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The Indonesian Journal of Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies, published biannually by the Doctoral Program in Islamic Law, Islamic University of Indonesia, serves as a platform for intellectual exchanges and interdisciplinary studies on various aspects of Islam including, but not limited to, theology, law, education, economy and politics and how they are historically and contingently embedded, expressed and articulated in a variety of historical contexts. The journal welcomes contributions from scholars and researchers of various disciplinary backgrounds in the form of original (theoretical or empirical) research articles on various issues related to Islam in both its normative and historical dimensions.

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UNDERSTANDING RELIGION-STATE RELATIONS IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES: Beyond Essentialist and Secular-Liberal Narratives

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Abstract

Scholars have offered different accounts in the debates over religion-state relations in the Muslim world. Central to their differing views are diverging premises on the degree to which religion-state relations in Muslim societies are dictated or determined by certain 'essential' cultural, religious or even civilizational characteristics. Another main root of conflicting analyses is different assumptions on the extent to which the discourse of religion-state relations should be confined to their distinctively secular-liberal character. While some discuss religion-state relations within strictly secular-liberal terms, others choose to go beyond these particular narratives. This paper revisits the debate on religion-state relations in the Muslim world in light of these two main roots of contention. The chapter begins with a critical examination of the cultural essentialist approach and its limited analytical value in the discussion on religion-state relations in the Muslim world. It then examines the dominant secular-liberal narratives of state-religion and their problematic projection within the context of Muslim societies. Finally, it offers an overview of the internal debate within the Muslim world over the issue of religion-state relations, focusing more specifically on the extent to which secular liberal discourses are contested or critically embraced.

Keywords: Religion-state Relations, Secular-liberal Narratives, Muslim Societies.

A. Introduction

Debates on religion-state relations in the Muslim world are often framed in terms of their compatibility with Western ideals and experiences. Scholars have offered different accounts in these debates. Central to these differing views are their diverging premises on the degree to which religion-state relations in Muslim societies are dictated or determined by certain 'essential' cultural, religious or even civilizational characteristics. Some scholars place more emphasis on the determining nature of these essential traits on the ideas and practices of religion-state relations in the Muslim world while others stress more complex contributing factors to the development of these ideas and practices. Another main root of conflicting analyses is different assumptions on the extent to which the discourse of religion-state relations should be confined to their distinctively secular-liberal character. While some discuss religion-state relations within strictly secular-liberal terms, others choose to go beyond these particular narratives.

This paper revisits the debate on religion-state relations in the Muslim world in light of these two main roots of contention. The chapter begins with a critical examination of the cultural essentialist approach and its limited analytical value in the discussion on religion-state relations in the Muslim world. It then examines the dominant secular-liberal narratives of state-religion and their problematic projection within the context of Muslim societies. Finally, it offers an overview of the internal debate within the Muslim world over the issue of religion-state relations, focusing more specifically on the extent to which secular liberal discourses are contested or critically embraced.

B. Cultural Essentialism and Its Critiques

In discussing religion and its relationship to modernity, some scholars have tended to focus on text-based religious essentials to

explain religion's impact on socio-political life. This approach is usually referred to as 'cultural essentialism'. When it is used in more civilizational terms, it is often called as 'civilizationalism' or 'civilizational' approach with the 'clash of civilizations' thesis as its most famous version.¹ For a tendency in some versions of 'cultural essentialism' or 'civilizationalism' to single out Islamic culture or civilization as distinctively different from the rest in its response to modernity, the approach is also sometimes closely associated with the 'Islamic or Muslim exceptionalism' thesis.² Whatever term or label associated with it, this approach generally argues that there is (a) inherent distinction between certain religions and religious communities, and (b) direct causal impacts of these religious differences on politics.³

The discussions on religion-state relations in the Muslim world and their compatibility with Western ideals are not immune from this approach. In these discussions, cultural essentialists approach tends to focus on the fundamentally different approaches of Islam and Christianity towards secular and religious authority. Scholars subscribing this approach generally assume that the latter is doctrinally and culturally more hospitable to secularism and secularization. Van Nieuwenhuijze, for instance, considered secularism and secularization as the natural theological outcome of Christianity. In contrast, Islam in his view is in fundamental tension with secularism "as it embraces everything under *tawhid* (the unity of God): secularism (is) basically

¹ The most widely cited theory of clash of civilizations is that offered by Samuel P. Huntington in his works. See in particular his "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72 (3), 1993, p. 22-49 and *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996)

² This type of thesis or analysis can be found, for example, in Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Ann K.S Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to Islamic Political Theory: The Jurists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and "Islam and Liberal Democracy: A Historical Overview," *Journal of Democracy*, 7, 2 (1996), p. 52-63.

