



Special Issue Reprint

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# Political Secularism and Religion

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Edited by  
Naser Ghobadzadeh and Ali Akbar

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# **Political Secularism and Religion**



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Editors

**Naser Ghobadzadeh**

**Ali Akbar**

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**László Koppány Csáji**

Secularism and Ethnic Minorities: Comparative Case Studies on Ethnic, Religious, and Political Cognitions in Pakistani-Controlled Kashmir, Central Russia, Romania, and Northern Scandinavia

Reprinted from: *Religions* **2023**, *14*, 117, doi:10.3390/rel14010117 . . . . . **169**

# About the Editors

## Naser Ghobadzadeh

Naser Ghobadzadeh is a senior lecturer at the National School of Arts, Australian Catholic University. Researching at the intersection of religion and politics, his interests lie in the study of Islamic political theology, secularism, and Middle East politics. His current book project involves conceptualising the political practices of the traditional Shīʿī orthodoxy through an investigation of its theological foundations and history prior to the emergence of political Islam. This book is entitled “Theocratic Secularism: Religion and Government in Shīʿī Thought” is published by Oxford University Press (2023). Naser has authored three books including *Religious secularity: a theological challenge to the Islamic state* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), *Caspian Sea: legal regime, neighbouring countries and US policies* (Tehran: Farhang-e Gofteman, 2005—in Farsi) and *A study of people’s divergence from ruling system* (Tehran: Farhang-e Gofteman, 2002—in Farsi). He is also co-editor of a collection of essays, i.e., *The Politics of Islamism: Diverging Visions and Trajectories* (New York: Palgrave 2018). Naser is the author of numerous articles in journals such *Third World Quarterly*, *Democratization*, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, and *Contemporary Politics*, and chapters in edited collections including the *Oxford Handbook of Political, Social, and Economic Transformation* (2018), *Muslim Secular Democracy* (Palgrave Macmillan 2013).

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# Preface to “Political Secularism and Religion”

This book examines the diverse approaches of religious leaders and movements to the secular political system. The secularisation thesis, which predicted the demise of religion in both private and public life, has been discredited in recent decades. However, the idea of political secularism, which emphasizes the separation of religious authorities and institutions from the leaders and institution of the state, remains a normative and positive phenomenon. The chapters in this book present original research that cover a broad range of topics related to religion and politics . The authors analyze the practical approaches of religious leaders and movements in the political arena, as well as the ideas of religious thinkers who offer prescriptions for how religion should engage with and play a role in politics.

Editor would like to extend their heartfelt thanks to the authors of the chapters in this book, who have been collaborative and committed to producing high-quality research. Their contributions have made this book possible, and their insightful analyses will contribute to a better understanding of the complex relationship between religion and politics in secular systems. We would also like to thank the reviewers who provided valuable feedback on the chapters.

**Naser Ghobadzadeh and Ali Akbar**

*Editors*



Article

# Religious Devotion to Political Secularism

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**Abstract:** By investigating the formation of Twelver Shīʿī theology, this article seeks to show that, despite being political and despite its advocacy of pure theocracy, living in the shadow of a secular state is part of Shīʿī religious doctrine. It is argued that existential threats against Proto-Twelver Shīʿism during its formative centuries led to a messianic conception of the twelfth Imām, the only person whose direct leadership can enable a religiously legitimate state to be formed. Therefore, until his return—which is subject to the will of God—all rulers are usurpers and imposers on the right of the twelfth Imām. Shīʿī leaders are not allowed to seize the institution of government, and non-governmentalism is institutionalized as part of Shīʿī political theology. Instead of focusing on the characteristics of a legitimate ruler and how to form a legitimate government, the founding Shīʿī scholars were concerned with how to co-exist with a usurper. It will be demonstrated that these scholars had differing ideas about the scope and scale of engagement/disengagement with the institution of the state, but none of them discussed the possibility of forming a religiously legitimate government before the return of the twelfth Imām.

**Keywords:** twelver shīʿism; political secularism; Shīʿī theology; theocracy; hidden imām; qāʿim; age of perplexity; ḥadīth collection; founding Shīʿī scholars

## 1. The Theocratic Foundation of Political Secularism

Not much time has passed since the dominant view of religion among thinkers and policymakers was that it would gradually fade from the realm of human life. In addition to being a descriptive claim about what was thought to be happening, it was also a normative and prescriptive claim. In other words, secularization, in its broadest sense tended to be seen as a positive phenomenon, something to be both desired and hastened. It was according to this logic that in many Muslim countries, secularization was pursued as a top-down political project aiming to accelerate a seemingly inevitable and constructive process. However, the situation of religion in the United States and, more importantly, the backlashes to secularization projects in the Islamic world, called the secularization thesis into question. The various dimensions of secularization theory were then scrutinized, and the hypotheses of a causal link between modernity and secularization and the inevitability of the secularization process gradually lost their validity. The desirability and usefulness of secularization were also questioned. But aspects of this theory remain constructive and prescriptive, including the idea of the separation between the institution and authorities of religion from the institution and authorities of the state, which can be described as political secularism. The key claim of this article is that political secularism, in this specific sense, is embedded in Twelver Shīʿī theology.

This article employs the analytical framework proposed by Rajeev Bhargava. To measure the secular or theocratic nature of a political system, Bhargava suggests that the relationship between religion and government should be examined on three levels comprising the connection or disconnection at the level of the ultimate end, the level of institutions and personnel, and the level of law and public policy (Bhargava 2006). The first two levels exist in Shīʿī political theology. In other words, political secularism as it is considered in this article is a disconnection between religion and the state at the level of the ultimate end and at the level of institutions and personnel. But at public policy

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level, this article does not seek to promote the privatization of religion as is advocated by the conventional secularization thesis. As José Casanova suggests, some religions have both public and communal identities, and for this reason, it is not possible to privatize them. The Shīʿī religion is a religion with strong public and communal identities, and limiting Shīʿism to the private sphere is neither possible nor desirable. Therefore, in the conceptual framework proposed in this article, there is no contradiction between political secularism and the role of religion in the public and political spheres. Of course, unlike the goal of political parties, the creation of a role for religion and religious leaders in the political sphere is not undertaken with the aim of such leaders taking over the institution of government, and their input will be limited to influencing public policy. As Casanova suggests, the most appropriate sphere for the religion to play a role is that of civil society (Casanova 1994). In talking about a religious commitment to secularism, therefore, I do not mean the advocacy of atheism or the exclusion of religion from the public or political spheres. Rather, I mean that the ultimate end of the institution of religion and the institution of state is not the same, and there is distance between religious authorities and government institutions and office holders.

The argument proposed in this article is at once descriptive as well as normative and prescriptive. My argument is descriptive in the sense that it conceptualizes one of the key elements of Shīʿī theology as political secularism. Another descriptive claim in this article is that this conceptualization describes the political behavior of more than a millennium of Shīʿī religious scholars/authorities before the emergence of Ayatollah Khomeini.

As suggested in this article, Shīʿī clerics have a long history of involvement in politics. This involvement has been greater in some periods, and at times clerics have actually driven political developments. Obvious examples in this regard are the tobacco protest led by Mirza Shirazi and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, in which clerics played a decisive role on two opposing fronts. Clerics like Akhund Khorasani and Mirza Naini supported constitutionalism and Shaykh Fazlullah Nouri opposed constitutionalism. Ayatollah Khomeini's involvement in politics in the years leading up to the 1979 revolution can be considered a continuation of the tradition of Shaykh Fazlullah Nouri. It is not without reason that a quote attributed to Shaykh Fazlullah Nouri ("Our politics is our religion and our religion is our politics") is one of the key slogans of Iran's clerical leadership. However, unlike Shaykh Fazlullah, who never conceptualized the idea of a government being taken over by clerics, Ayatollah Khomeini promulgated a specific politico-religious theory in which he introduced Shīʿism as a government-centered religion. According to Khomeini's reading of Shīʿism, which can be called governmental-Shīʿism, clerics have the authority and responsibility to take over the state apparatus. Before Khomeini, a small number of scholars, such as Muḥammad Ḥusayn Kāshif al-Ghiṭa (1744–1813) and Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Mahdī Nirāqī (1771–1829), had used the concept of wilāyat-i faqīh and spoken about a greater role for clerics in the government system. But Khomeini was the first jurist who conceptualized clerics taking over the government apparatus as a part of the Shīʿī belief system. In addition to the innovation that Khomeini added to the history of Shīʿī political thought, he was also the first Shīʿa who in his political practice, overthrew the established political system entirely and, after doing so, assumed the position of the head of the state.

The argument of this article is also normative and prescriptive in the sense that it is presented in opposition to the theory of wilāyat-i faqīh. It offers a theoretical framework for regulating the relationship between religion and the state in the Shīʿī world that could lead believers towards accepting a secular political system. In offering a general description of Twelver Shīʿī theology, I will explain what I conceive of as Shīʿism's religious commitment to political secularism.

## 2. Twelver Shīʿī Theology

Politics is a key element of the identity of Twelver Shīʿas. The seeds of the phenomenon of Shīʿism were sown in the claims about political leadership made after the death of the

Prophet. The concept of the Imāmate distinguishes Shīʿism from the Sunnī majority, a feature that attributes both religious and political authority to certain individuals chosen by God. These individuals number twelve, the first of whom was Imām ʿAlī, the Prophet’s son-in-law and cousin. ʿAlī’s two sons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn are known as the second and third Imāms, and the remaining nine Imāms are Ḥusayn’s descendants. Shīʿas believe that all twelve Imāms were chosen by God and infallible, and possess both *ʿilm ladunnī* [divinely inspired knowledge] and *ʿilm ghaybī* [knowledge of the unseen], so their understanding of religion is the ultimate and definitive understanding. The words and deeds of the twelve Imāms, along with the Qurʾān and the Sunna of the Prophet, are considered among the sacred and authoritative texts of Shīʿism. The twelfth Imām, known as the hidden Imām, is a messianic personage—considered the promised savior and the *qāʾim* [the one who will rise up]. Shīʿas believe that the twelfth Imām went into occultation in 329 AH/941 CE, is still alive, and will return on an unspecified future day to establish a government of justice and equity. If we were to use modern concepts to explain Shīʿī political thought, we could say that the legitimate and ideal political system for Shīʿas is pure theocracy. The convergence of religion and state is complete in Shīʿī thought. The head of state is appointed directly by God, and the ultimate end of the state is the same as the ultimate end of religion, which is to facilitate the salvation of human beings, and the implementation of religious rulings is considered the fundamental mission of the state.

One might opine that this was the model that was implemented in Iran after the 1979 revolution. In the Islamic Republic, the clergy claims that the government’s goal is to guide and pave the way for the salvation of believers. It is also claimed that all government policy-making is formulated and implemented in accordance with Islamic law. Finally, not only the position of the head of state, the *walī-yi faqīh*,<sup>1</sup> but the majority of key positions in the political system, are occupied by religious leaders. However, it cannot be said that the ideal political system of Twelver Shīʿism has been implemented in its entirety in the Islamic Republic. In fact, there has been a serious deviation from this ideal. The *walī-yi faqīh* is not understood by the Shīʿas to have been chosen by God. As was mentioned earlier, the Shīʿas have a very clear and unchangeable understanding in this regard: only twelve specific people have been chosen by God to be infallible Imāms. It is for this reason that many consider Ayatollah Khomeini’s conceptualization of Shīʿī political theology as an innovation and serious deviation from orthodox Shīʿism (Haeri-Yazdi 1994; Kadivar 1997, 1999). The ideal model of governance in orthodox Shīʿism cannot be implemented in the absence of the twelfth Imām. Shīʿī political theology was an ideal that was shaped by the power relations in the first few centuries of Islamic history. It was an ideal that was formed not with the goal of implementation but in response to the inconsistency between external reality and the defining element of Shīʿī identity. This point can be addressed in detail through an examination of the genealogy of the formation of Twelver Shīʿism.

### 2.1. The Genealogy of Shīʿī Theology

Shīʿī theology was established in the middle of the 5th/11th century. The roots of Shīʿism are found in the controversy over the succession of the Prophet. Despite the claims of the Prophet’s son-in-law and cousin, ʿAlī ibn Abī Tālib, the majority of the fledgling Muslim community pledged allegiance to Abū Bakr. Imām ʿAlī eventually ruled as the fourth caliph for five years, from 656 to 661 CE. After his assassination, his eldest son Ḥasan, known as the second infallible Imām to the Shīʿas, claimed the caliphate for about seven months, but due to the military superiority of another claimant to the position, Muʿawiyah I, was forced to renounce his claim and pledge allegiance to Muʿawiyah. After the death of Muʿawiyah I, his son Yazīd came to power, but Ḥusayn, another son of Imām ʿAlī known as the third infallible Imām to the Shīʿas, rebelled against him. Imām Ḥusayn’s uprising was tragically crushed and failed. Until the time of Imām Ḥusayn, the Shīʿī community, which at that time was more commonly known as the family of the Prophet or the Imāmi community, was homogeneous and present in the political arena through the leadership of one person (Imām ʿAlī, Imām Ḥasan and later Imām Ḥusayn). But after the tragedy of

Karbala, during which Imām Husayn and his family and companions were massacred, the Imāmis splintered off into different groups. Some took up arms to avenge the killing of Imām Husayn while others distanced themselves from political activity. Based on their different political approaches, many branches of Shīʿism emerged and new sects were established, some of which, like the Zaydiyya and ʿIsmāʿīliyah, have survived to this day. Of course, there were other sects that disappeared in the first centuries of Islamic history. The sect that later became known as Twelver Shīʿism took a non-confrontational approach to politics. After the killing of Imām Husayn, nine other people took on the leadership of this branch of the Imāmi community, all of whom gradually came to be considered as chosen by God, recognized to have superhuman characteristics and transformed into the sacred figures of Twelver Shīʿism. None of these nine Imāms instigated a revolt against the caliph of their time. In the period in which these nine individuals led the Shīʿī community, various other Shīʿas conducted uprisings against the ruler, including the relatives of the Imāms. But the Imāms themselves never publicly supported any of the uprisings and in many cases took a stand against them. Overall, the infallible Imāms of Shīʿism took no action to seize the caliphate. They eschewed opportunities that arose, showing no inclination towards political power. A clear example in this regard was the sixth Imām, Imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (702–765), who rejected an invitation to lead an uprising to seize the caliphate during the decline of the Umayyads. Another example was Imām ʿAlī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā (766–818), the eighth Imām, who accepted the post of crown prince at the urging of the caliph at the time al-Maʿmūn, but on the condition that he would not play any part in government affairs:

I shall not command, and shall neither prohibit nor give legal opinions, nor judge nor appoint, and I shall not remove [people] from office nor alter any of the existing [arrangements], and you will excuse me from all these.

(Imām Riḍā quoted in [Tor 2001](#), p. 121)

The conservative approach of the infallible Imāms is not difficult to understand in the context of the power relations of the early centuries of Islam. The Proto-Twelver Shīʿas, not only in relation to the governments of their time, but even in comparison with other Shīʿī/Imāmi sects, were much too weak to countenance any attempt to seize political power. This realism is reflected in the words and deeds of the infallible Imāms. For example, at the time of the revolt of Zayd b. ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn (75–121/694–740), the half-brother of Imām Bāqir, the Imām tried to dissuade him from carrying it out, warning him of the possible consequences ([al-Kulaynī and Sarwar 1999a](#), pp. 507–8; [Gleave 2018](#); [Khiyabani 2007](#), p. 12; [Kohlberg 2012](#); [Lalani 2000](#), pp. 46–47). Another example was the response of the sixth Imām, Imām al-Ṣādiq, to one of his followers Sadeyr who had wanted to rebel:

“O Sadeyr! Had there been for me Shias of the number of these goats, there would not have been leeway for the sitting back (not rising against the ruling authorities) for me”.

([al-Kulaynī and Sarwar 1999b](#), p. 393)

Sadeyr reports that the goats pointed to by Imām al-Ṣādiq numbered to 17. Despite the very weak position of the Twelver Shīʿas, they could not abandon their claim to the legitimate right to govern, because that was the very reason for their existence.<sup>2</sup> This claim was validated by the blood relationship of the infallible Imāms with the Prophet on the one hand, and the crisis of legitimacy faced by most of the caliphs on the other, despite its realization requiring a combination of factors lacked by the Proto-Twelver Shīʿas.

Another important point to note about the Proto-Twelver Shīʿas is that after the death or killing of each of the infallible Imāms, it was common for new sects to split off from the community. For this reason, the Shīʿas were constantly in crisis and survival was their main concern during the first few centuries of Islamic history. By the early 3rd/9th century, a number of key elements of Shīʿī theology had taken shape and been established, including

the fact that the Imāms are God-appointed, infallible individuals with *‘ilm ladunnī*, and therefore that their understanding of religion is ultimate and definitive. More importantly, at the core of Shī‘ī theology were the concepts of the messiah and *qā‘im*, meaning that the Shī‘as believed that eventually, one of the Imāms would rise up and assume power. However, the key element of Twelver Shī‘ī theology, from which the quality of political secularism claimed in this article stems from, was formed later on and in fact emerged from the even more critical situation faced by the Proto-Twelver Shī‘as in the 4th–5th/10th–11th centuries. This key element was the messianic conception of the twelfth Imām.

## 2.2. *Qā‘im and Savior*

With the martyrdom of the third Imām in 61/680, the Imāmi community split into several branches. Imām Ḥusayn’s son, Imām Sajjād, maintained his distance from the government and pursued a policy of non-confrontation with the caliph. But other Shī‘ī groups were formed, such as the Tawwābīn and Kaysāniyya, which took up arms to avenge Imām Ḥusayn’s death. The insurrections were quickly suppressed and their efforts came to nothing, which in turn led to pessimism about armed struggle and the rise of messianic sects. Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafiyya, who was the half-brother of Imām Ḥusayn, was the spiritual leader of the Kaysāniyya movement and died in the year 81/700. However, a significant number of members of the sect disseminated the belief that he was still alive and would return as their victorious leader (Al-Nawbakhtī and Kadhim 2007, pp. 76–79; Buhl 2007; Halm and Mousavi-Khalkhali 2005, pp. 49–83). This sub-sect within the Kaysāniyya movement became known as the Karbīyya. This group can be said to have been the first significant Shī‘ī messianic sect. From this point, messianic sects emerged in response to the death of a significant number of important and influential people across various Shī‘ī branches. The sect which later became known as the Twelver Shī‘ism was no exception, and after the death of each Imām, a number of Shī‘as tended to form a new sect and, believing that the deceased Imām was still alive, refused to pledge allegiance to the next one (Newman 2013, pp. 16–35). For example, the Bāqariyya sect was formed after the death of the fifth Imām (Shahrastani 1984, pp. 142–43), and the Nāwūsiyya sect was formed after the death of the sixth Imām (Al-Nawbakhtī and Kadhim 2007, p. 123). Most of these sects disappeared very quickly, usually when the next Imām consolidated his position.

