'Islam, State and Secularism': Assessing the Perceived Conflicts between Islam and Secularism

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Introduction

The debate regarding the compatibility of Islam and secularism has become increasingly prominent in modern times. Numerous scholars[1] have stressed that within Islam there can be no distinction amongst politics and religion, alluding to the concept of an Islamic political system. This evocation elects a flawed certainty that Islam is a solitary, universal set of ideals in which there is no division between religion, politics and culture. This generates the notion of a single set of Muslim 'values' which are often diametrically opposed to Christian, Secular or Western values. The term secularism is often defined[2] as the belief that religion should not be involved in the organization of society and education, for example. It is thus due to this view that secularism has often been perceived as antithetical to Islam. This paper will attempt to assess the alleged compatibility and perceived conflict between secularism and Islam. The idea of Islam as a set political methodology will be assessed in order to establish whether Islam has a homogenous approach in attending to affairs of the state. This paper will also include an assessment of the impact of colonisation on Islamic thought so as to explore the disinclination towards secularism by Muslim thinkers. Additionally, the compatibility of secularism with Islam will be explored.

'The term "secular"[3] conveys a meaning with a marked dual connotation of *time* and *location*; the *time* referring to the "now" or "present" sense of it, and the *location* to the "world" or "worldly" sense of it.'[4] Thus, secular is 'linked to temporality or temporal matters'.[5] The spatio-temporal connotation conveyed in the concept 'secular' can be seen to clash with that of the transcendental view professed by religions such as Islam, as religion is mainly correlated to spiritual and theological affairs. According to Kolig, Enlightenment liberalism preaches human enjoyment and benefit and a quantifiable anthropocentrism quite in contrast to the Islamic sense of devotion and duty to God.[6] Therefore, it could be argued that at the very epicentres of the philosophies of 'secularism' and 'Islam' are two diametrically opposed notions of existence: one that espouses a humanistic liberalism in which human enjoyment and

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1 *See* Syed Abul A'la Maududi, *Towards Understanding Islam*, (Lahore: Kazi Publications, 1977); Hassan Al-Banna, 'The New Renaissance' in *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*. 2nd Edition. ed. by J.J Donohue, and J.L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) pp. 78-83; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, (London: K. Paul International, 1990).
2 Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of* Religion (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 106.
3 *Secular is derived from the latin term saeculum.*
4 Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpar: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, 1978), p. 16.
5 Fouad Zakariyya, *Myth and Reality in the Contemporary Islamist Movement,* trans. by Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (London: Pluto Press, 2005), p. 14.
6 Erich Kolig, 'To Shar'iatize or not to Shar'iatize', in *Sharia in the West*, ed. by Rex Ahdar and Nicholas Aroney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 255-278 (p. 262).

freedom are paramount, in opposition to a philosophy that promotes complete subordination to a supreme creator.

However, many of these bifurcations work with a definable concept of Islam that is far too nebulous to encompass the breadth of the Islamic tradition. It can be seen in modern day Britain, for instance, that there are various different sects/groups within Islam that claim to be representative of Islam. Therefore, when discussing the compatibility of Islam and secularism, an inexorable tension is born due to the lack of authoritative structure that has characterised the religion since its inception. This naturally leads to the development of a plethora of schools of thought, both liberal as well as conservative, attempting to appropriate the representation of religion as their own, quoting scripture 'in support of their respective positions.'[7] It could thus be argued that Islam cannot be perceived as a concrete and clearly defined religion. However, intellectuals such as Maududi have stressed that the heterogeneity in Islam does not displace its fundamental tenets, and that within those tenets an inherent incompatibility with the secular world view exists.

Syed Abul A'la Maududi, a 20th century Muslim thinker from India, believed Islam to be a religion inherently linked with the organisation of society. Within his work, *Capitalism, Socialism and Islam[8]* he stresses that Islam is an alternative to the ideological systems of capitalism and socialism and cannot simply subsist within them. Religion, in the view of Maududi, is not limited to the private sphere; it is inexorably linked with the public sphere and is a complete religion which has the solution for all erroneous societies. From Maududi's works, it can be deduced that he did not perceive any distinction between Islam and politics. In light of this, one could argue that Islam and secularism are incompatible. In the Enlightenment period, the church was separated from the state, and thus religion was arguably limited to the private sphere, playing little part in politics, which is a characteristic that ostensibly typifies secularism. However, a reluctance to accept Maududi's somewhat myopic definitions would not be unwarranted.