³ Ahmed T. Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France and Turkey* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 17.

alien to Islam.”⁴ In a similar vein, Bernard Lewis argues that “the distinction between church and state, so deeply rooted in Christendom, did not exist in Islam.”⁵ In a more elaborate account, Lewis writes:

In Islam, religion is not, as is the case in Christianity, a sector or division which governs certain parts of life, while others escape its grip; the Islamic religion is concerned with life as a whole, exerting its jurisdiction, not in limited, but in global terms. In a society like this, the mere idea of a separation of the Church and the State is devoid of sense, in that the Church and the State, religious power and political power, do not exist as two distinct units able to be separated; they are one.⁶

Maxime Rodinson supports Lewis’s argument suggesting that Islam is a religion that “exhibits the characteristic, distinctive among the large family of monotheistic religions, of linking theological and political problem closely and structurally.”⁷ In supporting their argument, these scholars often refer to this well-known verse of the Bible: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar’s, and unto God the things which be God’s.”⁸ Samuel Huntington goes even further contrasting different religious and cultural imperatives: “in Islam, God is Caesar; in China and Japan, Caesar is God; in Orthodoxy, God is Caesar’s junior partner. The separation and recurring clashes between church and state that typify Western civilization have existed in no other civilizations.”⁹

The cultural essentialist approach toward Islam, however, has been increasingly challenged. For most of its critics, the main problem with this approach is its perennial, unitary and totalizing premises of Islam.¹⁰ Olivier Roy, for instance, challenges those who approach Islam

⁴ Quoted in Abdulkader Tayob, *Religion in Modern Islamic Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 3.

⁵ Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 2-3. See also his “Islam and Liberal Democracy: A Historical Overview,” *Journal of Democracy*, 7, 2 (1996), p. 52-63 and his most recent collection of work, *Faith and Power: Religion and Politics in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶ Quoted in Mohamed-Cherif Ferjani, “Islam and politics: The terms of the debate,” *History and Anthropology*, 16:1, 2009, p. 78.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 78.

⁸ See, for example, Bernard Lewis, *Faith and Power*, p. xi.

⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 70.

¹⁰ Critiques of essentialist perspective can be found, among others, in Aziz Al-Azmeh,

as “a discrete entity, a coherent and closed set of beliefs, values and anthropological patterns embodied in a common society, history and territory, which allows us to use the term as an explanatory concept for almost everything involving Muslims.”¹¹ Roy also disagrees with the ways in which culturalists overemphasize the role of Islam in contemporary societies, viewing culture as “a fairly homogenous and closed set of values, downplaying a centuries-old history of civil wars and ideological conflicts.”¹²

Challenging this essentialist and unitary reading of Islam, some scholars offer an alternative reading which stresses the multiplicity of its expression and multivocality of its doctrine. In challenge of monolithic view of religion, Fred Halliday suggests that there is no such “one traditionally established Islam” which appears identical in all situations.¹³ Stressing the multivocality of religious doctrines, Alfred Stepan challenges the assumption of the univocality of world religions, including Islam. In discussing their relationship to democracy, Stepan notes that “doctrinally, the world’s religious systems should not be assumed as univocally democratic or nondemocratic.”¹⁴ Other scholars have also challenged the essentialist and monolithic view of Islam. Aziz Al-Azmeh and Ebrahim Moosa both notes that there are many ‘Islams’ and many Muslims with differences in terms of their practices and understandings¹⁵ while Abdolkarim Soroush categorically states that “Islam is nothing but a series of interpretations of Islam.”¹⁶

Islams and Modernities (London, New York: Verso, 1993); John L. Esposito and John A. Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Salwa Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics, Culture, the State and Islamism* (London: IB Tauris, 2003); Aryn B. Sajoo (ed.), *Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives* (London: IB Tauris, 2002); Alfred Stepan, ‘Religion, Democracy and the “Twin Tolerations,”’ *Journal of Democracy*, 11 (4), October 2000.

¹¹ Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst, 2004), p. 9.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 11-15.

¹³ See Fred Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation* (London: Tauris, 1996), p. 119.