But the Wāqifiyya sect, one of those formed after the death of the seventh Imām, Imām Mūsā al-Kāzīm (127–183/745–799), was more significant than the other sects in two ways. First, the sect lasted for more than a century and a half, and second, its adherents were influential members of the Imāmi community and, unlike other messianic sects, produced extensive and powerful literature in support of their messianic theology. For this reason, this sect presented a more serious challenge to Twelver Shī‘ism than the other sects could manage. Ironically, the Wāqifiyya made two significant contributions to the conceptual consolidation of Twelver Shī‘ism. Firstly, in the process of defending its position against the Wāqifiyya, Proto-Twelver Shī‘ism enhanced and clarified its own identity, in particular with regard to ideas about the Imāmate and occultation. In addition to this reactive impact, conceptualization of the notion of *ghaybah* [occultation] by Wāqifis provided Twelver Shī‘as with invaluable material from which to conceptualize their own account of occultation. Amir-Moezzi’s path-breaking book on early Shī‘ism is worth quoting at length to emphasize this point:

An examination of the isnād of the great compilations from the time after the Occultation turns out to be a fruitful endeavour. For example, we are able to see that fragments, sometimes even entire treatises, have been collected and inserted into systematic compilations. Such is the case, for example, of the Kitāb al-nusra by the Wāqifite ‘Alī b. Ahmad al-‘Alawī (d. circa 200/815), incorporated into al-shaykh al-Tūsī’s Kitāb al-ghayba; the author includes some forty ‘messianic’ traditions in which the number of Imāms stops at seven, as would be expected for one of Mūsā’s Wāqifites. There is also the Kitāb al-hujja fī ibtā‘al-qā‘im by Md b. Bahr al-Ruhnī al-Shaybānī (second half of third/ninth century to the beginning of



the following century, thus after 260/874), inserted by Ibn Bābūye into his *Kamāl al-dīn*, and by al-Tūsī into his *Kitāb al-ghayba*.

(Amir-Moezzi 1994, pp. 101–2)

This was not the only instance in which Twelver Shīʿas expropriated concepts from other sects. Proto-Twelver Shīʿas had from the very first century of Islam considered the *Ghulāt* [exaggerators] as its major foe. The *Ghulāt* were known to overstate the qualities of the Imāms and attribute superhuman characteristics to them.<sup>3</sup> The infallible Imāms and their close associates always opposed the *Ghulāt*, but gradually many of the claims that the *Ghulāt* had made about the Imāms found their way into Twelver Shīʿī beliefs. The same was true of the messianic character of the Twelfth Imām. For the first four centuries of Islamic history, the Proto-Twelver Shīʿas had rebuffed the belief that the most recently deceased Imām was still alive, pledging allegiance to one of his sons. They believed that the Imāmate line would continue until one of them rose up and established a legitimate government. It was for this reason that the Proto-Twelver Shīʿas rejected the Wāqifiyya sect and their attribution of a longer than natural lifespan to the seventh Imām. For example, one of the key figures of Proto-Twelver Shīʿism, Abū Sahl al-Nawbakhtī, who lived during the minor occultation, rejected the messianic conceptualization of Imām Mūsā proposed by the Wāqifiyya. Shaykh al-Ṣadūq quotes the following text from the book *Al-Tanbiyyah fi al-Imāmah*<sup>4</sup> by Abū Sahl:

Our belief and tenets of faith today, regarding the occultation of the Imam, does not in any way resemble the Waqifiya sect that believes in the occultation of Imam Musa bin Jaʿfar (a.s.), because the matter of his death is a well-known fact. His death and burial were witnessed by a multitude of people and more than 150 years have passed after that, but during this period no one has reported seeing him or having correspondence with him. . . . And in this claim of ours the Imam’s occultation is neither a refutation of a sighting or feeling nor is it an impossible claim. It is also not a claim that reason may deny and something that is opposed to normality. Regarding him there are still present some among his reliable and secret Shias who claim that only they are the means to reach him and a channel through which the Imam’s verdicts are conveyed to his Shias.

(Abu Sahl quoted in Shaykh al-Sadūq and Rizvi 2011, p. 100)

About a century after Abū Sahl al-Nawbakhtī’s argument, the Proto-Twelver Shīʿas accepted the Wāqifiyyas’ concept as part of their own religious beliefs, albeit with the difference that the messianic referent became the twelfth Imām rather than the seventh Imām. Of course, acceptance of this belief did not take place suddenly, and we cannot attribute its conceptualization to any particular person or a pre-planned strategy.

Those who initially stated that the eleventh Imām had a son did not articulate their claim in a messianic context. It can be speculated that this claim was closely related to the interests of the late Imām’s circle of companions. With the death of the eleventh Imām, a complicated situation arose because it appeared Imām Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī had no child around whom the axis of the Shīʿī leadership circle could continue the extant Imāmate system. In addition, there was a claimant to the Imāmate from outside the Shīʿī leadership circle. Jaʿfar b. ʿAlī b. Muhammad, the brother of Imām Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, had claimed the right to the Imāmate even during the latter’s lifetime (Khasībī [945] 1999, p. 320). After the death of the eleventh Imām, he pursued his claim in a more determined manner and asked to be allocated the remaining property of the eleventh Imām. Jaʿfar, who is known as Jaʿfar Kaḏāb among the Shīʿas, took his claim to the point of bringing a complaint to the caliph demanding that the property of the eleventh Imām be transferred to him (Shaykh al-Sadūq and Rizvi 2011, pp. 127–28). At this point in time, the payment of khums was established as a Shīʿī religious duty, and it was collected through a representative organization called the *wikāla* network. For this reason, the Shīʿī leadership circle had considerable wealth at

their disposal, which they naturally did not want to hand over to someone outside their own circle. It was in this context that the mother and sister of the eleventh Imām, alongside some of the deceased's closest associates, made the statement that the eleventh Imām had left a son who was in hiding due to fear of persecution, and that he, from this place of hiding, held the responsibility for leading the Shī'ī community. Among the people who played key roles in this transitional period of Shī'ī history, we can point to: 'Uthmān b. Sa'īd 'Amrī,<sup>5</sup> Sūsan (the mother of Imām Ḥasan al-'Askarī, also known as Ḥadīth) and Ḥakīma Khātūn (the sister of Imām Ḥasan al-'Askarī), 'Ibrāhīm b. Mahzīār Aḥmad b. Ishāq Qumī (d. 263/876), Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Ja'far Qaṭān Qumī, 'Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad Ḥamadānī, Dāwūd b. Qāsim b. Ishāq (d. 261/874) Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Muṭāhir (d. 261/874) and Abū Sahl 'Ismā'īl b. Ishāq al-Nawbakhtī (d. 311/923). There was no messianic conceptualization in the claims of these people, who understood the absence of the twelfth Imām as a temporary phenomenon: he was presently in hiding, but would soon emerge, start an uprising and implement the ideal Shī'ī government. This claim initiated a process that led to an epistemic transformation of Shī'ī theology during the next one and a half centuries. However, before explaining this epistemic transformation, it is necessary to make brief reference to the period of the minor occultation, during which the early Shī'as faced an existential crisis.

### 3. The Age of Perplexity and the Existential Crisis of Proto-Twelve Shī'ism

As mentioned earlier, for the first few centuries of Islamic history, Proto-Twelve Shī'as believed that the Imām's line would continue until the right conditions were met and one of the Imāms would rise up and take over the government. The fact that no Imām from the fourth to the eleventh revolted led to recurring disappointment and caused the Proto-Twelve Shī'as to face several crises. But a more serious crisis arose after the sudden death of the eleventh Imām. When he died, a small number of his close companions stated that he had left a son who was in hiding for fear of persecution. Unlike in the previous periods, there was no Imām at this time who was present and visible to all in flesh and blood. The acceptance of his existence depended on trust in a few close associates of the eleventh Imām, as well as the signs claimed by the leadership circle of Proto-Twelve Shī'ism. The statement that the twelfth Imām was hidden was not initially articulated in a messianic form. The understanding of the Shī'as at that point in time was that the twelfth Imām had a physical presence, was hiding—in the literal sense of the word—somewhere, and would re-emerge in the not-too-distant future and rise up against the government. For a period of 69 years, which is known in Shī'ī literature as the period of minor occultation (*ghaybat al-ṣuḡhrā*), four people claimed to have direct contact with the hidden Imām and to act as his representatives. In Shī'ī writings, these four people are known as the *nawāb arba'a* [four deputies], and although they are not holy figures for Shī'as, they are nonetheless greatly respected. During this period, neither the messianic concept of the twelfth Imām was formulated nor the final number of Imāms determined. As the twelfth Imām's period of absence became longer, especially after it exceeded that of a normal human lifespan at the time, serious doubt arose among the Shī'as about his existence. These doubts were so significant that in Shī'ī literature this period is referred to as *al-ḥayra*, or the "age of perplexity". During the age of perplexity, several books were written by scholars and leaders of the Shī'ī community that include the word *al-ḥayra* in their titles (Modarressi 1993, p. 98).

In response to this crisis, it seems that the Shī'ī leaders considered formulations that did not necessarily correspond to what was later established as Twelve Shī'ism. A good example in this regard was the proposal of Abū Sahl al-Nawbakhtī. As Ibn al-Nadīm reports in *Kitāb al-fihrist*:

Abū Sahl Ismā'īl ibn 'Alī al-Nawbakht, one of the great shī'ī scholars... had theories about the Qā'im of the family of Muhammad (peace be upon them) that no one has surpassed. He used to say: I believe that Muhammad ibn Ḥasan was the Imām who passed away in absence, and his successor to the Imāmate during

the same absence was his son. And the other sons after him in the same way, until the command of God willing their appearance is executed.

(al-Nadīm and Tajaddod 2002, p. 330)

Modarressi also wrote that a number of Shīʿas in the age of occultation held the same belief (Modarressi 1993, p. 95). But the solution that made the Proto-Twelve Shīʿas' survival possible and ensured their success in competition with other Shīʿī sects was the messianic conception of the twelfth Imām, which occurred, in the words of Foucault, through an epistemic transformation.

### 3.1. Epistemic Transformation

Many studies on the formation of Twelver Shīʿism have sought to identify specific events and particular individuals who writers identify as architects of key elements of Shīʿī theology. Hossein Modarressi, for example, introduces Ibn Qība Rāzī as the person who formulated the refined, straightforward, and defensible Shīʿī theory of the Imāmate (Modarressi 1993). Elsewhere, Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. Jaʿfar al-Nuʿmānī is described as the originator of the idea of the two periods of occultation and the first person to identify the number twelve for the number of Imāms. I do not intend to identify any individual instigator for two reasons. First, any claim in this area is both highly controversial and must be supported by extensive research that extends beyond the scope of this article. Second, it is of little import who formulated which part of Twelver Shīʿī political theology for my purposes here.

What is important is that in the age of perplexity, through the contribution of a number of religious scholars, including both narrators and theologians, the key elements of religious devotion to political secularism took shape.

This approach is based on the presumption that the formation of Shīʿī political theology was not the product of a grand design, and that the scholars who participated in the formation of this thought system were neither participants in a broad conspiracy nor acting out a master plan. Founding scholars who lived in different places and even at different points within the same time period participated in the process of completing and consolidating Shīʿī political theology. I must also acknowledge that by exploring what occurred in relation to Shīʿī scholarly work, I make no claim to have identified all the dispersed developments associated with this epistemic transformation. Notwithstanding, the epistemic transformation that will be discussed in the remaining part of this article is, in my opinion, the most important element in the macro-level formation of Shīʿī political theology. In addition, one could mention elements such as the political atmosphere and the supportive role of the Būyids, the weakness of other sects, as well as the important contingency of certain events; each such element of course requires detailed and independent research that falls outside the scope of this article.

The ḥadīth sciences and theology were the epistemological figures that played the two most important roles in the evolution of Shīʿī epistemology in the age of perplexity.

### 3.2. Ḥ. adīth Collection

In Shīʿī scholarly literature, the word ḥadīth is used to refer to the words and deeds of the Prophet and the infallible Imāms (Ghorbani 1994, p. 20).<sup>6</sup> For the Sunnīs, the concept of ḥadīth does not include the words or deeds of the twelve infallible Shīʿī Imāms; the Prophet is the only source of ḥadīth. After the Qurʾān, the ḥadīths are the most important authoritative source for Muslims. There are no writings attributed to the persons of the Prophet or the infallible Imāms, so what are known as ḥadīths comprise quotes from people who lived during their lifetimes. Given this lack of directly authored sources, every ḥadīth has at least one narrator who has quoted its contents from someone else. The reporting and narration of the ḥadīths was prohibited from the Prophet's death until the time of ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, the eighth Umayyad caliph (r. 99–101/718–720) (Askari 1984, pp. 16–22; Shahrestani 2011). The second caliph, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, forbade some of the

Companions of the Prophet from leaving Medina so that they would not spread narrations of the Prophet, and imprisoned some of them, including Ibn Mas‘ūd, Abū Dardā‘, and Abū Mas‘ūd al-Ansārī, on the charge of narrating a ḥadīth of the Prophet (Nasiri 2013, p. 85; Tabatabaei 2017, pp. 10–13). Numerous explanations have been proposed for the prohibition, including concern about the creation of any book that could have been placed alongside the Qur‘ān, fear of the possibility of the dissemination of invalid ḥadīths, and worries that people would become occupied with something other than the Qur‘ān (Diyari-Bidgoli 1999, pp. 13–20; Tabatabaei 2017). In comparison to Sunnī ḥadīth collections, Shī‘ī collections are more controversial. Part of the problem stems from the fact that for the Shī‘as, instead of one person (the Prophet) being the sole source of ḥadīths, their sources encompass the words and deeds of thirteen individuals who lived throughout the first three centuries of Islamic history. In addition, the systematic and comprehensive collection and compilation of Shī‘ī ḥadīths took place about a century later than the parallel Sunnī process.<sup>7</sup>

The first comprehensive and systematic collections of Shī‘ī ḥadīths were compiled in the period after the presence of the Imāms. Shaykh al-Kulaynī’s (258–329/864–941) *Kitāb al-kāfī* [The sufficient book] was the first book of Shī‘ī ḥadīths, and three other significant collections were compiled by the middle of the 5th/11th century, which are collectively known as the *kutub arba‘a* [four books]. The other three books are *Man lā yahḍuruhū al-faqīh* [For he not in the presence of a jurist] compiled by Shaykh al-Ṣadūq (310–380/923–991) and two books by Shaykh Tūsī (385–460/995–1067), *Tahdhīb al-ahkām fī sharḥ al-muqni‘ah* [Refinement of the rulings explaining the hidden] and *Al-istiṣār fīmā ikhtalafa min al-akhbār* [Insight into the differences in the reports]. These books are in fact the main repository of the ḥadīths cited in the later books and writings of the Shī‘as. Shaykh al-Kulaynī’s book includes 15,339 ḥadīths, more than 9000 are listed in Shaykh al-Ṣadūq’s collection and Shaykh Tūsī’s two works include 13,590 and 5511 ḥadīths respectively (Ma‘arif 2018, pp. 329–64). Among the Sunnīs, there are two compilations of ḥadīths comprising ḥadīths that are all considered valid, which is why the word *ṣaḥīḥ* [correct] appears in their titles. These two books of ḥadīth are *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, both of which were written in the first half of the 3rd/9th century. On the other hand, the Shī‘as acknowledge that all their ḥadīth collections contain some ḥadīths that are either partially or wholly fabricated. Ayatollah al-Khū‘ī, for example, concludes from Shaykh al-Kulaynī’s introduction to *Kitāb al-kāfī* that even the compiler did not claim that all the ḥadīths he had collected were authentic (Al-Khū‘ī 1993, pp. 25–26).

The problems inherent to the ḥadīths recorded, and their causes, are outside the scope of this article. But it is worth noting here that one of the main complicating factors was political motivation. As was recounted earlier, the first three centuries of Shī‘ī history witnessed the emergence of numerous sects. These sects were formed by people who separated from the main group of Proto-Twelve Shī‘as, and they frequently quoted narrations from the Prophet or the last Imām they recognized to support their position. The extent of ḥadīth forgery is such that in some cases it is probable that a considerable part or even the whole of a ḥadīth collection was fabricated, or even that its author never actually existed. An example of this is the book of Salīm ibn Qays Hilālī, which is also known as the Book of the Saqīfa (*Kitāb al-saqīfa*).<sup>8</sup> Several aspects of this compilation are subject to debate, and doubts raised over whether the narrators were fabricated, or even that ḥadīths were also fabricated and then attributed to fabricated narrators. Among the critical works is an extensive study conducted by Alāma Askarī, who suggests that 150 Companions of the Prophet mentioned in this collection were fabricated personalities, and that ḥadīths were attributed to them despite their never having actually existed (Askarī and Sardarnia 2012).

In addition to all the issues with the veracity of the ḥadīths themselves, the phenomenon of collecting and compiling ḥadīths took place in the form of a vetting process from the late 4th/10th century. At this time, a large number of ḥadīths were sifted through systematically for the purpose of selection and ordered placement in collections to establish a particular system of thought. These collections were not gathered for purely scholarly

or impartial purposes. The compilers themselves often acknowledge at the beginning of these works that their goal is to provide a collection that helps strengthen the faith of Proto-Twelvever Shī'ī followers. For example, Shaykh al-Kulaynī's book describes his motivation for compiling *Kitāb al-kāfī* as arising from the request of a religious brother:

You have mentioned that you are confused in the issues of the verification of hadith due to the difference in variously narrated texts and that you know the reason for variation but you do not find reliable people to discuss with. You have said that you wish you had a book sufficient (Kafi) that would contain all issues of the religion. A book that would provide a student all the material that he would need is urgently needed. A book is needed that would help people to have proper guidance in the matters of religion to follow the correct instructions of the truthful people (Divine Supreme Covenant Body) and the prevailing Sunnah, the basis of practices . . . You have said, that you hope such a book would, Allah willing, help our brothers in faith to find the right guidance. . . . Allah, . . . has made the compilation of the book that you had wished for possible. I hope it will prove to be up to your expectations.

(al-Kulaynī and Sarwar 1999a, p. 27)

The motivation for the compilation of another of the "four books", namely *Tahdhīb* by Shaykh Tūsī, has been cited as:

The book *Tahdhīb*, despite being known today as comprehensive ḥadīth collection, was not only compiled with the goal of collecting ḥadīths, but the Shaykh also aimed to strengthen the foundations of Shī'ism and resolve the existing discrepancies between ḥadīths in order to eliminate the triggers of the ridicule of opponents; as a result, some have considered Shaykh Tūsī to have been the first scholar to rise in defence of Shī'ism through criticizing ḥadīths and assessing conflicting narrations.

(Hujjati 2015, p. 10)

In proposing a similar argument, Hassan Ansari proposes that one oft-overlooked factor in historical studies on the compilation of comprehensive ḥadīth collections is the influence of the evolving and fluid nature of Shī'ism at that time. He continues that by defining new boundaries between different Shī'ī sects:

[S]ome of the previous ḥadīth sources became fragmented, parts were deleted and other parts were added, and this was the main reason for compiling the comprehensive collections: before the ḥadīths in previous works were collected in one comprehensive work, [the compilers] first acted as reviewers and a number of the sources were removed, and a number of ḥadīths were considered and proposed in response to doctrinal developments.