Firstly, a distinction must be made between the *historical* and the *theological*. The concept that religion and politics cannot be separated was perhaps more of a historical reality than a theological necessity in Islam. The normative Islamic political methodology espoused by what might be described as mainstream Islam[9] is that of the '*Khilafat-e-Rashidah'* (the rightly guided period of the Islamic State).[10] In the nascent period of Islam, particularly in the era of the four *Caliphs* (political leaders of the Islamic State) succeeding the Prophet Muhammad, the 'state was very closely identified with the religion of Islam',[11] as society required regulations to deal with the developing circumstances in that epoch. It was assumed by early scholars that if religion was separated from politics, the rulers would neglect the fundamental views of Islam and behave in a manner which would only satisfy their greed for power.[12] Also 'the religion of

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7 Asghar Ali Engineer, 'Islam and Secularism', in *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives,* ed. by John J. Donohue and John L. Esposito, 2nd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 136-142 (p. 136).
8 See Syed Abul A'la Maududi, *Capitalism, Socialism and Islam* (Kuwait: Islamic Book Publishers, 1995).
9 *This is representative of the Sunnite theological schools, the Shi'ite schools differ on this point.*
10 Engineer, p. 137.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid, p. 138.

the ruler determined the state of the ruled'[13] in medieval times, thus the amalgamation of Islam and politics was a necessary reality.

However, An-Na'im, in *Islam and the Secular State*,[14] argues that the Qur'an never mentions the idea of a state and does not prescribe a particular form of government. Moreover, during all his life 'the Prophet made no allusion to anything which could be called an "Islamic State" or an "Arab state"[15] as he never intended 'to found a political state.'[16] Tibi states, 'historical circumstances imposed on the Prophet the need to act politically',[17] which shows that the circumstances in which Muhammad did take political actions were due to its contextual necessity, so the unity of religion and politics is not 'a constitutive part of Islamic beliefs.'[18] Therefore, the unity of religion and state which is viewed as a cardinal principle in modern times by mainstream dogma, is arguably false. For example, Abd al-Raziq states,

> [The] title of "Caliph of the Prophet of God" given to Abu-Bakr was one of the sources of the error which spread among the mass of Muslims, leading them to believe that the institution of the caliphate was a religious dignity and that he who was charged with the directions of Muslims' affairs held the place occupied by the Prophet.[19]

Consequently, since the earliest period of Islam the opinion has been propagated that the institution of the caliphate is a religious office occupied by a successor to the Prophet, hence it is the legislator of the law. The notion of the caliphate permeated mainstream theology. An example of this can be seen in the '*Tahawi creed'*[20] which is generally considered as representative of Sunni Islam, in which it is argued that it is necessary to follow a caliphate.[21] The major influence politics played in the development of theology in medieval times can clearly be seen through this. It is evident that religion was used as a bulwark to protect future caliphs. From this, it can be argued that the perfect Islamic state that is advocated by pan-Islamism is in fact simply a hypothesis that has never been instantiated or realized.

The perception of a purely Islamic state is hence perhaps best understood as a theoretical construct which has been retrojected romantically by modern scholars. In light of this, it can be argued that Muslim societies are not fundamentally different from Western societies with regard to the relationship between religion and state. In Western societies, the clergy delineated the boundaries of belief within society prior to the Enlightenment (and continued to do so post-Enlightenment); similarly,

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13 Ibid, p. 140.
14 Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (Harvard University Press: United States of America, 2008).
15 Ali Abd al-Raziq, 'The Caliphate and the Bases of Power,' in *Islam in Transition*, ed. by John J. Donohue and John L. Esposito, pp. 24-31 (p. 29).
16 Ali Abd al-Raziq, 'Message Not Government, Religion Not State,' in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Charles Kurzman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp.29-36 (p. 36).
17 Bassam Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Disorder* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1998), p. 166.
18 Ibid, p. 166.
19 Abd al-Raziq, 'The Caliphate and the Bases of Power,' p. 30.
20 Iqbal Ahmad Azami, (n.d) *Aqidah Tahawiyya,* [online] Masud.co.uk, <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/misc/tahawi.htm.> [accessed 18 November, 2013].
21 Imam Abu Ja'far Al-Tahawi states*, "We do not recognize rebellion against our Imam or those in charge of our affairs even if they are unjust, nor do we wish evil on them, nor do we withdraw from following them. We hold that obedience to them is part of obedience to Allah, The Glorified, and therefore obligatory as long as they do not order to commit sins. We pray for their right guidance and pardon from their wrongs."*

the caliphs propagated the same ideals by controlling knowledge, religious institutions and what was considered correct belief. Therefore, while there is no authoritative declaration on a set methodological framework in regards to the notion of state construction within Islam, there exist theoretical frameworks regarding the Islamic state that retroject onto early Islam. As a result, Islam does not have a set methodology in regards to dealing with politics and thus could be argued to be compatible with secularism.