¹⁴ Alfred Stepan, “Religion, Democracy, and the “Twin Tolerations,”” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (October 2000), p. 44.

¹⁵ See Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (London: Verso, 1993) and Ebrahim Moosa, “The Debt and Burdens of Critical Islam,” in Omid Safi (ed.), *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 2003), p. 113-114.

¹⁶ Abdolkarim Soroush, “The Changeable and the Unchangeable,” in Kari Vogt, Lena Larsen and Christian Moe (eds.), *New Directions in Islamic Thought: Exploring Reform and*

Another main weakness of the cultural essentialist approach is its tendency to underestimate human agency and their diverse religious interpretation. As Ahmed T. Kuru notes, while religion plays a very important role in shaping politics, its impact on state policies is generally filtered by human agency and “depends on diverse human religious interpretations”.¹⁷ Kuru therefore suggests that religion per se should not be taken as a determining factor; different kinds of interpretation of religion linked with various political ideologies deserve more attention.¹⁸ More specific to the issue of secularization, or its absence, in Muslim societies, Abdulkader Tayob argues that cultural explanations seem unable to make sense of the modern history of Islam. According to Tayob, cultural explanations of this question are built on the assumption that “modern Muslim developments have not added anything substantial to shape the meaning of Islam for Muslims.”¹⁹ Sacrificing the history of modern Muslim thought, “they have tended to ignore the cultural patterns and values that modern Muslim intellectual contributions have added to the intellectual legacy of Islam.”²⁰

Challenges of the cultural essentialist approach also come from many historical and empirical accounts. A closer look at the historical and empirical developments in the Muslim world reveals a much more complex picture than essentialist accounts generally tend to suggest. As Ira Lapidus stresses, religious and political institutions in the Muslim world have been separate since the 8th century. At that time, independent Sunni schools of law, Shi’a sects, and Sufi *tariqas*, in addition to secular military and administrative rulers, challenged and replaces the institution of the Caliphate, which claimed to represent both political and religious authorities.²¹ Olivier Roy offers a similar

Muslim Tradition (London, New York: I.B Tauris, 2009), p. 14.

¹⁷ Ahmed T Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion*, p. 20.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 20

¹⁹ Abdelkader Tayob, *Religion in Modern Islamic Discourse*, p. 5.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 5

²¹ Ira Lapidus, “The Separation of State and Religion in the Development of Early Islamic Society,” *International Journal of Middle East*, 6, 4 (1975), p. 363-85.

account asserting that Islam has experienced secularization, from both the political and sociological point of view. According to Roy, all authorities in Islam, except for the period of the Prophet, “were secular in the sense that they were not determined by religious criteria.”²² Roy further observes that “Sultans, emirs, generals, and presidents took power (and continue to take it) following perfectly temporal processes (force, dynastic succession, *coup d'état*, or even election).”²³ Other scholars such as Said Arjoman have also emphasized the presence and development of legal pluralism in Islamic political history, referring to the recognition of basic duality of temporal and religious laws in medieval and early modern Islam.²⁴

In the more contemporary period, the US Commission on International religious Freedom issued a report on religion-state relations in 44 predominantly Muslim countries. The Commission concludes that “the majority of the world’s Muslim population currently lives in countries that either proclaim the state to be secular, or that make no pronouncements concerning Islam to be the official state religion.”²⁵ The report emphasizes the diversity of state-religion regimes in the Muslim world and disproves the alleged unity of Muslim countries. More importantly, as Richard Mohr and Nadirsyah Hosen note, some patterns of religion-state relations that are familiar to European or Western contexts are also present in some parts of the Muslim world. Turkey’s ‘assertive secularism’, for example, resembles France’s *laïcité*, both of which “aim to exclude religion and its personal expression from the public sphere.”²⁶ This form of secularism is in

²² Olivier Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 50.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 50.

²⁴ Said Amir Arjoman, “Religious Human Rights and the Principle of Legal Pluralism in the Middle East,” in Johan D. Var der Vyver and John Witte Jr., (eds.), *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective: Legal Perspective* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1997), p. 334.

²⁵ United States Commission, “The Religion-State Relationship and the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief: A Comparative Textual Analysis of the Constitutions of Predominantly Muslim Countries.” See also E. Stahnke and R. C. Blitt, “The Religion-State Relationship and the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief: A Comparative Textual Analysis of the Constitutions of Predominantly Muslim Countries,” *Georgetown Journal of International Law*, 36 (4), 2005.