(Ansari 2017, pp. 137–38)

In addition to the four ḥadīth collections of this period, which became the main repository of Shī'ī scholarly work throughout the ages, writings with a clear focus on the issue of occultation were also produced at this time. The most significant of these works include: *Al-Imāma wa al-tabṣira min al-ḥayra* [The Imāmate and insight into the confusion] by 'Alī b. al-Husayn b. Bābawiyah al-Qumī, *Kitāb al-ghayba* [The book of the occultation] by Muḥammad b. 'Ibrāhīm b. Ja'far Nu'mānī, *Kamāl al-dīn wa-tamām al-ni'mah* [Perfection of faith and completion of divine favour] by Shaykh al-Ṣadūq, two books *Ārb'a resālāt fi al-ghayba* [Four treatises on the occultation] and *Al-fuṣūl al-'ashara fi al-ghayba* [Ten chapters on the occultation] by Shaykh al-Mufīd, *Al-burhān 'alā ṣaḥā ṭul al-Imām ṣāḥib al-zamān* [Proof of the authority of the Imām of the ages] by Muḥammad b. 'Alī Karājuki, the two books *Al-muqna' fi al-ghayba* [The mystery of the occultation] and *Mas'ala wijiza fi al-ghayba* [A brief

review of the question of the occultation] by Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, *Al-ghayba* [The occultation] by Shaykh Tūsī, *Muqtaḍib al-<sup>2</sup>athar fi al-naṣ ‘alā al-Imāma al-ithnā ‘ashar* [Brief impact of text on the twelve Imāms] by Ibn ‘Ayāsh Juhārī and the *Kitāb kifāya al-<sup>2</sup>athar fi al-naṣ ‘alā al-Imāma al-ithnā ‘ashar* [The book of sufficiency of the impact of text on the twelve Imāms] by ‘Alī b. Muḥammad Khazāz Qumī. Shī‘ī scholarly literature about the twelfth Imām and his occultation in the following centuries was primarily based on the narrative and argumentative content of these books.

### 3.3. The Formation of Theology

In addition to the compilation of ḥadīth collections, Shī‘ī theology was also formed in the age of perplexity, offering a rational and logical basis for Twelver Shī‘ism’s belief system. While the infallible Imāms were present, the Shī‘ī scholarly atmosphere was generally text-based. The prevailing belief among the Shī‘as was that the infallible Imāms had ‘*ilm ladunnī* and that they had the most accurate answer to any religious question that arose. For this reason, *ijtihād* and the use of logical reasoning had no place in Shī‘ī scholarship during the time of the infallible Imāms. But when the infallible Imāms were no longer present, *ijtihād* and reasoning became part of the scholarly work of the Twelver Shī‘as. Of course, their arguments were based on religious beliefs, not pure logic.

With the theological work of Shaykh al-Mufīd and his student al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, Shī‘ī theology emerged and expanded in a systematic manner. As mentioned earlier, the Shī‘as were occupied with fundamental doctrinal issues during the age of perplexity. Therefore, the most significant issues discussed by theologians such as Shaykh al-Mufīd and al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā were the fundamental beliefs of the Shī‘ī faith. For this reason, the conceptualizations they presented and succeeded in establishing became part of the framework of Twelver Shī‘ī beliefs, conceptualizations that remain part of the Shī‘ī epistemological system to this day.

The key element of Shī‘ī identity is the concept of the Imāmate. Some of the elements of the Imāmate were already more or less established before the time in question. One such element was the idea that Imāmate is related to *naṣ* [designation], which means that after the Prophet, God appointed a sequence of specific people to lead the Muslims, and that this matter was not one to be determined by the opinion of the people or the elites. Likewise, the Imāms’ infallibility and their ‘*ilm ladunnī* was mostly accepted. Although there were some scholars who held different views, this disagreement did not pose a serious threat to the Shī‘as. Doubts about the existence of the twelfth Imām, and the matter of occultation, in particular the responsibilities of the believers, and the matter of politics during the time of occultation, were the issues that created an existential crisis for Shī‘ism. The theologians of the period were able to offer convincing and reasoned conceptualizations about these matters, which gradually became accepted by most of the Shī‘as and transformed into the foundations of faith and elements of the identity of Twelver Shī‘ism. Here, instead of addressing several issues in a cursory manner, I will restrict myself to focusing on one example of the Shī‘ī theological arguments of the day, explaining it in detail. I have selected an issue that posed an existential threat to Twelver Shī‘ism during the age of perplexity: skepticism about the existence of the twelfth Imām.

In all the writings of the Shī‘ī theologians of the time, including those of Shaykh al-Mufīd and al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, the first issue that the writers considered necessary to discuss and verify was that Imām Ḥasan al-‘Askarī had a son named Muḥammad b. Ḥasan al-‘Askarī.<sup>9</sup> By juxtaposing a ḥadīth and a doctrinal principle, theologians proposed an argument that would, alongside the ḥadīths compiled in the ḥadīth collections, create a rational basis for the existence of the twelfth Imām. The narration used by these theologians states that at no time can the earth lack a *hujja* [proof] of God.<sup>10</sup> Another doctrine that was prevalent among the Shī‘as of the time was that the transfer of the Imāmate is vertical, i.e., it is transferred from the father to the eldest son.<sup>11</sup> The progression of the argument went that since the earth cannot be void of a proof of God (an Imām): therefore, an Imām must



exist. Since Imām Ḥasan al-‘Askarī was the eleventh Imām and only his son could be the next Imām: therefore, he must have had a child.

Another argument that was developed by theologians such as Shaykh al-Mufīd and al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā to prove the existence of the twelfth Imām was based on the “principle of *lutf*” [God’s favor]. According to the rule of *lutf*, God is duty-bound to send prophets and codify laws to guide His servants towards the right path (McDermott 1978, p. 77). In applying this principle, Shī‘ī scholars argued that the presence of the Imām to guide and help the believers confirms the *lutf* of God to His servants, and that as God does not deprive believers of His *lutf*, there must always be an extant Imām to direct them towards the right path (Latifi 2002; Rabani-Golpayegani 2003; Yousefiyan 2016).

Al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (355–466/965–1044) argues that it is God’s *lutf* that causes the existence of the Imām, so that through his management, appropriate conditions will be brought into being to guide believers towards righteousness and away from evil:

As any rational person who is familiar with the purpose and method of logic is aware and clearly acknowledges that whenever there is a competent and skillful leader of a society, who prevents oppression and transgression and defends justice and virtue, more appropriate social conditions are brought about for the expansion of virtue and goodness, and distancing from oppression and evil. Or at least compared to a situation in which such leadership does not exist, [such a society] will enjoy conditions more conducive to the avoidance of evil and transgression. This can be nothing but the *lutf* of God, because *lutf* is something that through its realization, makes the obligated turn to obedience and virtue and away from evil and ruin, or at least places them in more appropriate conditions for doing so. Thus, the Imāmate and leadership are granted through the *lutf* of God to the obligated, because they lead them to perform their rational duties and abandon evil, and the requirement of divine wisdom is that the obligated not be deprived of it [lutf].

(al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā 1990, p. 409)

Shaykh al-Mufīd made an argument based on a similar premise, stating that God has afforded this *lutf* to His servants and has done what was necessary by sending the twelfth Imām; however, it was the shortcomings of the servants who neglected to follow him that led to the Imām’s absence (Shaykh al-Mufīd 1993a, p. 45).

Of course, from an extra-religious point of view, many serious questions can be raised in connection with the principle of *lutf* and its use to prove the Imāmate; the argument may even be rejected in its totality. However, this is not my concern here. What is important from the point of view of discourse analysis is that the audience of these arguments accepted the principles on which they were based, and therefore such arguments were convincing and acceptable, and became part of the Twelver Shī‘ī regime of truth.

Shī‘ī scholars also referred to historical experience in order to argue that the Shī‘ī claims were not without precedent. For example, Shaykh al-Mufīd suggested that many births had been concealed over the course of history for a variety of reasons, and that the eleventh Imām was not the only person to keep secret the birth of his son (Shaykh al-Mufīd and Khalesi 1998). Theologians also referred to common and Qur’ānic stories, for example arguing that given the long lifespans of Khidr and Noah, the unnaturally long lifespan of the twelfth Imām was not without precedent (Al-Nu’mani [953] 2003; Shaykh al-Mufīd and Khalesi 1998). The justification of the twelfth Imām’s long lifespan was also accompanied by a number of other conceptualizations, such as the concept of *qā’im*, awaiting and fixing the number of Imāms at twelve.

Throughout the first few centuries of the Islamic history, the concept of the *qā’im* and the idea of *intizār* [awaiting], the revolt and formation of a just government by one of the Imāms found a central place in the political discourse of the Proto-Twelver Shī‘as. During this early period, the prevailing notion of the *qā’im* and the concept of awaiting were at their core bound to temporal proximity; every generation of Shī‘as expected the

uprising post-haste. However, in parallel to the twelfth Imām becoming the last Imām and a messianic figure, he was no longer expected to rise immediately and could be awaited indefinitely, and the concept of the *qā'im* became an apocalyptic concept.

Another important change that took place was in relation to religious and political authority. The belief that the infallible Imām possessed ultimate authority in both spheres continued to define Shī'ī identity. However, coming to terms with the fact that the twelfth Imām was not present, and was not going to be present any time soon, led in practice to the delegating of both political and religious authority, albeit in a modified form, to religious scholars. They were thus assigned political authority outside the sphere of the governmental apparatus in a manner limited to the execution of certain public affairs, as well as specified religious authority to answer questions about the sharī'a obligations of believers and responsibility for the performance of religious rites.

Thus, legitimacy to rule was reserved exclusively for the twelfth Imām from a religious perspective, and until such time as his appearance, all rulers were known as *jā'ir* [usurper] rulers. Under these circumstances, another key question that the founding Shī'ī scholars addressed was: what would be the duties of the Shī'as in the political arena during the occultation of the twelfth Imām?

#### 4. Politics in the Era of Occultation

The type of political behavior developed by the founding scholars of Twelver Shī'ism for the era of occultation, which was established and institutionalized as the element of political theology in Shī'ī religious beliefs, was living in the shadow of a secular state. Two key facts are testament to this claim. The first is the absence of discussion about the characteristics of the legitimate ruler in the Shī'ī scholars' writings during the period, and the second is the particular attitude reflected in their writings towards the incumbent ruler.

The most central political question in the Islamic world has always revolved around the characteristics of the ruler. But the founding Shī'ī scholars did not engage in this debate, because in their view the only legitimate ruler from a religious point of view was the twelfth Imām. His unique and transcendental characteristics, and position and legitimacy to rule, could be matched by no other person. Instead of contemplating the characteristics of a legitimate ruler, the political debate among the founding scholars of Shī'ism concerned how to interact with the incumbent ruler, who they referred to as the usurper (*jā'ir*). In this regard, there were somewhat different opinions expressed by the scholars. In particular, differences can be observed between the perspectives of scholars of the Qum school and those of the Baghdad school.

The scholars of the Qum school, such as Shaykh al-Kulaynī and Shaykh al-Ṣadūq, were textualists and generally opposed to *ijtihād* and the use of logical reasoning. Because most of the remaining ḥadīths of the infallible Imāms had advised against relations with the rulers, these scholars rulings advised the same. Based on his study of the ḥadīths quoted in Shaykh al-Kulaynī's *Kitāb al-kāfi*, Andrew Newman states that in these ḥadīths, there is "a strict line against such entanglements." Newman continues that in a chapter of the same book titled "Working for the sultan and their gifts," Shaykh al-Kulaynī quotes 15 ḥadīths from the Imāms in which the Shī'as were asked to refrain from working for rulers. One of such narrations, reported from Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, states:



[W]hoever humbled himself to a sāhib sultan or to someone opposed to his own faith “to seek after what is in his hand of the world, Allah will silence him.” If he did acquire something of the world, the Imām stated, “Allah almighty will take it from him and he will not be recompensed on the basis of anything he spent on the pilgrimage, manumission [of slaves] or piety”.

(quoted in Newman 2000, p. 174)

Shaykh al-Ṣadūq, another influential scholar of the Qum school, also narrates ḥadīths that suggest the *jāʿir* ruler should be avoided. Shaykh al-Ṣadūq quotes Imām ‘Alī in his book *Khiṣāl*: “Those who oppress, those who facilitate oppression, and those who applaud oppression, are three partners” (Shaykh al-Ṣadūq and Kamarei 1998, p. 126). Shaykh al-Ṣadūq also quotes a ḥadīth attributed to Prophet Muhammad, according to which: “No servant of God approaches an oppressive sultan unless he has turned away from God” (quoted in Mirali 2016, p. 133). He also refers to a narration from Imām al-Ṣādiq, which states that:

Do not let one of you shīʿa bring someone to the ruler for litigation, but look among yourselves for he who is familiar with the rules and manner of our government and choose him to resolve the hostility and to arbitrate, so bring the matter to him, and accept his arbitration and judgment, and I will also appoint him as your judge and arbiter.

(Shaykh al-Ṣadūq 1988, p. 3)

Unlike their counterparts in Qum, the scholars of the Baghdad school were less strict in their rulings on dealings with the oppressor. Shaykh al-Mufīd, a pioneer in the use of rationality and reasoning, was among many Baghdad thinkers who “changed the customary norm about the impermissibility of cooperation with the *jāʿir* ruler and made cooperation permissible and even obligatory in certain circumstances (Gahramannezhad et al. n.d., p. 104). He puts forward two basic conditions for the legitimacy of interacting with a usurper, first that such interaction does not harm the believers, and second that most of a person’s deeds in collaboration with the usurper are not sinful and lead primarily to good outcomes (Shaykh al-Mufīd 1993b, pp. 120–21).

Shaykh al-Mufīd allowed believers to refer to the government judicial procedures (Shaykh al-Mufīd 1991, p. 537), even permitting a Shīʿī to hold the position of judge in a *jāʿir* apparatus. Nonetheless, he points out that the latter should judge according to the Shīʿī rules of jurisprudence except in the case of facing the risk of financial or mortal harm (Shaykh al-Mufīd 1991, pp. 811–12).

Another of the influential theologians of the Baghdad school was al-Sharīf al-Murtadā (355–436/965–1044), who wrote an independent treatise on the subject of relations with the usurper. Like Shaykh al-Mufīd, al-Sharīf al-Murtadā rejected the general ban on working with the *jāʿir* ruler, outlining four possible situations in which such cooperation could be permitted:

This [tenure of office on behalf of the usurper] may be of several kinds: obligatory (and it may exceed obligatoriness toward compulsion), licit, and evil and forbidden. It is obligatory if the one accepting office knows, or considers it likely on the basis of clear indications, that he will through the tenure of the office be enabled to support a right and to reject a false claim or to order what is proper and to forbid what is reprehensible, and if it were not for this tenure, nothing of this would be accomplished . . . It reaches the level of compulsion when he is forced with the sword to accept the office or when he considers it likely that, if he does not accept it, his blood will be shed . . . It is licit when he fears for some property of his or is afraid of some harm befalling him the like of which can be borne.

(al-Sharīf al-Murtadā and Madelung 1980, pp. 24–25)

al-Sharīf al-Murtadā considers that the existence of expediency makes the acceptance of a government post in an oppressive ruler's administration permissible. In addition to rational arguments, al-Sharīf al-Murtadā also refers to the first Imām, who accepted council membership from ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, as well as to the action of Prophet Yusef (Joseph) in accepting a post from ʿAzīz of Egypt—a usurper—to give historical context and precedent to his argument (al-Sharīf al-Murtadā and Madelung 1980). It is no surprise that Sharīf al-Raḍī and al-Sharīf al-Murtadā themselves held official government positions. The two brothers, both leaders of the Shīʿī community at the time, each accepted ʿAbbāsīd caliphate appointments. Their responsibilities included supervising the niqābat<sup>12</sup> of the ʿAlids, serving on the court of maḏālim (a court of appeal which also heard complaints against government officials), and managing pilgrim's affairs and the two cities of Mecca and Medina (Nasr 2000; Shahsavan and Nasiri 2016). Of course, this was not the first time that a Shīʿī leader had occupied an official position in the caliphate. In previous eras, many prominent Shīʿī families had enjoyed proximity to the caliphate and some of their members had attained senior positions including at the level of minister, such as Abu'l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Muḥammad b. al-Furāt (231–312/846–924), Abū al-Faṭaḥ Faḍl b. Jaʿfar (d. 327/939), and Barīdī (d. 332/944). Most intriguingly, Ḥusayn b. Ruḥ al-Nawbakhtī (d. 326/937–938), who was the third deputy of the twelfth Imām, held concurrent responsibility for the caliphate's property assets at some point in time (al-Jahshiyari 1987, p. 300). It is important to note that their geographical locations as well as the balance of power in the two cities of Baghdad and Qum caused differences in the type of thinking that took shape in Qom and Baghdad. In Baghdad, the Būyids, who were Zaydī shīʿas, had a friendly and supportive attitude towards the proto-Twelve shīʿas. The Būyids' friendly approach led to the formation of close relations between shīʿī leaders and the government apparatus. It was with the support of the Būyids that the shīʿa enjoyed the opportunity to hold mourning ceremonies on ʿĀshūrā and celebrations for the event of Ghadīr Khumm. The shrines of the Imāms were also rebuilt during this period and the shīʿas were able to visit them on pilgrimages. The call to prayer in the shīʿī style was also permitted during this period. Notable advancements for shīʿī scholarship included the establishment of numerous libraries and the presence of the shīʿī ʿulamā in scholarly discussions and debates convened by Būyid rulers. This support extended even to ʿAḍud al-Dawla (ruled 338–372/949–983) ordering ten man of bread and five man of meat be sent to the discussion sessions convened by Shaykh al-Mufīd. It is further reported that ʿAḍud al-Dawla was so close to Shaykh al-Mufīd that he visited him personally (Elhami 2000; Faqihī 1994, p. 136; Khosrobagi and Jalilian 2013; Kraemer 1986).

Qum, on the other hand, had relatively unique political conditions. From the first century of Islamic history, a semi-autonomous city-state emerged in Qum due to the influence and power of the Ashʿariyya family. Many members of the Ashʿariyya family were companions of the infallible Imāms and had close ties with them. This meant that the Ashʿariyya played a substantial role in narrating the ḥadīths and an equally prominent one in shaping shīʿī religious scholarship. In addition to their impact on religious scholarship, the influence and power of the Ashʿariyya in terms of political equations in Qum was also decisive. It was the influence of the Ashʿariyya family that made Qum a shīʿī base, and for this reason the city always had problematic relations with the central government. The semi-independent situation of Qum caused the thinkers of the Qum school, unlike their counterparts in Baghdad, to be supported more by the influential Ashʿariyya family than the central government. As Newman points out, this situation influenced the writings of the Qum scholars. Especially in relation to issues of government and relations with the usurper ruler, the thinkers of the Qum school generally prescribed the keeping of distance from the usurper (Davtalaḥ 2010; Farshchian 2005; Haidar-Sarлак and Mehrizi 2012; Hajji-Taqi 1997; Newman 2000, pp. 32–49).

The commentaries on the matter of rebellion against the ruler also demonstrate the attitude of the Shīʿas towards governance during the era of occultation. Generally, Shīʿī scholars did not recommend uprising or seeking to overthrow the ruling system. In the

era of the presence of the Imāms, with the exception of the third Imām, no other Imām attempted rebellion personally nor supported any of the uprisings of their time. For this reason, there are many ḥadīths prohibiting any uprising prior to the return of the twelfth Imām. For example, in the introduction of *al-Ṣaḥīfah al-sajjādiyyah*, a ḥadīth attributed to Imām al-Ṣādiq is quoted as saying:

Before the rise of our Qa'im not one of us Folk of the House has revolted or will revolt to repel an injustice or to raise up a right, without affliction uprooting him and without his uprising increasing the adversity of us and our partisans.