Scholars such as Mernissi have argued that Islam would 'not only survive but thrive in a secular state.'[22] An example of her thesis can be seen in the UK, where Islam is the fastest growing religion.[23] Therefore, one can envisage the compatibility of Islam with secularism as the UK 'is often thought of as one of the more secular countries in Western Europe'.[24] Nonetheless, the 'condemnation of secularism'[25] by Muslims still remains and cannot be denied even though facts prove both to be harmonious. From Maududi's writing, *Capitalism, Socialism and Islam*,[26] it can be seen that after the colonisation of Islamic countries, there has been a reluctance to inherit ideas from the West. This can also be inferred through Al-Attas who argues from a similar perspective to the political Islamic movements. Al-Attas argues that the issues in Muslim countries who are trying to acknowledge secularism are 'caused due to the introduction of western ways of thinking and judging and believing emulated by some Muslim scholars and intellectuals who have been unduly influenced by the West and overawed by its scientific and technological achievements.'[27] Thus, the apprehension of Muslims towards secularism is arguably a political issue rather than a theological issue.

Due to the colonisation of the 'Muslim world' by 'Western' countries, many Muslims were reticent towards their colonisers and the ideological hegemony purported during this period. While modern changes were intrinsic to Western historical development, they were largely seen by Muslims as alien and enforced. Consequently, even though 'modern systems, institutions and instruments were welcomed' by most Muslim countries, Farouki argues 'it did not escape the Muslim collective consciousness that these were articulated in foreign languages, and were premised on foreign values.'[28] It can be seen that there was an immense anxiety concerning identity politics during the colonial and post-colonial period. Hence, 'much modern Muslim thought, in a reaction to the actual or perceived threat of cultural marginalisation or annihilation, has increasingly become *self-consciously* "Islamic."'[29] This may be why the enforcement and return to an 'Islamic state' and also the Shar'iah law is endorsed. As a result, the conventional wisdom that assumed the centrality of secularism in a modern state, and viewed religion as only a private affair, has been challenged in much of the Muslim world. The resurgence of Islam in

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22 Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, trans. by Mary Jo Lakeland, 2nd Edn. (Cambridge: Perseus Publishing, 2002), p. 65.
23 Patrick Goodenough, "British Census: Islam Fastest-Growing Faith in England; Christians Drop to 59% of Population", in *cnsnews.com*, December 12 2012, <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/british-census-islam-fastest-growing-faith-england-christians-drop-59-population>, [accessed November 25, 2013].
24 Graeme Smith, *A Short History of Secularism* (London: I.B Tauris, 2008), p. 1.
25 Tamara Sonn, 'Secularism and National Stability in Islam', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 9 (1987), pp. 284-305 (p. 284).
26 See Syed Abul A'la Maududi, *Capitalism, Socialism and Islam* (Kuwait: Islamic Book Publishers, 1995).
27 Al-Attas, p. 15.
28 Suha Taji-Farouki and Basheer M. Nafi, *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century* (London: IB Tauris, 2004), p. 2.
29 Ibid, p. 4.

Muslim politics and society has in fact signalled a retreat from the secular path. It should be noted, however, that this is not a specifically Islamic phenomenon. With the rise of the BJP in India, and the recent resurgence of Evangelical Christianity and its links with the Republican Party in the US, the rise of religion in politics appears to be a global trend.