²⁶ Richard Mohr and Nadirsyah Hosen, “Introduction, De capo: law and religion from

contrast with ‘passive secularism’ developed in some English-speaking countries in which public visibility of religion is tolerated.²⁷ Again, this informs us that there is no single model of religion-state relationship in the Muslim world. In other words, the separation of state and religion is far from being an exclusive achievement of Western civilization “as actual state practices are far more blurred and western and eastern states cannot easily be divided in secular and clear-cut non-secular states.”²⁸

With all these critiques, it can be argued that cultural essentialism has fundamental weaknesses in explaining and understanding religion-state relations and religious freedom in Muslim societies. On the other hand, the multivocality approach may lead to a much more nuanced discussion on these issues. It is not, however, without critiques. John Anderson, for instance, argues that the multivocality argument “tends to focus on “theological” debates or rely on interviews with religious leaders out of power and as such offer only a partial aid.”²⁹ According to Anderson, “in the political ‘real’ world, one has to deal with ‘actually existing’ systems and ideological tendencies, not the interpretations of a handful of “liberally” inclined intellectuals.”³⁰ While acknowledging the possibility of major changes in religious doctrines and discourses, Anderson urges scholars “to look less at what might be than at what in practice are the dominant themes or arguments within a religious tradition at any particular time and how these might impact upon the political order.”³¹

the top down,” in Nadirsyah Hosen and Richard Mohr (eds.), *Law and Religion in Public Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 6.

²⁷ For comparative account on “assertive” and “passive” forms of secularism, see Ahmed T. Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France and Turkey* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²⁸ Jeroen Temperman, “The Neutral State: Optional or Necessary? A Triangular Analysis of Religion-state relationship, Democratisation and Human Rights Compliance,” *Religion and Human Rights*, 1, (2006), p. 264.

²⁹ John Anderson, “Does God Matter, and If So Whose God?: Religion and Democratization,” *Democratization*, 11: 4 (2004), p. 207.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 207.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 207.

C. Secular-Liberal Narrative and Its Discontents

Another major stumbling block in the debate on religion-state relations in Muslim societies is a tendency among scholars to strictly limit the debate within secular-liberal terms and framework. Much of the standard literature on these issues implies that secularism, with a complete separation of church and state, is the most conducive institutional arrangement for the protection of religious freedom. In this kind of narrative, a linear relationship between religion freedom, liberalism and secularization is firmly assumed. Describing this kind of tautological narrative Richard Helmstadter writes:

Secularization, in the sense of putting the secular aspects of life at the centre and marginalizing religion, has been fitted into the master narrative as a kind of extension of Protestantism, progress, and modernization. To see the decline of religion and the secularization of society as inevitable was ... the logical postscript to the narrative in which liberalism and religious freedom are seen as predestined goals in the progress of mankind.³²

Others such as W. Cole Durham have traced the link between modern discourse of religious freedom and secularism in certain Enlightenment philosophy (most notably that of John Locke). According to Durham, Locke's idea that "religious (and by extension, political) freedom could sow political order from religious seeds that had always been assumed to be ultimate source of anarchy" paved the way for a new perspective of political cosmos and the legitimacy of political community. In Durham's view, "by placing respect for freedom at the centre of the constellation of values, and by recognizing that respect for freedom and dignity of individuals is itself a moral and religious truth of the highest order", the Lockean insight "transformed the ground for legitimizing and stabilizing political communities."³³

³² Richard Helmstadter (ed.), *Freedom and Religion in Nineteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 7.

³³ W. Cole Durham Jr, "Perspectives on Religious Liberty: A Comparative Framework," in Johan D. Var der Vyver and John Witte Jr., (eds), *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective: Legal Perspective* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1997), p. 8-9.

