless refuge from secularity.

Besides the presentation of the Maryamiyya paradigm of Islamic art, the article reconnects to discussions on the Islamisation of knowledge and their application to the art field within the tawhidic paradigm. A decolonial Islamisation of art might open up a space to address secularity in new ways. Through this discussion, the Christocentrism of secularity becomes visible, and new prisms of the concept surface.
Setting the Secular Frame

In response to growing Islamophobia in the West many leading museums have produced new galleries for the exhibition of Islamic art. Many of them are funded by patrons from Saudi Arabia or the Gulf.¹ They are all presented by the secular custodians of the museums as contributions to intercultural understanding and social tolerance. The perceived secularity of art makes it politically convenient to express tolerance for Islam via such a channel, while public support for mosques, for example, meets strong resistance in most Western cities.² Such is the political frame of this article. The major premises are that we live in a secular age; that art (as it is practised, understood and displayed in today’s globality) is a secular institution; that Islam, like Christianity, has had an inherent secularising logic; and that those who deny or want to escape secularity today, do so from within the secular age.

The first premise is a quote taken from the first sentence in Charles Taylor’s monumental A Secular Age. Taylor qualifies his statement by saying that “I mean the ‘we’ who live in the West, or perhaps North-west, or otherwise put, the North Atlantic world—although secularity extends also partially, and in different ways, beyond this world.”³ Taylor finds the “judgement of secularity” hard to resist when “our civilization” is compared with for example “Islamic countries”. Unfortunately Taylor here rests on a division between civilisations that hides the long history of “our” civilisation’s colonial and imperial striving for dominance over the rest of the globe.⁴ Not only does this history question how secularity partially extends across the world, it (and the whole historical trajectory of Islam) also means that Islam is not an outsider to the North Atlantic world. According to the Pew

In Taylor’s *A Secular Age* there is an almost total Islamic vacuum. There are only a few passing remarks on Islam in the whole book, like when he says that “in pre-modern Christendom […] there was an important role for the Christian warrior […] as in much contemporary Islam.” In this massive historisation of the contemporary secular age the sole focus is on “our Christian tradition”. As articulated by the second premise, most discussions on contemporary art are similarly closed in by the post-Christian secular paradigm. In the close to 800 pages of the *Oxford dictionary of modern and contemporary art* there is an expressed aim to be “more international”, but still, what in line with Taylor’s vocabulary would be called “Christian countries” and Christian tradition dominate the entries entirely.

In order to counter this Christocentrism, I will open a little window into how the relation between art and secularity is being discussed within an Islamic frame. This is of course a vast topic that either calls for a book of Taylor’s size, or for further distinctions and delimitations. I will mainly look at one contemporary position, which I will call the traditionalism or more precisely the Maryamiyya paradigm. It is a paradigm arguing for the importance of Islamic art as an escape from secularity from within the secular age. This snapshot of the role of Islamic art for Muslim intellectuals in the secular age, interesting enough as it is in itself, will also reveal new prisms of the concept of secularity.

One of the prime articulations of Islamic art as an Islamically significant activity is the Maryamiyya sheikh Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s 1987 book *Islamic Art and Spirituality*. Nasr’s conception of spirituality builds on the writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schoun, who in turn took their departure from the Theosophical Society, going back to Madame Blavatsky. The roots of this esoteric understanding of spirituality are common with modern new age religions. They can in turn be traced back to a Romantic effort to secure a space for the sacred in the post-Enlightenment secular age. In this time the divide between East and West, that might in some respect be said to have some precursors in Greek antiquity, was institutionalised and drawn into a chain of equivalences with other Enlightenment dichotomies such as female/male, emotional/rational, holy/secular, traditional/developing, barbarian/civilised.

### What is “Islamic” Art?

Islamic art is a notoriously difficult label. Most of what goes under this label in Western museums was not necessarily made or used by Muslims, but simply consists of handicraft objects made under Muslim rule in Muslim majority cultural milieus. This generalising use of the label Islam and Islamic makes it easy to misinterpret the relation between belief and non-belief, and between sacred and secular, in the very different phenomena and discussions that the term “Islamic” refers to. This is obvious also in the very brief references to “Islam” in Taylor’s *A Secular Age*.