(Imam Zain ul Abideen 1988, p. 40)

In another ḥadīth, Imām Bāqir forbids one of his followers from joining anyone carrying out an uprising before the coming of the *mahdī* [messiah]: “Know that the Umayyads have a strong rule that people can not stand against . . . . Know that no group rising to resist oppression or to defend faith unless death is the end” (Al-Nu'mani [953] 2003, p. 192).

In addition to these ḥadīths, Shī'ī theologians also failed to offer any argument in favor of revolt against the usurper or of overthrowing the established regime. One of the issues related to that of action against the usurper is the issue of enjoining good and forbidding evil. The key question in this regard is, to what extent and by what means is the believer obliged to demand the ruler do good and reproach them for doing wrong? In this case, too, plurality can be seen in the views of Shī'ī thinkers, but none recommend armed or any other action aimed at ousting the ruler. Shī'ī theologians consider various stages for enjoining good and forbidding evil, the first stage relating to the heart and the second to the tongue. The third stage of enjoining good and forbidding evil involves the use of force and weapons. Most Shī'ī thinkers are very cautious about the third stage, and consider it especially necessary to ensure that this stage does not lead to societal chaos and unrest. Among the founding thinkers of Shī'ism, Shaykh al-Mufīd is especially cautious and even suggests that the second (verbal) stage be subject to certain conditions, including that (a) the enjoinment or condemnation must be addressed to someone who cannot distinguish good from evil, and (b) there must be a high level of certainty that the making of a statement is expedient. Shaykh al-Mufīd considers physical action to enjoin good and condemn evil as falling exclusively within the powers of the infallible Imām or someone assisting or given permission by the Imām (Shaykh al-Mufīd 1993b, p. 119). At the same time, the Shī'as' claims to be justice-seeking and willing to speaking out against oppression have a significant place in Twelver Shī'ī discourse. Despite the two principles of belief that (1) Shī'ism is pro-justice and anti-oppression, and (2) all leaders are oppressors, Shī'as have neither taken steps to rebel against the government nor recommended such a course of action in their theoretical scholarship. The explanation for this contradiction is that the Shī'as ruled out the possibility of establishing a government of justice and equity, and the overthrow of one *jā'ir* ruler meant replacing it with another, and therefore did not advise rebellion against the usurper, instead elucidating how believers should live in the shadow of a religiously illegitimate government.

## 5. Conclusions

In the literature on the relationship between religion and politics, the politicization of religion is generally considered synonymous with opposition to political secularism and the secular state. In this article, I attempted to draw attention to a religious tradition that, despite being political and despite its advocacy of pure theocracy, incorporates political secularism into its theology. Not only did Twelver Shī'ism emerge on the basis of a claim to political leadership, but Shī'ī leaders have been involved in politics in various ways throughout history. However, because the legitimate right to rule is reserved exclusively for the twelfth Imām, Shī'ī religious leaders cannot entertain the goal of seizing the institution of government. In other words, Twelver Shī'ī doctrine mandates living in the shadow of a secular state until the return of the twelfth Imām. In this article, I have focused solely on

the circumstances during which traditional Twelver Shīʿī political theology was established. Throughout the centuries, this approach has dominated Twelver Shīʿas' attitudes towards the state apparatus. Prior to the emergence of Khomeini's governmental-Shīʿī discourse, no Shīʿī scholar had either theorized about taking over the institution of government or taken any practical steps to form a government.

Although Shīʿas have followed a non-governmental pattern in both theory and practice throughout history, this way of thinking and behaving has not been theorized, neither in the Shīʿī seminary nor in university Shīʿī studies departments. In the existing literature, the political behavior of Shīʿī leaders prior to the emergence of Khomeini's governmental-Shīʿism discourse is conceptualized as apolitical and quietist. In this article, I have sought to show that these concepts are inaccurate and cannot adequately represent the political thinking or behavior of traditional-Shīʿism. The Twelver Shīʿas, while political, have always remained non-governmental.

Of course, it should be noted that Khomeini presented an innovative conceptualization of Shīʿism which both supported revolt against the usurper and considered possible the formation of a legitimate government in the absence of the twelfth Imām. But Khomeini's conceptualization and his success in forming a Shīʿī state should not be seen as the product of a fundamental change in Shīʿī thought. Khomeini's discourse was the product of the revolutionary conditions of the 1960s and 1970s and, as is widely acknowledged, the doctrine of *wilāyat-i faqīh* was unprecedented and failed to meet the standards of the Shīʿī seminary. After nearly half a century of dominance of the governmental-Shīʿism discourse, and despite significant investment by the ruling clerics of Iran, the fundamental Shīʿī belief that the twelfth Imām is the only one with the legitimate right to rule has not changed. For this reason, the conceptualization presented in this article can contribute to regulating the relationship between religion and the state in the likely tomorrow of Iran without the Islamic Republic.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The expression *wilāyat-i faqīh* refers to the doctrine and also the official post in the Islamic Republic, while *walī-yi faqīh* refers to the person who holds this post.
- <sup>2</sup> In Shīʿī writings, the incompatibility of the political behavior of most of the infallible Imāms with the fundamental political beliefs of the Shīʿas is explained using the concept of *taḳīyya*. The concept of *Ṭaḳīyya* (dissimulation) means refraining from expressing, concealing or even acting in conflict with one's true beliefs in order to avoid harm, particularly the loss of life or property. Referring to the principle of *taḳīyya*, Shīʿas contend that while all the infallible Imāms accepted their divine right to rule, they did not put this right into practice because there was potential harm in doing so. For further discussion about *taḳīyya* see (Kohlberg 1975; Strothmann 2012; Torbatinejad 2016).
- <sup>3</sup> For further discussion of the *Ghulāt*, see (Asatryan 2017; Moosa 1987).
- <sup>4</sup> This book has been destroyed and no copy of it remains, but parts of it remain in the form of quotations in Shaykh al-Ṣadūq's book.
- <sup>5</sup> In the case of some individuals, no birth and death dates are listed; this indicates that such details are unknown.
- <sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the concept of *ḥadīth* and its history in Shīʿism, see (Kazemi-Moussavi 2003; Kohlberg 1983).
- <sup>7</sup> *Al-Muwattaʿa* was the first comprehensive collection of Sunnī *ḥadīths*, compiled by Mālik ibn Anas, the Imām of the Mālikī religion (79–179/711–795) in the 2nd/8th century. *Musnad Aḥmad*, written by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (164–241/780–855) and *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* by Muḥammad Bukhārī (194–256/810–870) are among the other prominent collections of Sunnī *ḥadīths*.
- <sup>8</sup> It is said that this book was the first Shīʿī book, written during the lifetime of Imām ʿAlī, the first Imām, by one of his companions. The contents of this book mainly comprise the virtues of the *ahl al-bayt* [family of the Prophet] and the events after the death of the Prophet, as well as the subject of the Imāmate. It has been widely used and referred to in Shīʿī scholarship throughout the centuries. However, as mentioned, considerable doubt exists about its authenticity. For further discussion on this book and its contents, see (Amir-Moezzi 2015; Bayhom-Daou 2015; Gleave 2015; Sobhani 1996).
- <sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding, mentioning the name of the twelfth Imām was forbidden in many narrations. In Shīʿī sources, various reasons have been mentioned for this, including safeguarding the safety of the twelfth Imām. For further discussion, see (al-Hurr al-ʿĀmilī and Mirzaie-Tabrizi 2007; Mīr Dāmād Astarābādī 1988; Mirdamadi 2004).

- 10 This ḥadīth has been narrated from the Prophet and there are several narrations in Shīʿī sources about this and it is generally known as a *mutāwatīr* [reported by a large number of narrators] ḥadīth. However, there have also been challenges to the validity of this ḥadīth. For example, Mohsen Kadivar states that a total of 18 narrations were included in *Kitāb al-kāfi* about this ḥadīth, of which only one can be considered valid. Kadivar concludes that this narrative must be considered a *khabar al-wāhid* [reported by one narrator] and that “a principle of belief cannot be based on a *khabar al-wāhid*” (Kadivar 2014; Mohsen Kadivar Official Website n.d.).
- 11 This belief was very effective in countering the claim of Jaʿfar, the brother of Imām Ḥasan ʿAskarī, to the Imāmate. Modarressi argues that Ibn Qiba Rāzī in particular played a significant role in establishing the theory of *naṣ* in the Shīʿī school (Modarressi 1993).
- 12 Niqābat was an official post created by the ʿAbbāsids in the second half of the third/ninth century to deal with the affairs of the ʿAlid family. The main duties of the niqābat included recording the births, deaths and marriages, lineage and employment of the sādāt. For more details on this post and the history of its formation and eventual abolition, see (al-Māwardī 2000; Elahizadeh and Sirusi 2010; Modarressi 1979).

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Article

# A Critique of the Concept of *Ḥākimiyya*: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's Approach

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to demonstrate how the Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010) challenges the concept of divine sovereignty (*ḥākimiyya*), or the rule of God, developed during the twentieth century, primarily by Sayyid Qutb and Abul Ala Mawdudi—a concept that has inspired many Sunni Islamist movements. The article first explores key aspects of the concept of *ḥākimiyya* as presented by these two thinkers. Then, key components of Abu Zayd's humanistic hermeneutics are explained briefly. The article argues that Abu Zayd uses this hermeneutic to challenge the concept of *ḥākimiyya* and the three main ideas associated with it: (1) the notion of divine sovereignty; (2) the associations between divine sovereignty, the Prophet, and the Qur'an; and (3) the necessity of implementing Sharia. The article concludes that while challenging the concept of divine sovereignty, Abu Zayd argues for a political theory which seeks to de-politicize Islam—a theory which emphasizes that the state should take a neutral position toward the religious orientation of its citizens and the state law should not necessarily be derived from religious principles.

**Keywords:** Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd; Sayyid Qutb; Abul Ala Mawdudi; divine sovereignty; Qur'anic hermeneutics

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## 1. Introduction

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943–2010) was an Egyptian scholar who produced works in the areas of literary studies and the Arabic language as well as Qur'anic and Islamic studies. He received his Ph.D. from Cairo University in 1981 after submitting his thesis on the medieval Muslim Sufi, Ibn Arabi (d. 1240). The controversy created by his works, especially *Naqd al-Khiṭāb al-Dīnī* (Critique of Religious Discourse) and *Maflūm al-Naṣṣ* (The Meaning of the Text), led the Cairo Court of Appeals to declare him an apostate in June 1995, which resulted in his migration to the Netherlands, where he served as professor of Islamic Studies at Leiden University until his death (Abu Zayd and Nelson 2004, p. ix).

There is now a considerable body of scholarly literature in English in which Abu Zayd's ideas are explored and analyzed. The vast majority of these works deal with his approaches to revelation and Qur'anic hermeneutics (e.g., Rahman n.d.; Kermani 2006; Campanini 2011, pp. 52–62; Moch 2022), with some scholars considering his approach “humanistic” (e.g., Sukidi 2009). Some works compare Abu Zayd's approaches to interpreting the Qur'an with those of other Muslim scholars with reformist ideas, such as Muhammad Arkoun and Fazlur Rahman (e.g., Völker 2015, 2017). Abu Zayd's contribution to the reformist debate, particularly its re-examination of Islamic heritage in light of contemporary concerns (Völker 2018) and his ideas on pluralism (Zohouri 2021), are also covered in the literature. Some scholarly works are dedicated to the Egyptian court rulings against Abu Zayd's writings and the critiques made of his works by traditionalist scholars in Egypt (e.g., Bälz 1997; Najjar 2000). Despite this rich literature, Abu Zayd's political ideas, especially his approach to the relationship between religion and politics and his systematic criticism of the notion of divine sovereignty, have yet to be adequately analyzed, though some scholars have addressed the issue in passing (Kassab 2010, pp. 186–91).



To fill this lacuna, we explore how Abu Zayd challenges the concept of divine sovereignty (*ḥākimiyya*), or the rule of God, and illustrate the hermeneutic approach he uses to mount this challenge. We also demonstrate how Abu Zayd's approaches to religion and politics were shaped by his critique of the ideas of *ḥākimiyya* theorists, particularly Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) and Abul Ala Mawdudi (d. 1979). Analysis of the concept of *ḥākimiyya*, as well as criticisms of it by scholars such as Abu Zayd, is of vital importance given the close relationship between *ḥākimiyya* and the ideology of contemporary radical Islamist movements such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). With regard to the influence of Sayyid Qutb's ideas on the latter group, Hassan Hassan (2016, p. 1) notes that "the Islamic State's ideology... is the product of a hybridization of doctrinaire Salafism and other Islamist currents such as Sayyid Qutb's concepts of *ḥākimiyya*." One Salafi-jihadi manifesto used by ISIS leaders was *The Management of Savagery*, written under the pseudonym Abu Bakr Naji in 2004. In this book, Naji borrows heavily from Sayyid Qutb's idea of *ḥākimiyya*, calling for the replacement of *jāhiliyya*<sup>1</sup> with *ḥākimiyya* by force if necessary (Gerges 2016, pp. 34–35). Naji also highlights the importance of Mawdudi's idea that Muslims should revive *ḥākimiyya* and adopt it as their main political system in the contemporary world (Gerges 2016, p. 217). The use of *ḥākimiyya* in ISIS ideology was also seen after the group captured Mosul in 2014, declaring the establishment of the caliphate. At the time, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, an ISIS spokesman, delivered a speech that included references to the key principles of *ḥākimiyya*. In a similar tone to the arguments of Qutb and Mawdudi, al-Adnani compared contemporary events to the Prophet's era, stating that the present world is in a state of *jāhiliyya*. Therefore, al-Adnani (2014) claimed—in the same way that the Prophet built a state, implemented divine laws, and saved the Arabs from the state of ignorance—it is incumbent upon Muslims today to establish a state governed by God's laws.

This article comprises two main sections. First, key aspects of the concept of *ḥākimiyya* as presented by its two key proponents in the twentieth century, Sayyid Qutb and Abu'l Ala Mawdudi, are explored. Second, we present Abu Zayd's critique of the concept, explore key aspects of his hermeneutics, and demonstrate how he uses his humanistic hermeneutic to challenge *ḥākimiyya* and its key components. We argue that Abu Zayd's critique targets three main premises of *ḥākimiyya*: (1) the notion of divine sovereignty; (2) the associations between divine sovereignty, the Prophet, and the Qur'ān; and (3) the necessity of implementing Sharia in society and considering it the law of the state.

## 2. The Concept of *Ḥākimiyya*

The concept of *ḥākimiyya*, according to Hashemi (2013, p. 522), "featured prominently in modern Islamic political thought during the mid-to-late 20th century in the context of emerging debates on the moral basis of legitimate political authority in the postcolonial era." The key feature of *ḥākimiyya* includes "relying on the sovereign judgment of God and... applying the rule of God as the only legitimate rule over people" (Kassab 2010, p. 186). The Arabic word *ḥākimiyya*, commonly translated as authority or sovereignty, is derived from the root ḥ-k-m (*ḥukm*). *Ḥukm* appears in several verses of the Qur'ān and conveys a range of meanings. For example, some Qur'ānic verses confirm that God's prophets have been granted *ḥukm* and 'ilm; in the context of these verses, the former is often translated as wisdom and the latter as knowledge. The prophets Lot, Solomon, and Moses are described in the Qur'ān as having been granted wisdom (*ḥukm*) and knowledge by God (Q 21:74; Q 21:79; Q 28:14). Other figures in the Qur'ān are considered to possess *ḥukm*. For example, the Qur'ān states that John the Baptist received *ḥukm* while he was still a child (Q 19:12). In other verses, the term *ḥukm* is used alongside the terms of prophethood and scripture: "No person to whom God had given the Scripture, *ḥukm* and prophethood would ever say to people, 'Be my servants, not God's' " (Q 3:79; see also Q 6:89).

While the aforementioned verses do not ascribe any political connotation to *ḥukm*, key Islamist figures' interpretations of other verses associate the term with political authority. Those favoring this approach include Qutb and Mawdudi. Most often mentioned by such

scholars is the phrase “authority (*ḥukm*) belongs to God alone,” which appears in three verses (Q 6:57; Q 12:40; Q 12:67). In particular, Q 12:40 reads, “Authority (*ḥukm*) belongs to God alone, and He orders you to worship none but Him: this is the true faith, though most people do not realize it.” In contrast, pre-modern Muslim scholars and Qur’ānic commentators tended to interpret this verse in a less political manner. Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) interprets the phrase “*ḥukm* belongs to God” to mean that God alone must be worshipped and judgment belongs only to God (al-Ṭabarī n.d.). Another classical commentary on the Qur’ān, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, offered a similar view on Q 12:40: “Judgment decree belongs to God alone. He has commanded that you worship none but Him” (al-Suyūṭī 2021). At times, the idea that “*ḥukm* belongs to God alone” was used by pre-modern Muslim theologians such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) to argue against the notion of free will, affirming that “all possibilities are determined exclusively by God rather than by human agency” (Zaman 2015, p. 391). In the twentieth century and concurrent with the rise of Islamist views (particularly the idea that Muslims should live under an Islamic state in which Sharia is implemented), the phrase “*ḥukm* belongs to God” was interpreted in a highly political manner—interpretations that gave rise to the concept of *ḥākimiyya*.

A key figure in the twentieth century who interpreted the concepts of *ḥukm* and *ḥākimiyya* in an absolute political manner, breaking away from the pre-modern Muslim scholarship cited above, was Abul Ala Mawdudi. Mawdudi does not deny that *ḥākimiyya* means God is “the Creator of the Universe” and “the real Sustainer and Ruler” but extends the term to refer to the idea that “God’s Will should reign” (Mawdudi 1960, p. 166) and “God alone is the Law-giver” (Mawdudi 1960, p. 168). Indeed, for Mawdudi (1960, p. 169), “God is not the mere Creator of the Universe; He is also its Ruler and Governor.” Therefore, the only legitimate political system for Muslims is one in which God’s laws are implemented, meaning that human legislation should always be “subject to the Supremacy of Divine Law within the limits prescribed by it” (Mawdudi 1960, p. 169). Mawdudi uses the term *taḡhūt* to refer to the opposite of the rule of God and a form of disobedience to divine authority. Indeed, *taḡhūt* represents a condition in which human beings’ own laws prevail in society and God’s laws are neglected (Mawdudi 1955, p. 2).

To justify his political theory, Mawdudi argues that prophets of God questioned human-made legislation and sought to implement divine law. He believes even Jesus—who may not appear to have focused on legalistic matters—aimed to “revolt against man-made law and to obey Divine Law” (Mawdudi 1960, p. 177). The Prophet Muhammad is described in Mawdudi’s work as a legislator who “formulated laws of social culture, economic organization, group conduct and international relations” (cited in Jackson 2011, p. 46). Muhammad, according to Mawdudi (1960, p. 135), established a state, became a ruler, and enforced God’s law upon people, aiming to demolish “man’s supremacy over man.” Mawdudi goes on to state that the Prophet started a revolution in Arabia with the proclamation of Islam as a new religion (Mawdudi 1960, p. 125). Islam, therefore, “is a revolutionary ideology and programme which seeks to alter the social order of the whole world” (Mawdudi 1980, p. 5).