For these historically and epistemologically close links between religious freedom, secularism and liberalism, the modern discourse of religion-state relations and religious freedom has been largely framed and discussed within distinctively secular-liberal terms. The liberal principle of state neutrality, in particular, has been central in the modern discourse on religion-state relations and religious freedom. The principle of neutrality in liberal thought is generally understood to mean that in face of competing comprehensive doctrines with their conflicting conceptions of the good, state must refrain itself from endorsing or taking side with, let alone promoting, particular forms of these competing doctrines and conceptions of the good. Andre Altman makes clear this liberal position in his assertion that the state must remain neutral with respect to the exercise of individual rights precisely because they “involve matters that are not legitimate subjects for the concern and regulation of the political community.”³⁴

There are various arguments offered by liberal scholars for the desirability of state neutrality. A more principled argument often put forward by liberal scholars, however, is that the legitimacy of the exercise of state power depends on its being justifiable in terms of reasons which can be understood and accepted by everyone. Denise Meyerson observes that the early formulation of this argument can be found in John Locke’s ‘*A Letter Concerning Toleration*’ and its highly sophisticated contemporary formulation has been given in John Rawls’s *Political Liberalism*.³⁵ In this work, Rawls tackles the question of how a plural society in which the citizens hold a variety of reasonable, but deeply opposed comprehensive doctrines can arrive at an overlapping consensus. He proposes that on these fundamental points of political organization and social cooperation, individuals should be able to advance their arguments only by using freestanding conceptions

³⁴ Andre Altman, *Critical Legal Studies: Liberal Critique* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 73.

³⁵ Denise Meyerson, ‘Why religion belongs in the private sphere, not the public square’ in Peter Cane, Carolyn Evans and Zoe Robinson (eds.), *Law and Religion in Theoretical and Historical Contexts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 46.

“independent of the opposing and conflicting philosophical and religious doctrines that citizens affirm.”³⁶ The idea of neutral state is constitutive to this normative position. Rawls thus says: “the state is not to do anything intended to favour or promote any particular comprehensive doctrine rather than another or to give greater assistance to those who pursue it.”³⁷

By many scholars with liberal persuasion, the principle of state neutrality is regarded as the most appropriate foundation and framework for modern religious freedom. It is particularly assumed to be more beneficial for religious minorities. Andrew F. March, for instance, argues that in a liberal political order, “minorities are not forced to abandon most religious practices, to convert, to culturally assimilate, or to profess something that essentially requires the repudiation of basic theological beliefs.”³⁸ The main reason for this, he argues, is because the principle of state neutrality prevents the liberal state from seeing society “primarily as uniting citizens in a single common purpose but rather as the just management of multiple private purposes.”³⁹

These secular-liberal accounts on religion-state relations, however, have been seriously challenged. Contemporary developments in the West seem to have contradicted the secularist interpretation of religion-state relations. As Jung observes, strict functional separation between religion and politics is hardly the case in Western countries as these spheres often overlap and religious references have been present continuously at both the individual and the macro level.⁴⁰ Ira Lapidus also points out that the strict separationist view:

³⁶ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 9.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 193.

³⁸ Andrew F. March, “Are Secularism and Neutrality Attractive to Religious Minorities? Islamic Discussions of Western Secularism in the “Jurisprudence of Muslim Minorities” (*Fiqh Al-Aqalliyat*) Discourse, *Cardozo Law Review*, vol. 30, No. 6 (2009), p. 2821.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 2821.

⁴⁰ Dietrich Jung, ‘Islam and Politics: A Fixed Relationship?’, *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 16,1(2007), p. 21.

Ignores the numerous examples of state control of religion, the phenomenon of established churches (such as the Anglican Church in England), and the concordats in Italy. It ignores the integral connection between religious and political nationalism in such countries as Ireland or Poland. It ignores the close identity between religious affiliation and nationality in Holland and Spain. Finally, it ignores the connection between religion and activist political movements, such as the liberation churches in Latin America.⁴¹

Evidences contradictory to secularization theory are also presented by Jose Casanova. Based on five case studies from two religious traditions (Catholicism and Protestantism) in four countries (Spain, Poland, Brazil and the United States), Casanova observes rather a 'deprivatization of religion' in the Western world and points to the various ways in which religious organizations demonstrate political commitment in public sphere.⁴² In light of these developments, it appears that only the constitutional aspect of classical secularization theory, the legal separation of the state apparatus from religion, remains almost unchallenged.⁴³

The crisis of classical secularization theory leads to new interpretations of secularization. Instead of insisting on 'the wall of separation', Hollenbach, for instance, take the view of secularization as differentiation. He argues that religion must be differentiated from other spheres of public life, such as the state.⁴⁴ He also argues that religious beliefs and traditions may have their influence on law and state policy in an indirect way. This occurs through the activity of self-governing citizens, informal discussion, voting, political campaign, and lobbying.⁴⁵ Thus, the role of religion in public life does not imply all political institutions are under control of religion. In other word, in this alternative view, "differentiation of religion from the domain of

⁴¹ Ira Lapidus, "State and Religion in Islamic Societies," *Past and Present* 151 (1996), p. 3

⁴² See Jose Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World*, p. 69-207.