The historian Marshall Hodgson introduced the terms “Islamicate” and “Islamdom” to exchange the biases and ambiguities of the term Islamic for a terminology that can differentiate religion from society and culture. Hodgson started by making a distinction between Islamic as a term for religious phenomena and Muslim for cultural traits common among Muslims. In order to talk about the areas under influence from Islamic religion he coined the phrase Islamdom. In analogy with Christendom, Islamdom is simply the society that carries a culture/civilisation. Hodgson urges us to talk about “the society of Islamdom and its Islamicate cultural traditions”. This would leave Islamic as a term for religious aspects of these cultural traditions. Like the term Christian art, Islamic art would thus only cover artistic expressions of religious ideas and functions. But this terminology has unfortunately not been adopted widely.

We live in a secular age—and that also applies to those who argue for the religious importance of Islamic art. In the wide and differing
Islamic textual traditions not much is written on the religious significance of the objects nowadays displayed and discussed as Islamic art. The question, and the very label “Islamic” for this group of handicraft objects, architecture and artworks, arose after Western collectors had created a canon and collections of Islamic art, a process with very little care for the religion of Islam.

On the contrary (even if it is often over-interpreted today) there were critical arguments against the use of art in Islamic traditions. Oliver Leaman highlights three of these: “1. Creative visual representation will result in reason being overwhelmed.” This could overthrow the balanced perception that by the critics was seen as a key to understanding creation, and for behaving correctly. “2. Concentrating on the visual obstructs understanding how things really are.” Even if the natural world was often described as a book to be read and understood, the understanding should seek the patterns and meanings of the phenomena, rather than the visual surface. “3. The Prophet criticized idolatry.” There is a huge discussion as to how to interpret the critique of images that take the critical remarks attributed to the prophet Muhammad as their departure. Does it really apply to art? In one hadith the Prophet is asked by a man if it is permissible to pray in a direction where there is an image (samarthil). The Prophet answered that the man should put a piece of cloth over the image when he prayed. This means he didn’t say that images were bad as such, just that one shouldn’t pray in front of one.

The World of Islam Festival of 1976 and the Paradigm of Islamic Art

Despite the critical remarks and problematic aspects there is a well-established field named “Islamic art”, and Monia Abdallah has highlighted the World of Islam Festival in London in the spring of 1976 as a foundation for its contemporary paradigm. This big festival was held at a time when the secularisation paradigm enjoyed its peak. It was also a time before the resurgence of Islam, before the Iranian revolution, before the Afghan war—Islam was still largely viewed as a quaint remnant from a traditional way of life deemed to disappear in the ongoing modernisation of the world.

The festival’s presentation of Islamic art created a paradigm focused on cultural continuity within an Islamic civilisation. Art historian Annika Lenssen has similarly argued that the “Islamic Week” held at auction houses Christie’s and Sotheby’s during the 1976 festival, and that have since become a tradition, was paradigmatic in creating a market for contemporary Islamic art of a mystical and formal model centred on abstract unity. This paradigm was connected to the major part of the World of Islam festival that consisted of exhibitions of collections of traditional Islamic art in the major museums of London. Much of what was exhibited as Islamic art was collected by English arts and crafts propagators at the turn of the twentieth century seeking inspiration from its ornamental styles. Most of the objects came from what would be considered secular court milieux.