Another influential Muslim thinker of the twentieth century, the Egyptian scholar Sayyid Qutb, wrote about God’s power and authority in terms of political sovereignty. Commenting on verse Q 12:40, Qutb states that “judgment and authority belong to no one other than God. It is He... [who has the] authority to legislate and judge... sovereignty, belongs to Him.... Whoever claims any right to it is indeed disputing God’s power” (Qutb 2015, vol. 10, pp. 62–63). Qutb states that in the Islamic political system, “the nation selects the ruler, giving him the authority to govern in accordance with God’s law”; however, the ruler “is not the source of sovereignty” and is not given the right to legislate, because his duty is limited to implementing “what God has legislated” (Qutb 2015, vol. 10, p. 63). Therefore, any regulation or law that God has not legislated should not be enforced by the ruler. In this sense, in a proper Islamic political system, according to Qutb, *ḥākimiyya* does not belong to human beings but to God alone. The ruler’s duty is to ensure that God’s legislation is implemented appropriately. In such a system, the ruler does not rule per se; it

is God who rules. God's laws, according to Qutb, are fixed and unchangeable, and no one is permitted to change them according to his or her subjective desire:

The Qur'ān is immutable.... The Qur'ān is capable of guiding human life today and in the future because... it is God's last and final message... [and] never changing. Would it not be laughable if the sun, for instance, were described as old or "reactionary" and hence it should be replaced by a new and more "progressive" star? Similarly, is it not also laughable for man to be considered antiquated... and his replacement by some other more "enlightened" being to rule the world be argued for? It would also be ludicrous to say the same with regard to the Qur'ān, God's last and final message to mankind. (Qutb 2015, vol. 2, p. 3)

Another key term that appears in Qutb's writings is *jāhiliyya*, which is used to describe the ignorance of Arabian society before the emergence of Islam. *Ḥākimiyya* and *jāhiliyya* are connected in the sense that rejecting the latter implies endorsement of the former, given that the latter refers to submission to human sovereignty, while the former refers to submission to divine sovereignty. Indeed, *jāhiliyya* occurs when an individual or society rejects *ḥākimiyya*. Writing in the mid-twentieth century context, when the secularism thesis was prevalent in the world, including in Muslim-majority societies, Qutb claimed that contemporary societies live in a state of *jāhiliyya*. Mawdudi himself had used the term *jāhiliyya* in his writings but in a less "radical" way than Qutb. According to Zimmerman (2004, p. 234), "Mawdudi believed that the world was a mixture of Jahiliyyah and Islam, whereas Qutb believed that the world was either one or another." For Qutb (2008, p. 41), "*jāhiliyya* is the worship of some people by others; that is to say, some people become dominant and make laws for others, regardless of whether these laws are against God's injunctions." This stands in sharp contrast to Islam's fundamental objective, which from the very beginning of its emergence was to "abolish all those systems and governments which are based on the rule of man over man" (Qutb 2008, p. 37).

Therefore, the concept of *ḥākimiyya* has three key interconnected components. First, because God alone is the real sovereign and *ḥākimiyya* belongs to Him; no individual, party, or class can lay claim to sovereignty. Second, the real law-giver is God, and believers should not create independent legislation, nor should they change laws that God has legislated for them based on their own desires or intentions. Third, an appropriate Islamic political system should be founded upon the legislation laid down by God, or in Mawdudi's words, "The government which runs such a state will be entitled to obedience in its capacity as a political agency set to enforce the laws of God" (Mawdudi 1960, p. 138). Therefore, the main concept behind Mawdudi's and Qutb's political theories is the idea of God's will being embodied, not in a particular person, such as an imam or a caliph, but in the corpus of divine law. Indeed, unlike Shia political theologies in the modern period, in particular the notion of the rule of jurists, Mawdudi's and Qutb's political theories are focused on God's law and an Islamic political system that implements God's law rather than a focus on who is qualified to rule. In principle, *ḥākimiyya* supports the unity of religion and politics and rejects any theory which states that religion and politics, or religious and political institutions, should be separated in one way or another—be they American models of secularism or assertive secularism theories such as *laïcité* (Khatab 2002, p. 155).

Before we explain how Abu Zayd criticizes *ḥākimiyya* and its key elements, it is important to outline that Abu Zayd was not the first scholar in Egypt and in the Muslim world, broadly speaking, who criticized aspects of the concept of religious sovereignty and the establishment of a state based on the sharia. Long before Abu Zayd, Egyptian scholar Ali Abd al-Raziq (d. 1966) argued that the main aim of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad's teaching was not to establish a state. According to him, the Qur'ān and the Sunna of the Prophet do not provide any fixed rule about governance and methods of rulings, and that the caliphate had no basis in the primary sources of Islam (Abd al-Raziq 1978, pp. 5–13). As one commentator on Abd al-Raziq's works notes, the key argument presented by Abd al-Raziq was that "the Prophet never established or headed a government; nor did he call for such, since he was merely a messenger assigned with the task of proclaiming a religious

[and spiritual] message” (Ali 2009, p. 70). Unlike Islamist scholars such as Mawdudi and Qutb, Abd al-Raziq concluded that there is no fixed form of state assigned for Muslims, and thus they can choose an appropriate political system suited to their needs and conditions (Ali 2009, p. 71). As will be discussed below, some of these ideas have also been emphasized in Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd’s critique of the notion of *ḥākimiyya*.

### 3. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd’s Hermeneutic Approach

From the middle of the twentieth century onwards, some Muslim scholars developed a genre of exegesis, seeking to understand the Qur’ān in its historical context. Without negating the divine origin of the Qur’ān, these scholars sought to historicize it, arguing that the historical conditions of the Qur’ān’s emergence had an important impact on its style, content, and message. This approach to interpreting the Qur’ān emerged gradually in Egyptian academic circles of Qur’ānic studies scholars. Amin al-Khūlī (d. 1966), who is well-known for his literary approach to interpreting the Qur’ān, adopted a historical approach to revelation—one that was later used by Abu Zayd. According to al-Khūlī, the moment of revelation brought God’s speech “into existence amongst people and... in the world” (Naguib 2015, p. 47). Al-Khūlī further emphasized that the study of the world in which the Qur’ān emerged—specifically the political, cultural, and social practices of pre-Islamic Arabs until the era of revelation—is a necessity for any approach to interpreting the Qur’ān. Acknowledging these practices as *mā ḥawal al-Qur’ān* (what surrounds the Qur’ān), al-Khūlī argues that knowledge of the intellectual milieu of the Qur’ān, including the beliefs, history, and family structures of Arabs, is important to understanding the Qur’ān and its message (al-Khūlī 1961, pp. 233–34). Furthermore, al-Khūlī emphasizes that the study of the Qur’ān’s historical background should include the circumstances of its revelation. As Salama (2018, p. 44), one interpreter of al-Khūlī’s approach, notes, al-Khūlī held that “an exegete has to be equipped both with knowledge of the emotional condition of the Prophet in relation to the verses revealed and insight into the different psychological promptings of different revelations.”

This historical approach to the Qur’ān is key to Abu Zayd’s hermeneutics. Throughout his work, he highlights the historicity of revelation or its “occurrence in time” (*al-hudūth fil-zamān*) (Abu Zayd 1995, p. 71). From the moment of revelation, the Qur’ān entered history and acquired a status connected to the society and time in which it emerged. Like al-Khūlī, Abu Zayd notes that the Qur’ān is connected to the norms and values of the pre-Islamic era and is thus a “cultural production, in the sense that pre-Islamic culture and concepts are re-articulated via the specific language structure” (Abu Zayd 2006, p. 97; see also Abu Zayd 1998, p. 24). That is, “any genuine hermeneutics has to take into consideration the pre-Islamic culture as the key context” (Abu Zayd 2006, p. 97). For Abu Zayd, the experiences of the Prophet and the nascent Muslim community as well as their communication or debate with others, including opponents, influenced the content of the Qur’ān. This means that the Qur’ān is “the outcome of dialoguing, debating, augmenting, accepting, and rejecting. This horizontal communication and humanistic dimension is in the ‘structure’ of the Qur’ān, not outside it” (Abu Zayd 2010, p. 287).

Abu Zayd further argues that an interpreter’s pre-understandings determine the meaning that can be realized in the act of interpretation. This approach to understanding texts was adopted by some Western philosophers in the twentieth century. In particular, Hans-Georg Gadamer argued that any act of understanding or interpretation takes place in the context of pre-understandings—what the interpreter has already understood. Therefore, our pre-understandings make an essential contribution to our understanding, and interpreters of a given text are preconditioned by a variety of factors, such as the sociopolitical and cultural norms of the societies in which they live (Gadamer 1975, p. 296). Abu Zayd was in favor of this approach. Indeed, Gadamer’s influence is apparent in Abu Zayd’s ideas (see Akbar 2021). For Abu Zayd, when we deal with the discipline of interpretation, we should always consider the fact that we can never achieve an absolute truth: “there is neither an objective, nor an innocent interpretation” (Abu Zayd 2006, p. 93). Applying

this approach to the realm of Qur'ānic studies, Abu Zayd concludes that when one speaks of Islam or the Qur'ān, one indeed speaks of one's interpretation of Islam or the Qur'ān rather than Islam or the Qur'ān per se. Abu Zayd refers to a statement from Ali b. Abi Talib, the fourth caliph and the first Shia Imam, who once stated that the Qur'ān is just a piece of writing "that is drawn between two covers and that does not speak" for itself; it is humans who speak for it (Abu Zayd 2018, p. 97).

Based on this approach, Abu Zayd makes a sharp distinction between a given text and its interpretation, arguing that they must be distinguished from each other. Abu Zayd refers to interpretation as "the other side of the text," which should never be conflated with the text itself (Abu Zayd 1998, p. 9). In analyzing texts, he argues that "we would not claim that the interpretation was identical to the text or to the author's intent" (Abu Zayd 2018, p. 74). In the case of religious texts or sacred scriptures, this distinction is even more important, given that conflating the human interpretation of a text such as the Qur'ān and the text itself leads directly to "conflation of the human and the divine and confers divine status on the human and the temporal" (Abu Zayd 2018, p. 74). Accordingly, in a religious discipline such as *tafsīr*—or Qur'ānic interpretation—we should take into consideration that no idea is sacred or beyond question or criticism, because it includes human knowledge and human understanding of the text (for similar contextualist approaches see Akbar 2020; Akbar and Saeed 2020).

#### 4. Challenging the Very Notion of Divine Sovereignty

To challenge the theoretical foundation of *ḥākimiyya*, Abu Zayd uses his hermeneutics throughout his writings. He argues that the theorists of *ḥākimiyya*, particularly scholars such as Qutb and Mawdudi, neglect the idea that the interpretation of religion or religious texts takes place in a particular context and that every form of interpretation represents a unique relationship between the text and the interpreter, including the interpreter's particular pre-understandings and presuppositions. Indeed, for Abu Zayd, the main weakness of the concept of *ḥākimiyya* is the erroneous notion that "religious texts are self-explanatory and speak for themselves" (Abu Zayd 2018, p. 111). *Ḥākimiyya* takes "God's word in God's book as the sole arbiter in human affairs" and considers it "the only legitimate rule over people" (Kassab 2010, p. 186). However, this reliance on the word of God takes place through a particular interpretation, given that religious texts, like other texts, require "humans to understand and interpret them" (Abu Zayd 2018, p. 78). Based on this analysis, Abu Zayd considers the ideas presented by *ḥākimiyya* theorists as only one form of interpretation among many other possible interpretations.

Abu Zayd further argues that *ḥākimiyya* theorists fail to distinguish between their own opinions and Islam, and that they emphasize that their ideas represent Islam and absolute truth: "[They] do not present these ideas as individual opinions but asserts that [their] theories are Islam" (Abu Zayd 2018, p. 71). Abu Zayd gives the example of Sayyid Qutb's interpretation of jihad, which he argues is based on the particular approach of medieval Muslim scholar Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyah (d. 751/1350). Abu Zayd then concludes that Qutb attributes Ibn Qayyim's particular understanding of jihad, which is one among many other interpretations, to Islam itself: "When he [Qutb] discusses the principle of jihad, [he] adopts the classification that Ibn al-Qayyim makes for the relationship that Muslim society has with non-Muslims... Qutb accepts Ibn al-Qayyim's personal opinion... and, more importantly, equates that opinion with Islam itself" (Abu Zayd 2018, p. 64).

As a result, what proponents of *ḥākimiyya* present as divine sovereignty, Abu Zayd concludes, is nothing more than a human interpretation of religion. Therefore, establishing a government based on *ḥākimiyya* would not result in the fulfillment of God's will but rather impose human thoughts, ideas, or interpretations of God's book on citizens (Abu Zayd and Nelson 2004, p. 90). In the end, *ḥākimiyya*, according to Abu Zayd, is a man-made political system based on the rule of people or a group of people who claim to speak on behalf of God. For Abu Zayd, *ḥākimiyya* is not an Islamic government or divine sovereignty but represents what can be referred to as "human sovereignty" in the garb of religion. Such



a political system, even if ruled or supervised by a group of *‘ulamā’*, does not represent divine sovereignty, because “the authority represented by men of religion” is a form of human sovereignty with its “own prejudices and ideological biases” (Abu Zayd 2018, p. 78).

## 5. The Prophetic State and Afterwards

In his discussions criticizing the concept of *ḥākimiyya*, Abu Zayd argues that *ḥākimiyya* is not rooted in how the Prophet Muhammad and the rightly guided caliphs ruled the nascent Muslim society. During the Prophet’s time, as Abu Zayd notes, “there was a well-established understanding that religious texts had special domains of activity, while there were other domains that were open to human reason and human experience and were unaffected by the texts.” Despite this, *ḥākimiyya* theorists “expand the authority of religious texts into all domains,” including the arena of politics—an idea that neglects the prophetic principle that “You know best about your own worldly affairs” (Abu Zayd 2018, p. 49). Throughout Abu Zayd’s writings, the arena of politics is considered a human or non-divine sphere that requires human reasoning, meaning that in general there is no need to refer to religious texts in managing the political affairs of society. Abu Zayd notes that the Qur’ān only identifies a number of values such as fairness and justice that are central to the Muslim polity but does not mandate a specific political administration or form of government (Abu Zayd and Nelson 2004, p. 183). Accordingly, the “form of government... is open to Muslims to choose for themselves” (Abu Zayd and Nelson 2004, p. 183). This is reminiscent of Ali Abd al-Raziq’s argument about governance. As we discussed earlier, he argued that the Qur’ān does not instruct the Prophet to rule. Leaning on several Qur’ānic verses such as Q 4:80, Q 6:66–67, Q 10:108, Q 39:41, and Q 42:48, Abd al-Raziq argued that “apart from the right to proclaim the spiritual message”, the Qur’ān did not give any authority to Muhammad to rule or claim rulership over his *umma* (Ali 2009, pp. 77–78).

Unlike Qutb and Mawdudi, who believed that the key element of *ḥākimiyya*, namely the establishment of divine sovereignty, is rooted in the era of the Prophet, Abu Zayd argues that it is grounded on the Umayyad rulers’ manipulation of religious texts to legitimize their own rulership: “the Umayyads... first put forward the idea of divine sovereignty, with all that implies in the way of claiming that texts are operative in the domain of political rivalry and clashes of interests” (Abu Zayd 2018, p. 60). This began with *Mu’āwiya* b. Abī Sufyān (d. 60/680), the founder of the Umayyad dynasty. *Mu’āwiya* took the advice of ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ (d. 43/664), who served as his representative in the arbitration talks to end the battle with Ali’s forces, ordering his army to place pages of the Qur’ān on their lances and then appeal to the text as an arbiter in their dispute. Indeed, *Mu’āwiya* used the Qur’ān—as Muslims’ key religious text—to legitimize his rule because he, in particular, and other Umayyad rulers, in general, “had lost the legitimacy on which any political system must be based” (Abu Zayd 2018, p. 60).

The use of religion as a means of legitimizing politics continued throughout the Umayyad dynasty.<sup>2</sup> The Umayyad rulers collaborated closely with the *‘ulamā’*, which gave rise to the emergence of state *‘ulamā’*. By using religion and referring to religious texts, state *‘ulamā’* sought to decrease, to a great extent, the significant challenges facing Umayyad rulers’ authority (Abu Zayd 1995, p. 22). Indeed, without the support of the *‘ulamā’*, caliphs lacked the necessary legitimacy, and thus a discourse gradually emerged, according to which the caliph claimed to rule on behalf of God and based on God’s law. Abu Zayd (2018, pp. 60–61) further notes that one way in which the Umayyad rulers and state-affiliated *‘ulamā’* legitimized their rulership was their emphasis on the concept of *jabr*, or determinism, “which attributes everything that happens in the world, including the actions of mankind, to the total power of God and His indomitable will.”<sup>3</sup> This was another technique used by the Umayyads, Abu Zayd argues, to legitimize their rulership. The placing of religious legitimacy on the ruler and appealing to religious texts or using religious concepts such as determination to legitimize his rulership meant that the ruler’s political authority was gained through an appeal to divine rule. According to Abu Zayd, today’s *ḥākimiyya* theorists, as well as the state they seek to establish, base their legitimacy

not on the Prophet's authority, but on the Umayyad rulers' approach to power, which was oriented around the use of religion to advance their political objectives.

## 6. Implementation of Sharia and the *Hākimiyya–Jāhiliyya* Dichotomy

As previously discussed, one key feature of *hākimiyya* is the idea that God's laws should be considered the foundation of the state. Indeed, for a state to legitimately represent divine sovereignty, it must implement Sharia. Abu Zayd challenges this approach based on two arguments drawn from his hermeneutic principles. First, he argues that many areas of what is known today as Sharia include human efforts after the Prophet's death to stipulate regulations and laws, which gradually resulted in the emergence of four major schools within the Sunni tradition. According to Abu Zayd (2006, p. 94), Sharia "is a man-made production" and thus, "To claim that the body of Shari'a literature is binding for all Muslim communities... is simply to ascribe divinity to the human historical production of thought" (95). This means that the implementation of Sharia does not necessarily bestow legitimacy on a state based on the principle of divine sovereignty. For example, Abu Zayd (2018, p. 64) argues that Sayyid Qutb's approach to the penalty for theft consists of nothing more than citing the opinions of legal experts and thus not only considering them tantamount to the religion itself but also presenting them in such a way that they "cannot be contested or debated."

Abu Zayd's second argument criticizing the implementation of Islamic law is grounded in his historical-contextualist approach to the Qur'ān. The idea that Islamic laws, including those articulated in the Qur'ān, should be implemented today stands in sharp contrast to the fact that they emerged in a particular social and political context. For Abu Zayd, Islamic laws were the product of the sociopolitical conditions encountered by the Prophet and the nascent Muslim community. They "reveal a context of engagement with human needs in specific times" (Abu Zayd 2006, p. 95). Many prescribed punishments, such as the penalty for theft, had their roots in pre-Islamic society: "The Qur'ān adopted particular forms of punishment from pre-Islamic cultures in order to have credibility with the contemporary civilization" (Abu Zayd and Nelson 2004, p. 166). Given that today's context differs from that of the Prophet's time, many aspects of what we refer to as Islamic laws "need to be revised and reconsidered" (Abu Zayd 2006, p. 95). Abu Zayd therefore challenges political systems that claim to implement Islamic laws; for him, "there is no obligation to establish a theocratic state claimed as Islamic. Such a demand is nothing but an ideological call to establish an unquestionable theo-political authority" (Abu Zayd 2006, p. 95).