⁴³ Dietrich Jung, "Islam and Politics: A Fixed Relationship?," p. 25.

⁴⁴David Hollenbach, "Contexts of the Political Role of Religion: Civil Society and Culture", *San Diego Law Review* 30, no. 4 (1993): p. 878

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 878.

state power does not rule out all religious influence in public life, nor politics, broadly conceived.”⁴⁶

D. Muslim Debate on Religion-State Relations

Like any religious tradition, Islam is open to various, and frequently conflicting, interpretations about its inherent normative demands. Such diverse interpretations also emerge in the issue of religion-state relations. Far from presenting one single binding Islamic position on these issues, various Muslim individuals and groups offer a great variety of ‘Muslim discourses’ about whether and how certain interpretations of religion-state relations and Islamic normative requirements fit each other.

Concerning the issue of religion-state relations, it is interesting to note that the ‘integralist’ view of Islam, emphasized by scholars who subscribe to cultural essentialist approach, is also very popular within certain Islamic movements. These movements usually argue that Islam cannot recognize anything like a separation of church and state or a “clear-cut boundary between morality and legality.”⁴⁷ Hassan Al-Banna, one of the most prominent ideologues of Islamic revivalism, for example, suggested that Islam “was a faith and an ideology which encompassed and regulated all human affairs, and which did not shrink from facing new problems and necessary reforms.”⁴⁸ In the same token, Sayyid Qutb, another leading figure in the movement, defined Islam as “a complete social system which caters for all peoples’ need and which differs fundamentally from other systems.”⁴⁹ But even beyond revivalists, the comprehensiveness of Islam has been repeated and championed by many others.

⁴⁶ Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World*, p. 219.

⁴⁷ Ann K.S Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to Islamic Political Theory: The Jurists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), xv-xvi.

⁴⁸ Derek Hopwood, ‘Introduction: The Culture of Modernity in Islam and the Middle East’, in John Cooper, Ronald L. Nettler, and Mohamed Mahmud (eds.), *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond* (London: I.B Tauris, 1998), p. 7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 7.

Despite their differing intellectual orientations, these Muslims figures and scholars can be categorized as the 'integralists'. They generally agree in two main points: first, that the different conditions of origins and different character of the two religions mean that secularism is appropriate for Christian Europe but not for the Muslim world; and second, its 'importation' into the latter is contrary to Islam's claim to all-embracing validity.⁵⁰ This kind of argument is asserted, for example, by Muhammad 'Amara as the representative of the 'integralist' view:

Under the auspices of Islamic civilizations, the call for the reign of secularism is far more strange and abnormal than just being an innovation of the West...and borrowing from it a solution for a problem we don't actually have!.. If European renaissance was linked to secularism, or even based on it, after its decline had been tied to the hegemony of religion and church over state and society,...then the march of our Arab-Islamic civilization was exactly the opposite. For the Arab-Islamic renaissance was intimately linked to the hegemony of the Islamic *shari'a* over a state that was civilian and Islamic at that time, while the deviation from the Islamic character of the law was the beginning of the path of our nation into inertia and decline.⁵¹

This is not, however, the only view having currency in the Muslim world. The opposite view which stresses the 'separationist' tendencies within intellectual and historical roots of Islam has been also advocated by a number of Muslim scholars. In the modern period, the intellectual roots of secularism can be discovered in both Sunni and Shi'ite Islam. In the Sunni Islamic world, the idea of separation of state and mosque was first advocated by the Egyptian Muslim scholar 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq (1888-1966). Al-Raziq challenged traditional *ulama* in his time who mandated the establishment of a unified caliphate to establish temporal rule over all Muslims. He put forward three important arguments for his position. Firstly, there was no substantial argument from the Qur'an, the *sunna* and the consensus of Muslim scholarship on the necessity of a religious government. Secondly, Prophet did not instruct

⁵⁰ Alexander Flores, "The Discussion within Islam on Secularism, Democracy and Human Rights", p. 611.

⁵¹ Muhammad 'Amara, quoted in Alexander Flores, p. 612.