The World of Islam Festival was “a watershed for the Islamic art trade.” Its legacy can still be seen in most major exhibitions of contemporary art, as well as in for example the Jameel Prize hosted by the Victoria and Albert museum in London: the “Jameel Prize is an international award for contemporary art and design inspired by Islamic tradition. Its aim is to explore the relationship between Islamic traditions of art, craft and design and contemporary work as part of a wider debate about Islamic culture and its role today.” Even if the prize does not have any religious connotations, it works within a traditionalist paradigm (a paradigm that is possible and makes sense only in the secular age). The same narrow understanding of Islamic tradition could be seen, for example, in the large Berlin exhibition Taswir (meaning “image”) held in 2009, juxtaposing “traditional” (old) and “modern” (new) Islamic art on the classicist themes of calligraphy, ornament and miniatures. In Islamic art, Islam is framed as a separate and past civilisation without direct contact with lived experiences in Europe today. What Abdallah and Lenssen do not mention is how the World of Islam Festival was deeply formed by a traditionalist Maryamyya understanding of sacred and Islamic art.
The Traditionalist World of Islam

The traditionalist paradigm of Islamic art was formulated by Sheikh Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings and Frithjof Schuon, who were the World of Islam Festival’s most influential curators and writers, as well as core members of the Maryamiyya Sufi order. Not much has been written on this festival, and even less on the conceptualisation of Islamic art it promoted and institutionalised. Only a few have noted it. According to historian Mark Sedgwick “Traditionalist views of Islam—and Maryamis—predominated in the festival.” The Maryamis, including the leader Nasr, are reticent to talk publicly about their affiliation, and it is thus difficult to trace their influence, which has also led to some conspiratorial thinking as to their impact, in part due to the friendship between Prince Charles and the UK Maryami leader Martin Lings.32

Against a coming “world covered with concrete from Las Vegas to Peking” the festival’s director Paul Keeler posits the world of Islam as an intact civilisation where “unity and equilibrium has always been paramount”, and predicts that “Islamic culture and civilization will be for the modern world as new and startling a discovery as the Greco-Roman world was for the Italians.”33 In this he closely mimics the Romantic idealisation of the East, as well as the Orientalist way of approaching the East as a passive source for Western consumption. This also means that there is no prospect for development or change in the Islamic world.34 To realise this idealised and self-centred representation of the counter-cultural “unity of Islam”, Keeler brought in leading Maryami scholars who shared his a-historical and Orientalist focus on Islam’s esoteric cultural essence. Peter Lamborn states that “there could be said to be a single man who stands for, and indeed to a large extent inspired the batin [inner meaning] of the festival, it is Frithjof Schuon.” Lamborn also calls Schuon’s book Islam and the Perennial Philosophy, published by the Festival Trust, “the heart of the heart” of the festival. The perspective of the festival fitted into the context of Western seekers for an Eastern spiritual path who had hitherto developed their ideas mainly in relation to India and the Far East, to Hinduism and Buddhism.35

Islamic art was understood as governed by a few esoteric and timeless principles.36 This concept of a spiritual Islamic art was formed in the secular age, and informed by a traditionalist nostalgia for hierarchical order.37 As William Dickson concludes “Nasr tends to view traditional social formations, including gender differentiations, as expressing an archetype of human goodness, one not to be compromised for modern social movements.”38

The Tradition of Traditionalism

The birth of traditionalism is located in nineteenth-century Catholic resistance to secularity and the Theosophical Society’s interest in the esoteric in Eastern traditions. One of the important theorists of modern traditionalism that finds its expression in sacred Islamic art is Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), who from 1932