Based on his historical approach to religious texts and concepts, Abu Zayd also questions the approaches of Qutb and Mawdudi to *jāhiliyya* and *hākimiyya*. He argues that such scholars' understanding of *jāhiliyya* lacks a historical approach to the term, given that they reduce it "to a state of mind or an intellectual attitude that can recur whenever society has strayed from the path of Islam, whether in the past, the present or the future" (Abu Zayd 2018, p. 78). Furthermore, from Abu Zayd's perspective, although *jāhiliyya* refers to the pre-Islamic era, Qutb and Mawdudi present an image of Islam versus *jāhiliyya* in a way that constructs a sharp contrast between them. However, although Islam created a "new" culture that was distinct from pre-Islamic Hijazi culture in some important respects (Abu Zayd 1998, p. 24), Abu Zayd notes that the emergence of Islam did not instigate a sharp break or replace all the norms, values, and ideas of the Arabs. Many practices of pre-Islamic Arabian society, including their legal norms, paved the way for Islam. Indeed, by "dismissing the historical dimension" of religion, *hākimiyya* theorists redefine the term *jāhiliyya* in a way that suits their own ideology and then wield it against all political systems that are inconsistent with their preferred system. Therefore, based on his historical approach, Abu Zayd not only challenges the implementation of Sharia laws but also questions the validity of constructing a sharp dichotomy between *jāhiliyya* and *hākimiyya*.

## 7. Conclusions

This article has demonstrated how Abu Zayd uses his hermeneutic approach to challenge various aspects of *ḥākimiyya*. First, Abu Zayd challenges the notion of divine sovereignty. Given that the interpretation of religion or religious texts takes place in a particular context comprising a number of presuppositions, any political system established based on *ḥākimiyya* is nothing but a state governed by a particular understanding of religion, meaning that divine sovereignty cannot exist. Second, Abu Zayd challenges *ḥākimiyya* on the grounds that it has its roots, not in the Qurʾān or the rulings of the Prophet Muhammad and the rightly guided caliphs, but in the Umayyads' search for legitimacy. Third, based on his historical and contextualist approach, Abu Zayd questions the implementation of Sharia and the sharp distinction between *jāhiliyya* and *ḥākimiyya*.

Therefore, unlike proponents of the concept of *ḥākimiyya*, who consider the establishment of a state based on religious principles an essential aspect of Islam, Abu Zayd seeks to de-politicize Islam. His critique of *ḥākimiyya* is associated with his defense of alternative political theories such as democracy and political secularism. Indeed, Abu Zayd defends a secular-democratic political system—one in which the state takes a neutral position toward the religious orientation of its citizens and the state law is not necessarily derived from religious principles. The form of a state, according to Abu Zayd, should ultimately be determined by its citizens, because the Qurʾān does not explicitly endorse any particular political system. In such circumstances, the 'ulamā' do not have a special position. Whether Abu Zayd's ideas can be incorporated into broader Muslim political discourse and the extent to which they would be acceptable to the people of Egypt—a country in which religion still plays a major role in sociopolitical affairs—requires further research.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This term often refers to the time and the religious, political and social conditions of Arabia before the emergence of Islam.
- <sup>2</sup> For example, during the second civil war (680–692), when the Umayyads' enemy 'Abd Allah b. al-Zūbayr controlled Mecca and the pilgrimage routes, the Umayyads circulated a hadith that encouraged Muslims not to "remove the saddles from their mounts except at three mosques." The circulation of this hadith was conducted in order to establish an alternative annual pilgrimage location in the territories that were under their control in Palestine (see Goldziher 1971, vol. 2, pp. 44–45).
- <sup>3</sup> For more on this topic, see Judd (2014).

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Article

# Ahmad Qābel, Religious Secularity and *Velāyat-e Faqih* in Iran

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**Abstract:** Religious secularity and Islam have not often been considered in the West as comfortable bedfellows, yet the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 questioned assumptions about the appropriateness of separate spheres for religion and politics. However, within a decade of the revolution, theoretical and intellectual shifts were visible in the Iranian seminaries, and alternative views about the doctrine of *velāyat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurists) which twinned religion and politics together, were being discussed. Such shifts transformed the doctrine from one which had a divine mandate to one that in practice emanated from the people. This article focuses upon the ideas of a mid-ranking reformist seminarian, Ahmad Qābel (d. 2012), whose tight adherence to reason resulted in him ultimately rejecting *velāyat-e faqih*, and calling for a form of religious secularity in which the seminary remained divorced from state structures and institutions. For Qābel, this did not mean the creation of an irreligious society, but the establishment of a more open and pluralist one, in which religious differences could be voiced. Qābel's short essay on *velāyat-e faqih* is utilised herein to outline the main arguments of those who have refuted the doctrine. Qābel's complete rejection of *velāyat-e faqih* is important because it went much further than the view of his spiritual mentor, Ayatollah Montazeri, who sought reform of the idea. As such, it demonstrates that within the seminary there is much difference of opinion, although there are very few (such as Qābel) who have the courage to articulate their opposition to the "official" view. Qābel's essay provides a straightforward entry-point into a complex topic, employing the kinds of rationalist argumentation that he learnt within the seminarian environment of Iran.

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**Keywords:** Ahmad Qābel; religious secularity; *velāyat-e faqih*; *foqahā*; Iran

## 1. Background

The 1978–79 revolution in Iran is widely held to be a landmark event in the Middle East in the respect that it heralded the return of religion as a major player in the social and political affairs of the country. The outpouring of Islamic sentiments was a shock to many Western observers who had believed that "modernisation" would result in the secularisation of thought and social and legal organisation (Benard and Khalilzad 1984, pp. 1–24). However, the pattern of modernisation experienced by Iranians from the 1960s onwards had differed radically from that of Europeans or North Americans. Iranian "forced" modernisation was a harsh, top-down method of decrees in social and political realms, which resulted in religion becoming a focal point of dissent. With the return of Ayatollah Khomeini to Tehran in 1979, Iranian religious leaders commenced the task of rolling back the "secularising" policies of Mohammad Rezā Pahlavi, the last Shāh of Iran. Most notably this included a revision of the political system, and the new constitution of 1979 included provision for the leading cleric to oversee the operation of the political machinery. Traditionally, a leading Shi'a cleric, known as a source of imitation (*marja' taqlid*), had remained aloof from the political world, although he considered it a duty to assert the Qur'ānic imperative to "Command the good and forbid the evil" (Q. 9.112) which had been understood as a duty to advise the monarch. (One reason for the reluctance among some clerics to become ensnared in political machinations was due to the Shi'a belief that political authority belonged solely to the Twelfth Imam, an eschatological figure, descended from

the prophet Mohammad, who disappeared from human eyes in 940 C.E., but who will reappear to establish a period of justice before the end of time). Moreover, the *marja' taqlid* had his own source of finance as he was the recipient of charity bestowed upon him by the faithful, which contributed to his political independence from the state.

As such, religion and politics had been separated for much of Iranian history, but the doctrine espoused by Khomeini, known as *velāyat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) which introduced the *marja' taqlid* into the political framework was enshrined in the new constitution of 1979, and it received overwhelming public endorsement in a referendum of March 1979. Thus, the drift towards political secularisation was reversed, and the state and religion were conjoined. In the wake of the revolution, Iranian society was gradually Islamicised, and this included mandatory head covering for women (or veiling), a reduction in the marriage age, and the imposition of a range of “Islamic” punishments known as *hudud* laws.

Nevertheless, there was considerable concern even among the echelons of the clerics themselves about how to implement the laws of the Qur'an and which had been formulated in the centuries subsequent to its revelation in the 7th century. It is notable that even a stalwart of the revolution, Hāshemi Rafsanjāni, had asked Khomeini about the possibility of ruling the country according to the interpretation of shariah law that existed at the time (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2014, p. 234). While Rafsanjāni was a loyal supporter of the doctrine of *velāyat-e faqih*, there were other clerics who preferred to separate the religious and political realms, and they endorsed the more traditional role of a *marja' taqlid*. Clerics who actively opposed *velāyat-e faqih* were side-lined and often put under house-arrest, and some were even defrocked, as was the case with Ayatollah Shari'atmadari (Moussavi 1992, p. 106). Such opposition is often thought of as political quietism, although it should be stressed that from around the time of the Constitutional Revolution in the first decade of the twentieth century, it was argued that the seminary should function in a kind of supervisory fashion to the ruler. Indeed, Qābel himself appears to endorse such a perspective in his writings, for although he argued against *velāyat-e faqih*, he consistently expressed his right to “*command the good and forbid the evil*”, the aforementioned Qur'anic inspired ideal that encourages believers to articulate a pious and good way of life, particularly before those in authority (Cook 2001).

The difficulty of finding a suitable Islamic leader for Iranian society who enjoyed political acumen and also religious charisma was recognised in the later 1980s, at a time when Khomeini's health was failing. Accordingly, the revised constitution of 1989 did not mention that a *marja' taqlid* was a condition for political leadership, which permitted 'Ali Khāmenei, a mid-ranking cleric, to assume the reins of power on Khomeini's death in June 1989. Although this seemed to have loosened the ties of politics and religion, in practice, the new theory of the Absolute Guardianship of the Jurist (*velāyat-e faqih-e motlaq*) did not diminish any of the authority enjoyed under the 1979 constitution. Indeed, Khāmenei was a “Principlist” (*osulgarā'i*), or, as outsiders frequently observe, a “hardliner”, who envisaged a central place for religion in politics and society. According to Khāmenei's opponents, the political decision-making process was streamlined to a chosen few (who were supportive of the Leader, or else chosen by the Leader himself), whereas the political choices of the citizens of Iran were restricted. Indeed, Khāmenei's attempt to promote himself to the rank of *marja' taqlid* in the 1990s is indicative of the de facto marriage of religion and politics (such as certain “religious” conditions for appointments to political and judicial posts).

## 2. Ahmad Qābel as a New Religious Thinker

Ahmad Qābel's entrance onto the Iranian politico-religious stage coincided with the first Presidency of Mohammad Khātami (1997–2001), known as a reformist cleric whose policies frequently seemed at odds with the world view of 'Ali Khāmenei. In the wake of Khātami's electoral victory, Grand Ayatollah Montazeri sent him a letter of congratulations in which he advised the President to take a firm stand to ensure the rule of law (von Schwerin 2015, p. 180). Montazeri had become known as sympathetic to religious

reform, and in particular, to a version of *velāyat-e faqih* that included some form of public election. Ironically, he had been instrumental in inserting the doctrine into the 1979 constitution, but his revised thinking on the subject and combined with his concern about the executions that were taking place in Iranian prisons in the mid-1980s resulted in his dismissal as Khomeini's deputy in 1989 (Abrahamian 1999, pp. 219–20; von Schwerin 2015, pp. 118–31). It was copies of Montazeri's letter of advice, or congratulations to Khātami that his student, Ahmad Qābel, was distributing in North-East Iran in the summer of 1997, and which resulted in his arrest and short detention. Between this first arrest and his death in 2012, Qābel spent several periods in jail, which were a result of his championing Montazeri's criticisms of Khāmenai and his autocratic tendencies, and also for crossing the redlines on various social and political issues.

Qābel had a very deep religious background. His father was a mid-ranking cleric, and the family's attachment to Islam became evident when the young Qābel enrolled into a Mashhad seminary in 1971 and then in Qom in 1978 (Qābel 2012b, p. 61; 2012c, p. 127). He supported the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, and he was to spend several periods defending the revolution at the war front during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988). Qābel said very little about this period of his life, however, he earned a degree of notoriety in the seminary even before his first arrest because in 1991 he refused to wear the distinctive clerical gown and turban as he wished to be viewed as an ordinary person (Qābel 2007b, pp. 95–96). Although this sartorial choice is not without precedent in the seminary, it is indeed rare, and is an early indication of Qābel's independence of mind. Subsequent photographs of Qābel show him sporting an open-necked shirt and trousers, even when he visited his mentor Ayatollah Montazeri (Alchetron 2018).

From the late 1990s until his death, Qābel began propagating a reformed version of Islam which has been termed "Rational Shariah" (*shari'at-e 'aqlāni*) (Ridgeon 2019; Jahanbakhsh 2020). The emphasis on reason is a defining element of a movement in Iran known as "New Religious Thinking" (*andishān-e naw-e dini*) that emerged in Iran after Khomeini's death. This movement includes "dissident" clerics including Mohsen Kadivar (2021) and Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper 2006). New Religious Thinking is associated with the view that Islam is compatible with rationality and modern human rights by re-interpreting sacred texts. This means that scripture such as the Qur'ān, hadith and narrations from the Imams reflect a particular worldview and historical context which obviously no longer pertains. Therefore, such scripture is re-evaluated in light of contemporary standards of reason and justice, which are considered as two of the major themes of scripture.

Qābel is viewed as taking this position to an extreme (Eshkevari 2012, p. 322): indeed, he viewed reason a tool, God-given to all humans, but one that was independent of sacred scripture and the shariah. In fact, Qābel believed that if humans saw a contradiction between reason and scripture then scripture needed to be re-interpreted so that it conformed to reason. (Qābel 2012c, p. 68). He did not see any contradiction between the universal reason of humanity and justice, and those elements of scripture which appear today "out of date", since the latter simply reflect the reason existent at the time of revelation. Therefore, scripture (or the human understanding of it) is not static. This kind of understanding was, and is, a direct challenge to those believers who consider scripture the unchanging word of God, and who demand what they consider a "literal" interpretation and implementation of Qur'anic verses. For example, whereas Qābel was hesitant to endorse the principle of amputating thieves' limbs (Qābel 2011a, p. 385), others, such as the Principlist Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi argued in favour of the punishment (Mesbāh-Yazdi 2002, p. 217). Another example of Qābel's Rational Shariah is his famous fatwa of 2004 in which he declared that it is not necessary for women to wear the hejab (Qābel 2007a; Ridgeon 2021, pp. 179–201), which was a direct challenge to the laws of Iran which deems non-observance of the hejab a crime that can lead to a prison sentence and a fine.

### 3. Ahmad Qābel and Religious Secularity

In theory, the constitutional reforms of 1989 can be understood as a step towards secularising the Islamic Republic, in that the Leader (*rahbar*) did not need to be a very senior seminarian, or a *marja' taqlid*. Yet, the process of appointing a new leader ensured that the position remained securely within the religious classes. Accordingly, an elected body known as the Assembly of Experts (*majles-e khobregān-e rahbari*) selects an appropriate Leader, although all candidates for this Assembly are scrutinised and checked for “Islamic” credentials by the Council of Guardians (*shūrā-ye negahbān*). Half the members of Council of Guardians are appointed directly by the Leader and the other half are elected by the Parliament (having been nominated by the Chief Justice (who is selected by the Leader)). Thus the “secularisation” of the constitution may be regarded as superficial. Ahmad Qābel pointed out that the Assembly of Experts have the potential to be an effective body in limiting the excesses of the leader’s power:

representatives of the people are elected as the Assembly of Experts (*majles-e khobragān*) and they [in turn] elect the *vali-ye faqih*. They can dismiss, supervise, and advise him. They can make him go back on some policies that have been assessed as mistaken, and they can constrain him if [their] policy is good and is in the interest of society until he acts on implementing that policy. (Qābel 2009b, p. 230)

Given the overwhelming influence that the Leader exercises over the Assembly of Experts in terms of its composition, it is not surprising that it has not been an effective bulwark against any excesses of the *vali-ye faqih*. Due to the context of reform under Khātami’s Iran (and the immediate aftermath of his two Presidencies), it is unsurprising that Qābel asserted that even the Absolute variety of *velāyat-e faqih* did not mean the Leader should abuse power. He stated that there were some members of the Assembly of Experts (mentioned in the quote below) who considered legitimate the unbridled power of the Leader. He said:

A small number of jurists, like Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Montazeri are people who accept the absolute jurisdiction of the *faqih*, meaning that it is not conditioned by the three constraining limits on his power [i.e., the executive, legislative and the judiciary], and like other governments they have the right to pass laws and judge and carry out executive functions but within the framework of the law. In this way the absolute jurisdiction of the *faqih* is interpreted according to the Constitution, certainly the term ‘absolute’ does not mean despotic or outside legal parameters. Unfortunately, the understanding that exists now and is propounded by the likes of Mr Mesbāh Yazdi and Mohammad Yazdi who see the term meaning an unbridled *faqih* who does not respect the law and whose word is the law. (Qābel 2009b, p. 229)

The above quote appears to exonerate the leading figures of the Islamic Revolution (Khomeini and Montazeri) from criticism. Indeed, Qābel’s censure of Iran’s leadership rests squarely upon the shoulders of Ayatollah ‘Alī Khāmenei. In particular, he condemned Khāmenei for a host of misguided policies (not just abuse of the *velāyat-e faqih* (Ridgeon 2019, pp. 3–5)). Aside from social and political reasons which have already been investigated, Qābel was concerned about the independence of the seminary (*hawza*). A free and autonomous seminary arguably promoted the idea of “religious secularity” (Ghobadzadeh 2015) which simply implied separate areas of jurisdiction between the political sphere and the religious sphere; it did not necessarily entail the diminishing of religious faith in society. During Khāmenei’s leadership an attempt has been made to centralise many aspects of the seminary, such as the correct ways of thinking (defrocking dissenters), propagating the “right” manner of performing religious rituals, and providing funds for religious students (Ghobadzadeh and Akbarzadeh 2020). Qābel was explicit in condemning such changes during his interrogation after being arrested in 2010:



We talked about the seminaries. I pointed to the non-governmental background of the Shi'a seminaries and the schematic observance of this in the time of Ayatollah Khomeini. I stated clearly, 'Unfortunately, from the time of Mr Khāmenei's leadership, the balance of governmental interference has suddenly removed all Shi'a pride in the seminaries' academic independence from governments. The allocation of the state budget, the prejudice of the security apparatus and the Special Clerical Court, creating fear among the *marja'* and *'olemā* (who have inquiring minds on academic and social issues), demonstrating and shouting slogans against them, repeated assaults upon their houses, plundering their wealth, closing their bank accounts etc, have completely violated the esteem of the Shi'a seminaries'. (Qābel 2010c, p. 163)

Qābel's reference to the Special Clerical Courts above assumes significance in light of Khāmenei's influence to persuade such institutions to "defrock" leading theologians, including Ahmad Qābel's own brother, Hādi, in 2008, and most controversially, the reformist seminarian Ayatollah Sāne'i, was "demoted" in 2010 by the Qom Theological Lecturers Association (*jāme'-e modarressin*).