The debate regarding the compatibility of Islam and secularism has been raging for many decades; however, it can be clearly seen that conversations pertaining to religion are not conducted in isolation of political realities. There is a huge reluctance to engage with secularism on the part of Muslim intelligentsia, but also the Muslim masses, due to the notion that secularism is fundamentally foreign, Western, antithetical to Islam and therefore dangerous. Also, due to the fact that there is no central authority within Islam, it is difficult to define whether Islam is truly incompatible with secularism. There are Muslim majority countries, such as Turkey, that are arguably secular, whilst other Muslim countries, such as Pakistan, are arguably quasi-secular and claim to uphold a religiously ethical philosophy. Therefore, it can be surmised that Islam is not intrinsically incompatible with a secular world-view, if secularism is to be defined as the separation of church and state. However, it could equally be argued that secularism cannot simply be defined as such, as there are variants of the system that are aggressively anti-religious. For example, it is defined by Yinger as 'a view of life based on the premise that religion and religious considerations, as of God and a future life, should be ignored or excluded.'[30] Therefore, there are certain strands of the system that are antithetical towards religion as a whole, including Islam.

For example, the secularism seen within Turkey differs hugely from the secularism seen in the UK. This can be seen in the case of the *Hijab* (Headscarf). In 1982, Turkey implemented a ban on 'headscarves worn for religious purposes in all universities, both public and private, as well as in government offices.'[31] Banning the veil in Turkey was seen as a 'necessary and reasonable response to the threat allegedly posed by fundamentalist Islam to Turkey's secular democracy'.[32] Similarly to Turkey, France has also banned the *Niqab* (Face-covering) in French public spaces and *Hijab* (Head-covering) in French schools in recent times.[33] Neither of these actions have been taken in the UK, emphasizing the difference in approaches between secular nations. The Turkish and French models of secularism could perhaps be described as more hostile towards religion in general, making the issue of compatibility more difficult, whereas the model found in the UK is arguably more tolerant of religious freedom, as, for example, in the UK, there are 26 bishops in the House of Lords.[34]

Therefore, as shown previously, there is a difficulty when attempting to properly identify and define the terms being compared. When speaking about 'Islam', many differing and often contradictory notions are presented. Similarly, when addressing 'secularism', there are differing conceptions and manifestations of the idea. Thus, depending on one's definition of the term secularism, secularism may

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30 J. Milton Yinger, 'Pluralism, Religion, and Secularism,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,* 6 (1967), pp. 17-28 (p. 19).
31 Valorie K. Vojdik, 'Politics of the Headscarf in Turkey: Masculinities, Feminism, and the Construction of Collective Identities', *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender,* 33 (2010), pp. 661-685 (p. 661).
32 Ibid, p. 662.
33 For further information regarding this topic, see: Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
34 Anthony Wilfred Bradley, *Constitutional and Administrative Law*, 15th edn (Harlow: Longman, 2011), p. 182.

be viewed as compatible with religion or as an antithesis to religion. Therefore, the question of the compatibility of Islam and secularism should not simply be limited to the assessment of Islam as a religion but also secularism as a political ideology.

In conclusion, the main aim of this paper was to assess the various attitudes regarding the compatibility of Islam and secularism. It can be seen that this issue is multifaceted and complex. Ultimately, the answer to this question lies in the process of defining terms. There certainly exist perceptions of Islam and notions of secularism that are incompatible, but this paper has sought to show that there are conceptualisations of the two that are compatible. As Watt lucidly states,

> 'In Islam […] there [is] no such authority [as "orthodoxy"]. There [is] only the main or central body of opinion in the various schools or sections of the community.'[35]

As there is no authoritative ecclesiastic body within Islam legislating what is correct, there exist many opinions ultimately validated by Muslim communities. Thus, it can be argued that Islam is compatible with a variety of concepts. This can be detected from the likes of Mahmoud Taha, who argued in *The Second Message of Islam*[36] that Islam is compatible with communism. Due to the diversity of opinions within Islam, intellectuals such as Al-Attas and Maududi have argued the incompatibility of Islam and secularism, whereas others such as Asghar Ali Engineer and Fatima Mernissi have claimed that they are compatible.

The issue of colonisation and the enforcement of ideas in Muslim countries by the West have arguably played a major role in exacerbating this issue. The doctrine that religion and politics cannot be separated is a later historical construct and therefore the reluctance regarding secularism is influenced by political realities more so than theology and belief. It could therefore be attested that there is no absolute contradiction within the entirety of Islamic thought in regards to the separation of the church and state. Overall, facts tend to refute the claim regarding the complete incompatibility of Islam and secularism and thus it can be concluded that Islam and secularism are compatible, so long as secularism is not conceptualised as an ideology that seeks to suppress faith, and Islam is not defined as a political system.

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35 William Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1962), p. 27.
36 See Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, *The Second Message of Islam*, trans. by Abdullahi Ahmed An- Na'im (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987).

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