34 Said, op. cit.
36 Grabar, op. cit., p. 50.
38 Dickson, op. cit., p. 216.
until his death developed what he called the *philosophia perennis*. In his private library in Boston, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who was a student at MIT, became acquainted with the traditionalist works of René Guénon, Schuon and Burckhardt in the early 1950s. Together with Coomaraswamy, René Guénon (1886-1951) can be said to be the founder of modern traditionalism. Guénon had already embraced Islam in 1912 and in 1930 moved to Egypt where he joined the Shādīliyya Sufi order, of which Maryamiyya is a branch. Traditionalism was further codified by Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), who became a disciple of René Guénon, back to Philippe Encausse and Madame Blavatsky, to see that it has as much to do with Western Romantic Theosophy as it does with Islam. This should not be understood as a simple critique. Every tradition is always lived in relation to new surroundings, and this supposed wisdom is abstract, and there is very little variation in the descriptions of different art works and traditions. It is thus easy for the reader to feel insecure and unthreatened when trying to grasp the deep and perennial metaphysical principles that the Maryami writers distill from the objects under discussion. Even after having read a considerable part of Nasr’s voluminous oeuvre, I still have trouble understanding how his traditional wisdom could find a place in any tangible world, traditional or secular. Maybe the point is that it can’t. Life is fundamentally esoteric for Nasr, and art is important because it is a material manifestation that can take us beyond the tangible world and let us escape its degrading secularity. There is no political programme aimed at defying secularity, even if Nasr and other traditionalist have tended to favour monarchic rulers who, like the Shah in Iran, uphold traditional hierarchies.

In the book *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Nasr states that the opposition between tradition and modernism “is total and complete as far as principles are concerned”. This is an important key to interpret the Maryamiyya traditionalist paradigm of Islamic art. The influential books written by Burckhardt, Lings and Nasr are all concerned with principles and metaphysical grounds. Their interpretations of works of art are always related to a true traditional wisdom, the *philosophia perennis*, as an opposite to the destructive intrusion of the modern secular West. This supposed wisdom is abstract, and there is very little variation in the descriptions of different art works and traditions. It is thus easy for the reader to feel insecure and unthreatened when trying to grasp the deep and perennial metaphysical principles that the Maryamiyya writers distill from the objects under discussion. Even after having read a considerable part of Nasr’s voluminous oeuvre, I still have trouble understanding how his traditional wisdom could find a place in any tangible world, traditional or secular. Maybe the point is that it can’t. Life is fundamentally esoteric for Nasr, and art is important because it is a material manifestation that can take us beyond the tangible world and let us escape its degrading secularity. There is no political programme aimed at defying secularity, even if Nasr and other traditionalist have tended to favour monarchic rulers who, like the Shah in Iran, uphold traditional hierarchies.

Nasr’s method in writing about art might be described as a kind of telological phenomenology that reads meaning into every aspect of the objects he has chosen as expressions of tradition and truth. It is not so much about interpreting the work of art; it is more of a spiritual meditation on beauty and creation. Everything is abundant with meaning, and through contemplating the meaning of art we can reach the “world of imagination (*alam al-mithal*)”. Art is thus the gateway to a world “wherein are contained the original forms, colours, smells, and tastes of all that gives joy to man upon earth. The space of the Persian miniature is a recapitulation of this space and its forms and colours are a replica of this world.” This is an original, perennial Platonic world of ideas that the true connoisseur can enter via his contemplation of sacred art. In this world everything is balanced according to an original hierarchy. And there is no aspect of secularity present there, since secularity can only mean a destruction of sacred hierarchies. The escape to this imaginary world is the way to a good, true and happy life before and beyond today’s secular age. For the Maryamī art, rather than politics, is the route to find relief from what they see as a degrading and fragmented secularity.

This emphasis on the contemplation of meaning also raises a methodological difficulty, since according to Nasr “one could not understand [...] works of sacred art without penetrating deeply into the religion which has produced these works.” That might be true. But what we can still do is trace this particular understanding of sacredness via discipleships to Frithjof Schuon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and René Guénon, back to Philippe Encausse and Madame Blavatsky, to see that it has as much to do with Western Romantic Theosophy as it has to do with Islam. This should not be understood as a simple critique. Every tradition is always lived in relation to new surroundings, the Maryamiyya as well as any other. Even if decolonial critics might want to see more exclusively Islamic sources, this is not my point. I rather want to contrast this entangled and deeply secular genealogy with the idealised concept of it that Nasr produces.