Khāmenei has defended this "interference" and stated:

The independence of the hawza does not mean the regime's lack of support for the hawza, or the hawza's lack of support for the regime. A group of [people] desire this; in the name of independence some want to sever the hawza's connection to the regime. This is impossible . . . However, the question of the seminaries is not limited to the livelihood [of students]. In the seminaries there is expenditure that would not be possible to meet without help from the treasury and governmental assistance . . . the hawza accepts various forms of support from the regime with respect and magnanimity . . . this support is not just financial. Today, praise be to God, the most important and most common national platforms are at the disposal of the scholars of the hawza and the great marja . . . This is the support of the regime . . . so the question of interference or independence should not be confused with the realities that exist on this matter. (Khāmenei 2010)

Just as Qābel desired the hawzas to remain autonomous from the state, he was a champion of what might be termed "Islam-lite", or minimalist-Islam. To this end he cited the view of Ayatollah Khomeini (from a work penned in 1954) which advocated just the main principles of Islam that he regarded as sufficient for someone to be a Muslim:

The reality of reliable Islam, which is acceptable to all Muslims, is nothing more than three or four principles, which are: 1. The existence of God: 2. His unity: 3. Prophecy and messengership: 4. Probably belief in the afterlife and the day of recompense. (Qābel 1999, p. 91)

Such a role for religion in this version of religious secularity meant that Qābel was at pains with the Islamic Republic on many issues, and he frequently stepped across the state's redlines, and so exasperated was he at the state's appropriation of religion that he advocated for Iranian youths to flee from it, or to apostatise:

I believe that life-conditions in this world, and in particular in Iran, have turned out in such a way that one has to apostatise (*dīn-gorizi*). That is, right now I believe that a religion has been constructed in Iran from which one must flee. If the youth and people of this country do not decide to apostatise, [then] I have my doubts about their [faculties of] reason (*'aql*). In other words, whoever possesses reason must apostatise from this religion that has been, and is, given [to them]. When they give you a religion which omits rationality, you can do nothing except apostatise. Some [people] say we should wage war with [that religion]. However, we are not warmongers, and we do not encourage violence in society. The very least thing that we can do in a wise manner is to engage in battle with it in a logical way. We flee from it, and we say to the youth 'don't have anything to do with this religion'. (Qābel 2012a, pp. 414–15)

In his “Islam-lite” variety, Qābel rejected the state-driven Islamification of society. This included the segregation of the sexes in universities (Qābel 2011a, p. 338) which he argued was tantamount to replacing one potentially flawed system with another. His commitment to root out inequality, based on what he perceived as anachronistic readings of Islam went so far as to argue for the same rights between men and women, rather than the traditional complementarity (2007–8). Indicative of this was his argument that women could lead prayers, a statement that he made days after the African American female theologian, Amina Wadud, led a mixed-congregation gathering in New York in March 2005.

#### 4. Ahmad Qābel and *Velāyet-e Faqih*

Of all the redlines crossed by Qābel it was perhaps his rejection of *velāyet-e faqih* that was most problematic for the Principlists. However, in truth, long before Qābel uttered his reservations about the system, leading seminarians in Iran had already voiced their disquiet. This included Ayatollah Shari’atmadāri’s refusal to participate in the referendum of 1979. In addition, an alternative and “democratic” version of *velāyat-e faqih* was advocated by Ayatollah Sālehi Najafābādi in the mid-1980s (Moussavi 1992). Likewise, a reformed version was advanced by Ayatollah Montazeri in a four-volume collection in 1988 called in Arabic *Dirāsāt fi Wilāyat al-faqih wa fiqh al-dawlah al-Islāmiyya* [Studies in *Velāyat-e faqih* and the jurisprudence of an Islamic state] (Akhavi 2008). Mention should also be made of Mohsen Kadivar’s meticulous investigation of the Shi’a conceptions of government which were published as *Nazariyeh-hā-ye dawlat dar feqh-e Shi’a* [Theories of Government in Shi’a Jurisprudence] (Kadivar 1998b) and *Hokumat-e Velā’i* [Government by Mandate] (Kadivar 1998a). The Principlists have exerted pressure, some may say intimidation, on these reformist thinkers who have faced imprisonment, and house arrest. Nevertheless, Qābel added his voice to the list of those advocating the amelioration of the system.

Despite exonerating Khomeini and Montazeri from criticism, Qābel admitted that he had never wholeheartedly supported the doctrine of *velāyat-e faqih*:

From the time when Ayatollah Montazeri propounded this doctrine [of *velāyat-e faqih*] until today, notwithstanding all of the proofs that he and Ayatollah Khomeini, his teacher had set out, I have not been satisfied that God has given a special right to the jurists. (Qābel 2010b, p. 274)

By the mid-2000s, Qābel decided to “come clean” and reveal his views about *velāyat-e faqih*. He did not produce multi-volumed and detailed analysis (such as that proposed by Montazeri and Kadivar), instead he published sparingly, in the form of articles placed on his website, or he gave his opinions in articles. The imposition of a ban, imposed by the state, on Qābel publishing books or writing articles for journals may have contributed to the relative brevity of his articles, but it certainly did not intimidate him, typified by his open letter of criticisms against ‘Ali Khāmenei in 2005. This eventually culminated in Qābel’s observation that the forecast of many experts, religious and jurisprudential authorities, and even some contemporary *marja’-taqlids* is that *velāyat-e faqih* will end with Mr Khāmenei, and in reality there will be no *velāyat-e faqih* after him (Qābel 2009a, p. 225).

By 2009 when Qābel made the statement above (couched in non-personal terms) he had crossed so many redlines, and Iran was reeling in the aftermath of the “rigged” 2009 Presidential elections, and which witnessed the emergence of the Green Movement (*jonbesh-e sabz*) which protested amongst other things against the “victory” of Mohsen Ahmadinejad, which was eventually endorsed by Khāmenei. Therefore, Qābel’s statements about *velāyat-e faqih* most likely reflect the context of increasing political conflict. His writing on *velāyat-e faqih* summarised his main ideas of the topic, and as such it served as a highly effective means by which his essential arguments could be conveyed to a greater audience.

Qābel’s most extensive treatment of *velāyat-faqih* is in article called simply *Velāyat-faqih* which he composed in Mashhad, Iran, in April 2006. It is twenty-two pages in Farsi and consists of nine points which refute the necessity of the doctrine. Currently, the article appears in the ebook edited by Mohsen Kadivar, called *Feqh, Kār kard-hā va Qābeliyat-hā* [Jurisprudence, Products and Potentialities] (Qābel 2013).

(i). Qābel's first point contrasts the words *velāyat* (guardianship) with *vekālat* (deputyship/representation). By comparing these nearly synonymous terms, Qābel referred to the views of his master, Ayatollah Montazeri, who considered *velāyat* as a broader form of *vekālet*. These two terms are considered in relation to the idea of sovereignty, which all rational humans possess, and is a God-given right. Qābel claimed that because it is an inherent right "no-one has the right to control, exercise judgement or interfere in the restricted area of human property and life." (Qābel 2013, p. 76).

(ii). This first point is a broad sweep about the meaning of *velāyet*, but it allows Qābel to introduce his second point which is to investigate government and *velāyat* as it pertains to control in the public realm, in particular, where there are shared interests and properties in public wealth. In the endeavour to maximise the interests of individuals in society it is inevitable that government is necessary. Interestingly Qābel observed that "the different forms and methods accounting for the rise and fall of governments is a sign of the various steps taken by humans to acquire the necessary experience to reach the best kind of government and the best possible path for attaining these aims of a suitable social life." In other words, and reading between the lines, Qābel considered political fluctuations natural and healthy, and it was periods of dictatorship and autocracy that were unnatural. His other writings are replete with references to the autocratic leadership of Ayatollah Khāmeini, and he uses terms such as "dictatorship and tyranny" to describe the Islamic Republic (Qābel 2008, p. 41). Qābel associated *velāyat-e faqih* with the Shi'a response to rule and control the public domain, and he implicitly questioned the conditions that supporters of the theory place upon the leader. He stated:

Their conditions include maturity, reason, justice [being a] Muslim and a believer, being male, being of legitimate birth, being knowledgeable in the commands of the shariah, being strong and able in completing governmental duties, and not possessing greed. (Qābel 2013, p. 79)

He made no comment on this long list of required character traits, which is, perhaps, suggestive of his reservation that any one person could attain to such standards.

(iii). It is at this point that Qābel turned to the etymology of *velāyat* in his third point, and he noted that it is derived from the Arabic trilateral root v.l.i, meaning "help". He noted that in the Qur'ān one of its main uses bore the meaning of *kefālat*, which is a special form of help (*nosrat*). For those who supported the doctrine of *velāyat-e faqih*, the idea of care and help is associated with the jurists (the *foqāhā*) who are best qualified to offer care and help to the people, for example, by using and distributing religious taxes (Khomeini 1985, p. 45). Khomeini indicated that the *foqāhā* were able to give an opinion about Islamic law because of their specialised training which ordinary people did not have (Khomeini 1985, p. 95). Qābel's discussion of *nosrat*, however turned it on its head so that instead of the *foqāhā* exercising help (via God, the prophet and the Imams), it is the general populace who enjoy the power of dispensing *nosrat*: rather than being a top-down Divine blessing, it becomes a bottom-up phenomenon.

A government subject to the inspection and confirmation of the shariah is established and continues [its existence] when there is continual amity, support, and satisfaction from the citizens for the rulers. Whenever this amity turns to hostility, and satisfaction turns to dis-satisfaction, and help turns to [unhealthy] competition, the religious legality (*mashru'iyat*) of the government is questionable (*mawred-e so'al*). (Qābel 2013, p. 80)

(iv). From this juncture, Qābel commenced the fourth point which was an examination of sacred texts that had been used to legitimise *velāyat-e faqih*. This fourth point is the longest in Qābel's essay, and its analyses of sacred scripture shows the skills that he had learnt, in training as a seminarian. Indeed, Qābel preferred to be known more than anything as a seminarian—despite casting off clerical clothes—and he refuted the charge of being primarily influenced by secular thought (Qābel 2011b, p. 320).



Qābel did not cite these texts verbatim, but simply mentioned them by the name by which they have been popularly known; he did not need to repeat the wording of the text, because they are known in Iran. Qābel's discussion of these texts suggests that a literal reading of them does not prove the necessity for the *foqahā* to implement *velāyat* in the form of government. In particular, he cited the report from Omar Ebn Hanzala, a companion of the sixth Imam:

Omar Ebn Hanzala said, I asked Imam al-Sādeq whether it is permissible for two Shi'a, who had a disagreement concerning a debt or a legacy, to seek the verdict of the ruler or a judge. He replied: Anyone who has recourse to the ruler or judge, whether his case is just or unjust, has in reality had recourse to *tāghut* [oppressive government]. Omar Ibn Hanzala then asked: What should these two Shi'a then do under such circumstances? Imam Sādeq answered: They must seek out one of you who narrate our traditions; who is versed in what is permissible and what is forbidden; who is well acquainted with our laws and ordinances and accept him as judge and arbiter, for I appoint him as a judge over you. (Ghobadzadeh 2015, p. 159, n16)

The importance of this narration should not be overlooked, indeed, it was cited and discussed by Khomeini in his celebrated and seminal lectures on *velāyat-e faqih* in 1970 (Khomeini 1985, pp. 93–98). Qābel refuted the politicised interpretation of this narration and declared: "... its contents confirm *velāyat* in [the realm] of judgement, nothing more" (Qābel 2013, p. 80).

The other seminal narration that Qābel mentioned is the tradition of Abu Khadija, who was a companion of Imam Sādeq and who reported that the Imam had said that when disputes arise, "Designate as judge and arbiter someone among you who is acquainted with our injunctions ... for I appoint such a man as judge over you. Let none of you take your complaint against another of you to the tyrannical ruling power" (Khomeini 1985, p. 96). Qābel remained unconvinced of applying this kind of tradition to the realm of politics, whereas Khomeini had asserted "The judicial and governmental functions assigned by the Imams to the *fuqaha* of Islam are retained permanently" (Khomeini 1985, p. 98).

Unfortunately, Qābel did not discuss the temporal nature of these designations, but his rational and literal readings suggest that he viewed them as limited to the lifetime of the Imam in question. He did question the titles that have often been applied to the *foqahā*, which for some appears to legitimise their political claims, such as "trustworthy of the prophet," "legacy of the prophets" "fortress of Islam", whereas Qābel argued that there needed to be a proof compatible with the claim. This point is not elaborated any further, perhaps because the point was widely known in Iran. Thus, for example, whilst Khomeini cited that the scholars are the heirs of the prophets, taking the word scholars (*olemā*) as a synonym of the *foqahā*, it is just as possible to understand the scholars as learned people outside of the jurisprudential tradition. Moreover, the narration in question speaks of the prophets' bequeathing knowledge, which taken literally does not provide a proof for the necessity to take the reins of political power.

Qābel subsequently attempted to further diminish the political role given to the *foqahā* by claiming that even the Islamic prophets were restricted in this respect, and he cited approvingly an example of a narration included in *al-Khisāl*, the authoritative work of Ebn Babawayh (d. 991), which states, "God did not give any prophet rulership except for four among them: David, Solomon, Joseph and Dhu al-Qarnayn" (Qābel 2013, p. 81). Additionally, he added (without reference) that Imam Sādeq demonstrated that 99% of the prophets did not receive a commission to govern from God. Qābel made this point explicit by stating, "Is this not proof to invalidate the claim of designation and commission for divine government by the jurists, under the rubric of the legacy of all the prophets?" (Qābel 2013, p. 81).

At this juncture, the reader may be surprised about the omission of the Prophet Mohammad from the discussion about government, especially because he is often regarded as having been a statesman who ruled over his community, especially during the Medinan

period. However, Qābel's retort to such a perspective is that the Qur'ān does not address Mohammad as a politician, rather it states, "You are not one to manage their affairs" [Q. 82.22], and "You are not a guardian (wakil) over them" [Q. 6.107], and "You are only a warner" [Q. 13.7]. He ignored Qur'ānic verses such as 4.59 which states, "Obey God and obey the Messenger and the holders of authority from among you," or 33.6, "The prophet has higher claims on the believers than their own selves," which some have taken to be explicit recognition of political power (Khomeini 1985, p. 103). Qābel's rather selective reading of the Qur'ān allowed him to observe, "These verses [82.22, 6.107 and 4.49] are indicative of the prophet's lack of rulership and absence of guardianship over the right to determine human fate" (Qābel 2013, p. 82).

The theme of the prophetic lack of divine leadership is continued by Qābel in his discussion of Saul (Tālūt), who appears in the Qur'ān as a normal individual appointed by God as a king (Q. 2.247)—but importantly he is not a prophet. (Indeed, Saul has no roots in either the tribe designated for prophecy or for kingship, for in the Islamic tradition God selected one of the twelve tribes of the Bāni Isrā'il for government, and another tribe for prophecy). In other words, there was a separation of powers, an early form of religious secularity. (It is significant that Qābel seems to have been the only seminarian to make the connection between Saul and the separation of religion and politics).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Qābel pointed to narrations about those who are not the most learned or aware of the requirements of the task and yet take office. Although he did not identify any perpetrators in the text, Qābel probably had the "political" seminarians in mind. He mentioned various occupations with specialised knowledge, such as medical doctors, economists, astrologists and artists, and by extension he argued that in the realm of politics there was a need for those who are wise in political science, sociology and management. He even ring-fenced judicial affairs from the seminary, claiming that precedence should be allotted to those who understand law (*hoquqdān-ān*), which field is more general than *feqh* (religious or Islamic law) (Qābel 2013, p. 85).

Although the constitutional reforms of 1989 included a provision that eliminated the necessity of *marja'iyat* as a necessary condition for the post of *vali-ye faqih*, thus seemingly promoting the idea of religious secularity, still the holder of the top political position possessed much power,<sup>2</sup> and many of the state institutions required correct seminarian credentials. It is this that Qābel criticised:

If a faqih—lacking knowledge in management, politics, international law, or having less knowledge than others, is put in a post that has the greatest need for awareness in these areas . . . isn't this clear evidence of putting in charge an unworthy person, or preferring and putting in charge someone one who is not the most learned?

For tasks such as commanding the armed forces, or establishing the general policies of a regime based on its fundamental law, what special need is there for being the most learned in *feqh* or possessing *ejtehād* (juristic reasoning) for authorising a vote for the leadership of a republic of a nation, or for the election of people having the right credentials for some executive and judicial posts?". (Qābel 2013, pp. 85–86)

The above may also be seen as a veiled criticism of Khāmenei, who had already been severely chastised by Qābel in his open letter of 2005 (Ridgeon 2019, pp. 3–5).

Qābel also rejected the possibility of the need to choose a faqih who possessed all the right conditions for leadership based on the "unconvincing and unproven belief" that he had been appointed by God to lead the government over the people. Such a view of divine mandate was held by the likes of Ayatollah Javādi-Āmoli, who claimed that the *vali-ye faqih* had the right and duty to rule irrespective of the people's wishes (Mavani 2013, p. 170). In his rejection of this kind of unverifiable claim to authority, Qābel sought to substantiate his argument with reference to the views of past senior seminarians, such as Akhund Khorāsāni (d. 1911) and Shaykh Mohammad Hosayn Gharawi Isfahani (d. 1942)

and Ayatollah Arāki (d. 1994). Thus, he was relying on the seminarian tradition itself to legitimise and critique the doctrine of *velāyat-e faqih*.

(v). Having introduced and discussed a number of points related to *velāyat* from the perspective of scripture, Qābel's fifth point is brief, and he began a discussion about two forms of *velāyat*; appointed (*entesābi*)—meaning appointed by God, but in reality, chosen by the seminarians themselves—and elected (*entekhābi*) (Qābel 2013, p. 87). Qābel did not mention the background or origin of this issue, perhaps again because it was well known in the seminary and beyond, but the distinction between *entesābi* and *entekhābi* was one that had been made as far back as 1984 when Ayatollah Sālehi Najafābādi, posited a *velāyat-e enshā'i*—or a “created” *velāyat*, that is, created by the people through the electoral process, and a *velāyat-e khabari*, that is, a *velāyat* based on *khabar*, a report, or scriptural authority (comparable to the appointed variety (Salehi Najafābādi [1378] 1999–2000).

(vi). Point six is very brief and Qābel simply alluded to the various kinds of interpretations of *velāyat-e faqih*.

(vii). In his seventh point, Qābel expands on point six and showed that the elected variety of *velāyat* enjoyed support from an esteemed source—his own religious guide—even going as far as to cite the page number of his source):

Muslims are duty bound to elect the most learned, otherwise they have sinned against God. Other rulers are considered tyrants unless they have permission from a *majtahed* [a senior seminarian] possessing all the conditions to carry out and take charge [of the functions of government]. But Ayatollah Montazeri, who supported this approach, in [his] book *Dirāsāt fi Wilāyat al-faqih* [Teachings in *Velāyat-e faqih*] . . . expressed serious doubts about . . . the religious illegality of an elected government of a *vali* who is not a jurist and the people being sinners. In conclusion, “There is no warrant to take steps against a just government, ruled by a non-faqih, elected by the majority of the people, and who enjoys the support of the people” (vol. 1, p. 542). (Qābel 2013, p. 88)

Qābel referenced Montazeri once more (vol. 1, p. 547) when the latter claimed it was possible to prefer someone who is not the most learned in jurisprudence but is the most learned in politics, over the most learned in jurisprudence but not in politics. As pointed out earlier, this falls in line with the 1989 constitutional amendments, but it opens the door to a non-seminarian taking up the reins of power, whereas the assumption of the supporters of *velāyat* by divine appointment would hardly admit to such a possibility.

(viii). In the eighth point, Qābel discussed the heart of the problem that he saw with the implementation of *velāyat-e faqih* under Ayatollah Khāmenei. As we have seen, the constitution of 1989 allowed for a non-*marja'* to occupy the position of *vali*, which is a point that Qābel agreed with. However, the problem lay with the manner that the *vali* had oversight of all three branches of government (the executive, legislative and judiciary). Qābel insisted:

It is clear that no-one can have the amount of power so that he alone has responsibility for all executive, judicial and legislative tasks, such as the appointment people through him (directly or indirectly), and supervision of their work, and if necessary, the dismissal of an offending person from office. (Qābel 2013, p. 89)

Although he did not mention Khāmenei in person in this context, in other works Qābel was not so reticent, as has been argued elsewhere. In other words, the malaise in Iran was not about religious secularity, it concerned how religious secularity had been abused to the extent that it had been turned in practice to a dictatorship that encompassed religious and political spheres.