Muslims about particular form of government. And thirdly, there was a clear distinction between the roles of Muhammad as a religious and political leader.⁵²

In the more recent period, a number of Muslim intellectuals with a liberal persuasion have also provides persistent challenges to the ‘integralist’ view. While some of them acknowledge the doctrinal and historical difference between Islam and Christianity, they come to a completely different conclusion as to possibility of democratic government and the distinction of divine and human spheres of authority in Muslim societies. Khaled Abou El Fadl, for instance, suggests that “Islam does not even have a church per se that can authoritatively set down the true canonical Islam; therefore, the doctrine of separation of church and state, strictly speaking, is not applicable to the Islamic context.”⁵³ In El Fadl’s view, while early Western secularists of the seventeenth and eighteenth century wished to sharply curtail the powers of the Catholic Church over the public sphere, “the absence of an institutional church in Islamic history ensured that religion could not monopolize or control the public sphere.”⁵⁴ More importantly, El Fadl notes that historically, “the Islamic faith and Shari’a law have been represented by several competing schools of theological and jurisprudential thought, the most powerful and notable of these organized into privately run professional guilds.”⁵⁵

Abdulaziz Sachedina has also emphasized what he calls “the *facto* separation between the religious and temporal realms of human activity” within the Islamic tradition. As he writes:

Although theoretically it is true that Islam does not make a distinction between the church and the state or between spiritual and temporal, in practice the Islamic tradition recognizes a *de facto* separation between the religious and temporal realms of human activity, including distinct sources of jurisdiction

⁵² Abdelkader Tayob, *Religion in Modern Islamic Discourse*, p. 105.

⁵³ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from Extremists* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2005), p. 22.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 22.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 22.

in the Muslim polity. The categorization of religiously ordained God-human and interhuman relationships in Islamic sacred law, the *Shari'a*, is an explicit expression of the distinct realms of religious and temporal on earth. Whereas God-human relations are founded on individual autonomy as regulated by divine jurisdiction, interhuman relations are within the jurisdiction of human institutions founded on political consensus with the purpose of furthering social justice and equity.⁵⁶

While he endorses the modern distinction of divine and profane spheres, Sachedina challenges, however, the secular-liberal 'disestablishment' proposition that privatizes religion. He further argues that the proposition that attempts to banish religion from a secularized public arena is "a major obstacle in understanding societies in which religious obligation is a key element in managing social problems and sustaining a sense of community".⁵⁷ For Sachedina, while preventing the dominance of one religion over others, the secularist outlook "can also marginalize communities of faith and thus push them toward militancy, aggression and separatism."⁵⁸

Another fundamental challenge to the 'integralist' view is offered by Abdullahi A. An-Na'im. An-Na'im links more directly his challenge of 'integralist' view of religion-state relations to the Islamic normative requirement of religious freedom. An-Na'im argues that "the freedom of religion and belief of Muslims as well as non-Muslims is more likely to be violated by a state that seeks to promote a particular religious doctrine than one that is neutral on the matter."⁵⁹ For this reason, An-Na'im rejects the idea of Islamic state. For him, "the notion of an Islamic state is a contradiction in terms because whatever principles of *shari'a* are enacted by the state as positive law cease to be the normative system of Islam by the very act of enacting it as the law to be enforced

⁵⁶ Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁵⁹ Abdullahi A. An-Na'im, "Re-affirming Secularism for Islamic Societies," *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 3 (2003), p. 39.

by the state.”⁶⁰ More importantly, he further argues that the idea of an Islamic state is not only unprecedented in Islamic history but also morally untenable because “whatever views of *shari’ah* are enforced by those who control the state will violate the freedom of religion of those Muslims who disagree with those views, as well as the human rights of women and non-Muslims.”⁶¹

It is important to note, however, that while An-Na’im accepts the minimum requirement for a positive relationship is neutrality, he is of the view that “no public policy is ever completely neutral: citizens are always believers (in something)”.⁶² For An-Na’im, “it is grossly misleading to speak of complete separation or total union of any religion and the state. Any state, as well as its constituent organs and institutions, are conceived and operated by people whose religious or philosophical beliefs will necessarily be reflected in their thinking and behaviour.”⁶³ The question for him, then, “is how people can exercise free democratic choice in accordance with their own beliefs (religious or otherwise) while the neutrality of the state is maintained.”⁶⁴ In answering this question, An-Na’im argues for secularism in its weak form. As he states,

weak secularism of the state is necessary for a principled and consistent commitment to pluralism as a political and legal framework for enabling individual and collective self-determination, including freedom of religion. Weak secularism makes the least normative claims that are necessary for sustaining pluralism without violating the neutrality of the state regarding religious doctrine.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 39.