If traditionalists insist on the complete opposition between tradition and modernism, it is precisely because the very nature of modernism creates in the religious and metaphysical realms a blurred image within which half-truths appear as truth itself and the integrity of all that tradition represents is thereby compromised.
The view of Islam as one archaic monolith disconnected from contemporary contextualisation is mirrored by present-day Islamophobia, as well as by Salafism. The Maryami perspective has not only been formative; the positive Western interest for Sufism is also very much coloured by the Maryamis’ selection, translation and presentation. But, as Carl Ernest has stated, this has been “one of the least well known aspects of the rejection of Western modernism”. Sufi concepts are presented with what might be called an esoteric and traditionalist terminological in English. How this has affected the study of Islamic mystical expressions is still under-researched. What we can see is that it is quite visible in popular framings of Islamic art as an ahistorical and abstracting category, and that it has blended well with the older framing of Islamic art objects as masterpieces from a lost civilisation.

Secularity and Islam

The division between state and church read into Jesus’ answer in Mark 12:14-17 to the question if it is ok to pay taxes to the Emperor has no equivalent in the Qur’an or Sunna. Muhammed and his successors were both religious and political leaders. Many contemporary Muslim intellectuals, as well as Western scholars like Bernard Lewis, have taken this as proof that Islam is incompatible with secularity. Others, like Abdullahi Ahmed an-Naim, have argued that this perception is “really the product of propaganda of Islamist groups based on the ideological views of Abul A’la Maududi and Sayyid Qutb and not on the actual history of Islamic societies.” The difference between the stances of Faruqi and an-Naim is that the former talks about an Islamic theological ideal, while an-Naim talks about Islamic societies as historical realities that have never seen an exclusively religious state.

State and church are categories that have taken shape in European history, and they do not easily translate into non-Christian settings. The church is by definition a Christian institution with specific, but also internally different, Christian understandings of its functions and limits in the regulations of religious beliefs and its relation to the state. Even if no equal institutions are found in Islamic traditions, it is vital to stress, as an-Naim does, that every actual Muslim state has had laws and institutions that haven not stemmed from religious beliefs or religiously determined rulings.

A somewhat similar dichotomy as church and state is made between the sacred and the secular. This is a difficult pair for many who believe that the world is created by God, and that everything is therefore in some sense holy. This is, for example, an important starting point for many Islamically grounded environmental activists and thinkers. GIBCA and PARSE state that “secularity is based on the principle of a separation of religious belief (and non-belief) from the state.” In Arabic this translates into a separation between iman and mulk. But, as in Christianity, the understandings of both religion and state have developed over time and the spheres to be separated have thus had different boundaries at different times. They have also been given different names. In the Qur’an no clear concept...
of a state is expressed, and it has therefore been argued that the state is not a divinely sanctioned institution. The concept of a national Islamic state (dawla Islamiyyah) is most often said to be formulated by Maulana Maududi in a context of twentieth-century anti-colonial struggles in British India, while the idea of an Islamic Caliphate functioning as a state for all Muslims was formulated in the 1950s by Taqi al-Din al-Nabahini, founder of Hizb ut-Tahrir, in stateless Palestine.55

The Islamic concepts of belief and state are more fluid and historically situated than an attempt to fit them into an abstract secularisation theory assumes.56 Secularity translates into Arabic as alamiyyah, or dunyawiyyah, or hubbu al-alam. Al-Alam means “the world”, as does dunya, and hubbu al-alam translates as “love of the world”. These terms thus denote the worldly, most often in an implicitly negative aspect of being caught in a worldly rather than after-worldly (akhira) perspective. Still, there is no strict dichotomy between din and dunya, and the main strands of Islamic scholarly traditions have been sceptical towards ascetic ideals of turning away from the world that have been much more prominent in Christian circles.57

Another Escape from Secularity: Islamisation as a Decolonisation of Islamic art

It might seem as if I have become totally lost in translation. Maybe I simply hope to make the point that secularity is a Christian conception imbedded in modernity/coloniality, and that it might therefore be far from unproblematic to impose its concepts on other traditions, even if secularity has affected all contemporary states in one way or another.58 There is no escape from secularity. But for many who want to break with the Western and Christocentric framing of institutions and traditions, a struggle with secularity is inevitable. I bring this up in order to show that there are broader decolonial contexts where Islam and art (could) meet.