⁶¹ Abdullahi A. An-Na’im, ‘The Politics of Religion and the Morality of Globalization,’ in Mark Juergensmeyer (ed), *Religion in Global Civil Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.30.

⁶² Abdullahi A. An-Na’im, ‘The Interdependence of Religion, Secularism and Human Rights,’ *Common Knowledge*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Duke University Press, 2005).

⁶³ Abdullahi A. An-Na’im, ‘Shari’ah and Positive Legislation: Is an Islamic State Possible or Viable?’ in *Yearbook of Islamic and Middle Eastern Law 1998/1999*, vol. 5, ed. Eugene Cotran (The Hague: Kluwer, 2000), p. 40.

⁶⁴ Abdullahi A. An-Na’im, ‘The Interdependence of Religion, Secularism and Human Rights,’ p. 64.

⁶⁵ Abdullahi A. An-Na’im, ‘Islam and Secularism,’ in *Comparative Secularism in A Global Age*, p. 2129.

E. Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from the discussion in the previous sections. First, in analysing religion-state relations in Muslim societies, I have shown that cultural essentialism has a limited analytical and explanatory power. The essentialist, unitary and totalizing premises underpinning this approach tend to reduce Islamic traditions and Muslim societies into a fixed and monolithic cultural and political unit resistant to new ideas and socio-political changes. This approach thus tends to stress the doctrinal, historical, intellectual and cultural limits of Muslim world in accepting, adopting or adapting to certain “modern” ideas, processes and institutions. As an alternative to cultural essentialism, I have also discussed the multivocality approach as advocated by a number of Western and Muslim scholars alike. I have tried to demonstrate that with some caveats, this alternative approach offers a more useful analytical framework in the discussion of the highly rich, contentious and dynamic Islamic traditions and Muslim politics.

Second, in terms of normative challenge to the discussion of religion-state relations in the Muslim world, I have also shown that the tendency to restrict the discussion of religion-state relations into distinctively secular-liberal terms has a limited normative and explanatory power in understanding Muslim discourses and practices on religion-state relations. Strict terms of separation and neutrality in religion-state relations, for example, may find it difficult to explain the possibility of Muslims endorsing an institutional separation of state and religion while remain faithful to their religious values and commitment in leading their political and public lives. My discussion on this issue demonstrates that we need to go beyond the strict secular-liberal terms and framework for us to be able to understand the possibility of the Islamic tradition and Muslim societies expressing ‘modern’ or ‘universal’ commitment in their own terms. By this I am not suggesting, however, that that ‘Western’ discourse and theory of modernity of secularism

is not relevant and therefore should be abandoned altogether in the discussion of religion-state relations in Muslim societies. What I am trying to stress here is that we must critically employ Western social and political theory while acknowledging its ethnocentric biases on the one hand and its universalizing tendencies on the other. In this respect, I agree with Sudipta Kaviraj's assertion that "to understand political modernity in the non-Western world is impossible without Western social theory; it is equally impossible entirely within the terms of that tradition."⁶⁶

Third, as to the internal debate within the Muslim world on the issues of religion-state relations, I have shown that Islam is indeed open to various interpretations and Muslims are articulating different and often competing voices on these important issues according to their contingent historical, intellectual and socio-political contexts and conditions. While there are some Muslims who fundamentally reject modern ideas of religion-state relations, others find in their religious tradition strong doctrinal and intellectual foundation for the support of such ideas. This again supports the idea that Islam, like any other religious tradition, is multivocal. At the same time, this also challenges the putative thesis of 'clash of civilizations' or 'Muslim exceptionalism' as suggested by some scholars in the discussion of these issues. More importantly, the internal debate in the Muslim world on these issues as I briefly surveyed shows that positing a simple but tempting question as to whether or not 'Islam' is compatible with the 'modern' discourse of religion-state relations risks glossing over the internal tensions, contradictions and incoherencies constitutive to both 'Islam' and the these 'modern' ideas.

⁶⁶ Sudipta Kaviraj, "In Search of Civil Society," in Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (eds.) *Civil Society: History and Possibilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 287.

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