As it stands today this does not get recognised because of how Islamic art is framed. Decolonial studies has a strong base in Latin America, and a partial beginning in the Latin America subaltern studies group and the work of social theorists like Anibal Quijano and Walter Mignolo.59 As stated in the Decolonial Aesthetics Manifesto:

For many museums and art institutions, the break with classical objectifying, exclusive and practised in reconnections with the epistemological perspectives of the people(s) from where objects have been collected.60 This practice has not gained any currency in the field of Islamic art. In many other art institutions decolonial fragmentation is seen as a tempting option. The point being that there is no way to sum up all the differences present in a society that is not imperialist, and most historical efforts to display foreign culture and art in the West are tainted by colonial frames.62

One of the problems is that representations stemming from artworks, facts and experiences that do not fit in the “Western master narrative” tend to look illogical, and risk being written off as exoticism, lunacy or terrorism. They do not have an understandable beginning or end.63 A decolonial recognition of other world views as organically hybrid epistemic resources, paired with a focus on inequality and the power of global designs, is a topic contemporary art institutions and museums must address. Even if there is a real danger that such a decolonial ethos can foster an orientalist misconception that different peoples are truly different. In order to connect these abstract theoretical observations with the discussion on Islamic art and secularity it will widen the scope a little, and look at what the Islamisation of knowledge debate has had to say about art. I will propose a reading of the aims of Islamisation as a decolonial practice.

The Islamisation of knowledge movement was at its strongest in the 1980s, but it still has supporters and interpreters around the world, for example in its home institution IIIT (International Institute for Islamic Thought) in Herndon, Virginia, and its branches
in twelve different countries, as well as in the IIUM (International Islamic University Malaysia). The term Islamisation of knowledge was introduced locally by Malaysian philosopher Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas in 1969, in his Preliminary statement on a general theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indian archipelago, and universalised and popularised by his 1978 book Islam and Secularism. It was taken up and formalised into a programme in the US by the influential American-Palestinian intellectual Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (1921-1986) of the IIIT in 1982. The programme of Islamisation was put forward as an answer to the secularisation of Muslim debates, where many arguments from the modern West had become key building blocks. It was a time when most emancipatory efforts were framed by Marxist praxis and theory. The Islamisers called for an enlarged and indigenous emancipatory decolonisation of Islamic thought via the (re)creation of knowledge, culture and art built on purely Islamic sources. This would be the way to future Muslim self-reliance and prosperity.64

The different positions within the Islamisation debates all share the view that the modern world of the secular age is fragmented, and that Islam needs to be re-thought in this new environment in order to lift Muslim societies from the sad state that they are in. The problem is not with Islam as such; they all think that the problem stems from the lack of truly Islamic institutions and practices. They are all as vague in their use of the term Islamic as the Western scholars are. In order to correctly understand the modern predicament, Muslims must reconnect to their tradition and create institutions and paradigms that stem from their own grounding. All academic knowledge today is organised in Western categories that lack Islam’s organic unity.65

There are of course different perspectives within the Islamisation of knowledge debate. The traditionalist perspective of Seyyed Hossein Nasr is one. His view of knowledge is built on conceptual realism, meaning that the Islamic concepts are said to carry an essential and perennial truth unaffected by time and place. True knowledge comes from knowing the concepts that structure creation. It is a very Platonist idea. Ismail al-Faruqi and the IIIT instead focus on the need for interpretation (jihad). Islamic tradition needs to be reinterpreted in light of modern developments, and Islamic history is a kind of prototype

According to Faruqi the message to be aesthetically expressed in an art that can merit the label Islamic art is tawhid, which literally means “making one”.67 Implicit in this statement is Faruqi’s understanding that the oneness of God and creation, which he sees as the heart of the Qur’anic message, is a disqualification of any division between a secular and a sacred sphere. Islam is ever-present and therefore all human effort should express this presence of God. This is sometimes called the tawhidic paradigm, because of its claim that the dualism between the religious and the secular “created by the West is completely alien to the Muslim world”.68 A similar argument can also be found among different strands of contemporary Salafist interpretations, which are also more inside the secular age than they want to acknowledge.69 But in contrast to the traditionalists, the call for an Islamisation is clear about its modernity: “Islam is suitable for all times, and therefore a reinterpretation, or a more fully developed understanding of it is called for at each phase in man’s history. Precisely because of these changes, the roles of art in the past cannot simply be adopted wholesale.”70 This idea about adapting to the secular age contrasts Islamisation from the traditionalist paradigm, even if it depends quite heavily on Maryami writers when it comes to art.

There seems to be some similarities between decolonial curating and the Islamisation of art’s efforts. Still, the Islamisers have not been taken up as a part of the growing decolonial trend within museums and art institutions, and it has had next to no impact within the field of Islamic art. A secularist division that sees any Islamic art as part of religion, and thus separated from politics, further hinders art from playing an openly decolonial, political role.
Conclusions

One of the main points of this article is that all those who write about the religious significance of Islamic art do so from within the secular world, and in relation to the secular Western category of Islamic art. This is maybe most evident in the writers calling for an Islamisation of art and more broadly of knowledge, science, and ultimately for an Islamisation of society. If Islamic art was already Islamic it wouldn’t need to be Islamised, would it?

More particularly I have tried to show that Maryamiyya traditionalism might be classified as anti-secular. But, it must be noted that all its major proponents, with the possible exemption of Titus Burckhardt, who resided in the Moroccan city of Fez, have lived their lives in the North Atlantic world. They have worked deeply embedded in secular institutions such as universities, libraries and publishing houses. Their very understanding of tradition is a part and a product of the secular age. The Maryamis never express a political agenda, and their efforts to promote a traditional Islamic civilisation are only furthered via the call for a preservation of tradition. Traditional and sacred art is in their view the product of a life immersed in a naturally traditional society. Once it is lost, it is forever lost. Any political struggle to reinstall the traditional values is futile and will betray the values it sets out to save.

Luckily for the traditionalists, the traditional truth is not lost. Via sacred art we can reconnect to the Platonic ideas or divine names and thus escape the fallen society that surrounds us. This is why I label their view of art as an escape from secularity. Their sacred art is a reclusive abode where the aristocratic connoisseurs can withdraw from the world that sustains them and contemplate perennial wisdom. They do not need to change the world. And why should they, given that they tend to enjoy its material privileges at the same time as they are deeply appalled by the vulgarity of secular modernity and its disrespect for natural hierarchies and standards.

The conception of the sacred, as well as the concept of art that is the foundation for the traditionalist’s explication of Islamic art does not have a very deep genealogy. They are rather derived from a Romantic Western understanding of art, stemming from the turn of the nineteenth century. Rather than being traditional, their claims about what is traditionally Islamic are ideological and a product of the secular age.

Ismail al-Faruqi and the broader field of Islamisation of art might seem to have a similar stance, and Faruqi builds on Nasr and Burckhardt. Still, his promotion of Islamised values was socio-political and future-oriented. The Islamisation of art was one small building block in the creation of a decolonised Islamic society. This activist goal also forced him and his follower to be much more pragmatic in their theorising about the role of art in the future society. Art and aesthetics should play a vital part in the creation of a grounded and complete Islamic world view in tune with contemporary practical and socio-political demands. It should be political and decolonial. The traditionalists on the other hand are fundamentally reactionary and esoteric, seeing art as a field where connoisseurs can escape the fragmentation and politicisation of modern secularity.

Islamic art as it is exhibited, discussed and practised today is often enclosed in a traditionalist frame, and functions as an escape from secularity. As such it is disconnected from the broader contemporary art scene and the struggles to understand, and emancipate, our secular age. Like in Charles Taylor’s A Secular Age, Islam is imagined as outside of secularity.