(ix). The absence of political and Western terminology is conspicuous in the essay by its absence, as if Qābel wanted to manifest his attachment to Islam and the seminary. However, in the final point of his essay, he concluded that

The only correct and less-damaging way related to government is one of experience that other, wise people have tried and tested, and have selected from among

the various governmental forms. A government in which people determine their own fate has the possibility to use power with ease according to the wish of the people. It is something which goes by the name of democracy. (Qābel 2013, p. 90)

He even expressed exasperation at the appropriation of *velāyat*, which he clearly felt was the preserve of the Imams:

What extraordinary homogeneity there is . . . between the guiding Imams with a few jurists that they [are able] to reach the level of *velāyat*! The error that has appeared in [their] understanding and discernment of the truths of the shariah . . . is that some of them believe that the divine *velāyat* and government of the Imams is theirs. (Qābel 2013, p. 90)

Qābel ended his essay with a list of recommendations for good government, but what is most interesting about these is the absence of any reference to *velāyat-e faqih*. He called for elected and fixed terms in government, the promotion of political parties (which had been limited by the Islamic Republic), decision-making based upon the wishes of the peoples' representatives and for the establishment of referenda on major issues, the creation of a free non-governmental press where freedom of speech is guaranteed, the provision of equal opportunities (which assumes importance given the history of gender and religious discrimination in Iran), peaceful co-existence on the world stage which is promoted by the non-militarisation of society, the rejection of nepotism, and a degree of federalism where local interests may be observed.

## 5. Conclusions

Qābel's essay on *velāyat-e faqih* provides an alternative view to that of Ayatollahs Khomeini, Khāmenei, or for that matter Montazeri, because he simply rejected its applicability to modern Iranian politics. His views are important if only because the Iranian Shi'a seminary is so often viewed in a uniform manner that speaks with one voice; however, this debate has demonstrated that such an assumption is far from the truth. Indeed, Qābel's response is not so surprising given the tradition of political quietism among seminarians in Iran (although this quietism must be understood with the condition of "commanding the good"). Of course, it is possible to find discussions and refutations of *velāyat-e faqih* from secular sources, such as in the writings of Abdolkarim Soroush, called "the naughtiest of the children of the revolution . . . [who sought] to dynamite the Father's [Khomeini's] whole edifice by undermining the religious authority of the jurists" (Arjomand 2009, p. 88; on Soroush and secularity see also (Ghobadzadeh 2015, pp. 60–67)).

However, even in the seminaries, the conflict between the conflicting goals of a centralised state under the doctrine of *velāyat-e faqih* and a system of religious authority under *marja'iyat* which was not heavily concerned with politics has been a controversy of some substance ever since the early revolutionary days. Qābel alluded to this in his interviews, and he mentioned seven ayatollahs by name who had major differences of opinion with the doctrine.<sup>3</sup> However, Qābel views, as mentioned, went a stage further than simply abstaining or seeking modification of the doctrine in that he made public his rejection of *velāyat-e faqih*. His refusal to endorse any form of *velāyat* reflects the thinking of a fully independent *mojtahed*, who by the mid-2000s had emerged from the shadow of his illustrious teacher, Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, and had the confidence to articulate this controversial perspective. The discussions in the text are brief, and much of it is not unique, as there are summaries of discussions made by Sālehi-Najafābādi, Montazeri and Kadivar, but the brevity made the text far more accessible to the non-seminarian. The irony here of course, is that Qābel claimed to be a man of the seminary, and yet he was championed as a hero of the people outside of the seminary. This was particularly the case with the emergence of the Green Movement in 2009, when Qābel was regularly interviewed by the press, and inevitably, he was asked his opinion about *velāyat-e faqih*. In the words of Eshkevari,

In recent years, Qābel has also been among the well-known opposition leaders of the Green Movement. On this topic too, he was successful and dignified. In

following Ayatollah Montazeri (his master and leader in jurisprudence, politics, piety and morality) with his particular form of bravery, he clearly and firmly criticised and battled the political power and tyranny of the ruler in relation to religion and the shariah from basically a jurisprudential and religious perspective. (Eshkevari 2012, p. 324)

In addition to informing readers about the state of the Iranian seminaries, and their many voices, Qābel's essay provides an excellent entry-point to examine the forces of religious secularity in modern Iran. Whilst the reformed 1989 version divorced the condition of *marja'iyat* from the doctrine, and thus in theory it might promote religious secularity, Qābel believed that the autocratic method of rule by Ayatollah Khāmenei had simply reinforced the state's use of religious structures and institutions to maintain political control.

Nevertheless, post 2006, Qābel was one of the few seminarians in Iran who was sufficiently brave to openly challenge the desirability of the doctrine of *velāyat-e faqih*, whether in its 1989 incarnation or in its original form in 1979. He even pointed out that during the discussions before the acceptance of the 1979 constitution, a version had been distributed in which there was absolutely no mention of the doctrine, and which had initially been accepted by those drafting the document. It was this draft constitution that Qābel supported, and he claimed in 2009:

If the people's claims are over and above those [in the Draft Constitution] I will not agree and support [them]. I will even oppose them. [But] my reference will be to the Draft Constitution which the founders of the Islamic Republic and the gentlemen of the Revolutionary Council had signed, like Shahid Beheshti, Mr Hāshemi Rafsanjāni and Mr Khāmenei, and Ayatollah Tāleqāni . . . It is clear that in the perspective of these gentlemen, the Islamic Republic even conforms to the model of the Draft Constitution. Of course, the name of the regime does not differ so much [but] *velāyat-e faqih* must be omitted, and we return to the draft. (Qābel 2009b, p. 235)

For Qābel, religious secularity was not just about reforming the political structure of *velāyat-e faqih*. He should not be regarded as a "traditional" quietist seminarian, for although he desired to divorce religion from political structures, this did not necessarily equate with stepping away from giving his opinion on the way that Iran was ruled. His insistence on his right to "command the good and forbid the evil" is indicative of this.

This article has primarily focused upon Qābel's view of *velāyat-e faqih* and its relationship with religious secularity, but fruitful areas of future research might concentrate on his idea of a religious society that is based on reason which is neither defined nor determined by religious definitions or scriptural reference. For Qābel, the faculty of reason is something independent (but bestowed by God) and is possessed by the vast majority of humans who have a duty to create a just and open society. This necessitates a review of scripture (the Qur'ān, *hadith* and narrations of the Imams) which should conform to collective human reason. Consequently, Qābel endorsed the rights of individuals as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In so doing, he crossed many of the redlines that the Principlists in Iran had enshrined; he rejected the necessity to wear the hejab, opposed the separation of the sexes in educational institutes, advised Iranian youths not to accept state Islam but to "apostatise", and advocated gender equality (not just complementarity).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In a private email dated 3 April 2022, Mohsen Kadivar has asserted that to the best of his knowledge, no other seminarian has made this kind of argumentation.
- <sup>2</sup> The Leader has the authority to supervise the three branches of power; He appoints the head of the judiciary, selects half of the Council of Guardians. He endorses the election of the President, can convene an Assembly to review the constitution, is



Commander on Chief of the Armed Forces, has the power to appoint and dismiss the heads of the radio and television. (Arjomand 2009, pp. 38–41).

- 3 These seven were Ayatollahs Shari'atmadari, Shabir-Khāqāni, Kho'i, Qommi, Sayyed Mohamad Ruhāni, Sayyed Mohammad Shirāzi and Sādeq Ruhāni (Qābel 2010a, p. 253). He adds that there were many more such individuals.

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Article

# Islam and the Politics of Secularism in Pakistan

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**Abstract:** In terms of their political and ideological success, Pakistani Islamists have had several ups and downs since Pakistan became the Islamic Republic in 1956. Islamists strive to safeguard the Islamic state's status quo while simultaneously expanding the reach of Sharia. Despite insignificant electoral victories, Islamists have largely been able to dictate national identity policies to civilian and military governments. A major hurdle to the promotion of pluralism in Pakistan is noticeable through persistent opposition to secularism by major political actors. Despite different political ideologies, major political parties refrain from promoting secularism in Pakistan; however, such views are more rigid in the case of Islamists. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to examine and compare the discourses of Islamists and other political parties in relation to Pakistan's identity, reforms and anti-Westernism, religious minorities, and secularism. Based on the analysis, this paper argues that the views of Islamists and non-religious political parties are very similar regarding Islam and Pakistan's identity, secularism, and minority rights in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Islam; domestic politics; Islamists; Pakistan; secularism

## 1. Introduction

Since becoming the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 1956, Islam has been revered as the supreme authority in Pakistan. The country, however, has struggled to form a singular identity based on the dominant religion (Islam) because of ethnic divisions. Religious identity also raises questions regarding the inclusion of religious minorities in the country. Despite having a 96.47 percent Muslim population, Pakistan contains approximately four percent of religious minorities, such as Christians, Hindus, Ahmadiyyas, Parsis, Buddhists, Sikhs, and others (PBS 2017). The 2017 census is controversial for a couple of reasons. First, the data on religious minorities were shared nearly two years after the census was released (Tunio 2019), and second, the Christian community has criticized the census for under-reporting their numbers in Pakistan (N. Hoodbhoy 2021). In terms of the percentage of the total, the share of religious minorities might appear small, but that is not the case if we look in numbers as there are approximately 7 million non-Muslims in Pakistan's 207 million population (PBS 2017). These demographics have changed in relation to the proportion of religious minorities in Pakistan since 1947. At the time of the creation of Pakistan, there were approximately 23 percent non-Muslims in Pakistan, including the majority in the East Pakistan (Ispahani 2013). The demographics called for pluralism, which was exemplified by the founding father Muhammad Ali Jinnah, for example, by the appointment of Chaudhry Zafarullah Khan (Ahmadiyya) as foreign minister and Jogendra Nath Mandal (Hindu) as law minister in his first cabinet (P. Hoodbhoy 2016, p. 36). Another example of pluralism in the vision of Pakistan's founders is an amendment to the country's flag, in which a white strip was added to symbolize the nation's religious minorities (Burki 1986, p. 43). It should have been clear what Jinnah's plan for Pakistan was after the creation of such a diverse government and the flag, but that was not the case because Jinnah died in 1948, taking his hard-won vision with him. Soon after his death, the debates surrounding Pakistan's Islamic identity dominated, and the country was declared an Islamic Republic. In this backdrop, this paper aims to answer the following questions: How has the secularism

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debate in Pakistan evolved since 1947? How have various actors perceived the ideas of an Islamic State or a Muslim state? How do various political actors understand secularism and promote or oppose it?

Thinking of secularism, one would tend to view many Western countries as more secular compared to non-Western states because Western states are known for protecting and promoting freedom of religion and belief (Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy 2021). In its true sense, secularism is about separating religion from the state (Ahmar 2012; Iqtidar and Gilmartin 2011), but does that really happen, even in the case of renowned secular states? As argued by Asad (2003), there is a pattern demonstrating the state's involvement in religious affairs by managing religious practices and thought. It has, however, not been easy in many countries. Sometimes the secular dilemma leads to the politicization of religion, as was the case in Lebanon (Andersen 2022). Then, not all secular states are alike, for instance, in terms of separating religious institutions and the state, as Nweke (2015, p. 85) argues, "although more feasible within secular states, religious freedom and human rights are possibilities relative to existential circumstances of states, irrespective of their secular or non secular leanings". As secularism has progressed, albeit differently, across the Muslim world, Muslims scholars have focused on the compatibility between Islam and secularism. There is, however, an overwhelming majority that has viewed secularism as a social evil. Ashimi (2022, p. 55) claims, "Indeed, with the mindset of separating religion from worldly life, secularism gives a negative impact on the morality of humans and turns them to the state of ignorance". Similarly, AbdelSalam (2004, p. 216) argues, "Contrary to the claim of many Western writers, secularism cannot be considered a prerequisite for successful operation of democracy in Muslim societies, nor can it be considered a requirement of modernity. False modernity manifests itself in the deconstruction of Islamic society and then rebuilding it on a new non-Islamic basis". It is not surprising to see many Muslim writers and scholars rejecting secularism as theologically Islam rejects secularism or the separation of state and religion (Jackson 2017).

Each non-Western state has a different journey, and such is the case in Pakistan, which was formed for the Muslims of the Indian Sub-continent in 1947. Hence, Islam has been holding a central stage in Pakistan, but there have always been divisions between agents of Islamization and secularism. In 1956, Pakistan was declared an Islamic Republic, and its constitution said that it adhered "to a diluted version of pluralism" (P. Hoodbhoy 2016, p. 36). During Liaqat Ali Khan's tenure as Pakistan's first prime minister, the "Objective Resolution" was adopted, and that paved the way for the creation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Under the military rule of Field Marshal Ayub Khan, Pakistan underwent various reforms as Khan wanted Pakistan to be a modern Islamic state but a secular one, as was also reflected in the 1963 constitution of Pakistan (Qasmi 2019; Chacko 2016). He embarked on a nation-building project by re-writing history and claimed secularism (Qasmi 2019), but the reality was different. Khan gave in to the demands of the mullahs, and the Central Institute of Islamic Research was established in 1959 (Chacko 2016). Although the Objective Resolution hinted at the government's apparent affiliation with Islam, Sharia was not mentioned in the document (Zaidi 2003, p. 102), which happened later on while Pakistan experienced Islamization by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the 1970s. The 1973 constitution made Pakistan a theoretical state in every possible manner as Islam became the state religion and only a Muslim could be the head of state (Hamdani 2022). Article 2 of the constitution of Pakistan declared Islam as the state religion: "Islam shall be the State religion of Pakistan" (GOP 2012, p. 3). Even after the approval of the constitution, religious groups—led by the Jamaat-e-Islami—continued their pressure on the government to declare Ahmadiyya non-Muslims. Bhutto was against the idea of discussing the Ahmadiyya issue in the parliament and "maintained that declaring the Ahmadiyya a minority and pushing them out from state and government institutions would be detrimental to the economy of the country" (N. F. Paracha 2013).

Islamization resulted in the adoption of strict Islamic laws during the Zia-ul-Haq regime in the 1980s. A study argues that Zia-ul-Haq used Islam to support his regime's

“survival strategies of legitimacy, repression, and social control” (Sheikh and Ahmed 2020, p. 333). The legal reforms included the Hudood Ordinance and the murky Blasphemy Law. The media also had a period of intense state supervision, during which time television drama was to suffer a significant setback with the return of Islamic fundamentalism, and the state-run television channel (Pakistan Television or PTV) was utilized to disseminate both political and religious messages (Burki 1986, p. 33). Additionally, the Ministry of Information ordered PTV’s female newsreaders to appear on television without makeup and with a *dupatta* (scarf) covering their heads. In defense of Islamization, Zia-ul-Haq said, “Pakistan is like Israel, which is an ideological state. Take out the Judaism from Israel and it will fall like a house of cards. Take Islam out of Pakistan and make it a secular state; it would collapse” (Burki 1986, p. 78). While he was motivated by Saudi Arabia’s Islamic principles, structural changes were taking place in the nation because of Saudi Arabia’s strategic alliance with the US in relation to the Afghan–Soviet War (1979–1988). Then, for their political purposes, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) were at the forefront of jihad and Islamization both domestically and overseas (Afghanistan) (Z. S. Ahmed 2012).

Regarding the erstwhile scholarship on Islam and politics in Pakistan, there is no shortage in the literature in terms of how various political actors have used Islam in domestic politics and how that has led to a gradual decline in secularism in the country. In 2011, a Special Issue of *Modern Asian Studies* was dedicated to secularism in Pakistan in which the editors argued, “The case of Pakistan is an excellent for approaching secularism in this way, for it provides a clear perspective on how the analysis of secularism cannot be limited by any simple formula for separation of religious from the state” (Iqtidar and Gilmartin 2011, p. 494). I. Ahmed (2004) presented a comprehensive analysis of historical accounts of secularism and debates surrounding Islam and secularism in Pakistan. Jaffrelot (2012) examined Pakistan’s trajectory in terms of Islamization and how the country moved away from the secular vision of Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Similarly, Ahmar (2012) focused on Islamization in Pakistan and the two different camps for and against secularism. There is, however, no previous study that has examined and compared the relevant discourses of major religious and non-religious political parties in the country. This study aims to bridge that gap through a critical discourse analysis of how Islamists and non-religious political parties have viewed the role of Islam in Pakistan.

There has been no prior study that has investigated how major political parties, including both those that claim to be secular and Islamists, perceive the concept of secularism and what their visions/manifestos are in relation to secularism, pluralism, and the status of religious minorities in Pakistan. This paper aims to bridge that gap by investigating and comparing the positions (discourse) of the so-called seculars, i.e., Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), and Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI), and Islamists including JI and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazl (JUI-F). Here, the author has categorized JI and JUI-F as Islamists because both parties support Islamic fundamentalism and the greater influence of Islamic law in the politics and society of Pakistan. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used as an analytical tool to examine the relevant discourse and policies promoted by the selected political parties. CDA was previously used to examine the discursive construction of national identities by states (Alameda Hernández 2008; Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000), but it cannot be disconnected from the context as “the genre of language is associated with a particular social activity” (Fairclough 1993, p. 100). For the analysis, the data were collected from primary and secondary sources, such as the websites of political parties and their manifestos, and newspaper reports, covering a period of 20 years between 2002 and 2022. This period is quite relevant because the 2002 general elections were organized under the military rule of General Pervez Musharraf, in which Islamists through the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) achieved significant success by forming a government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) during 2002–2007. The PPP and its allies formed a government following the 2008 elections, the PML-N after the 2013 elections, and the PTI because of the 2018 elections. As most of the parties are old, the analysis uses

historical references while talking about the ideas of party leaders such as Maulana Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi of the JI. The analysis is divided into two sections separately examining the discourse of Islamists and non-religious parties on the following themes: (1) Pakistan's identity; (2) reforms and anti-Westernism; (3) religious minorities; and (4) secularism.

## 2. Secularism in Pakistan: Islamists versus Seculars

In this section, a comparative analysis is carried out on the positions of Islamists and seculars on issues relevant to secularism in Pakistan.

### 2.1. Pakistan's Identity

Concerning Pakistan's status as an Islamic state, there has always been ambiguity. Concerns have been raised about the place of secular ideals in a society where religion predominates. Since Pakistan's formation, there have been differences concerning the national identity of Pakistan and how it was perceived by the country's founders. In fact, there are opposing viewpoints regarding Muhammad Ali Jinnah's vision for the nation; for instance, whether he would have preferred an Islamic Republic or a secular state. This dispute occasionally flares up and was very active during the years this study was conducted.

Islamists continue to oppose secularism based on their own vague understanding of it. Islamists connect secularism as incompatible with the fundamental Islamic teachings. They are unwilling to make any concessions to allow for the promotion of plurality in the country since their viewpoint is so rigid. Later in the paper, numerous examples are provided of how and when Islamists have used the label of secularism to target non-religious and dominant political parties. Here, however, it is important to mention that they are not the only ones confused about secularism. As [Ahmar \(2012, p. 217\)](#) argues, "secularism is perceived as the most misinterpreted term in Pakistan". Across the board, Islamists in general, and particularly, the leadership of JI and JUI-F, have been claiming that Pakistan was created to be an Islamic state in which the Muslims of the Indian sub-continent could live under Sharia. To justify their stances, they provide references to the blueprint of Pakistan or the Two-Nation Theory. For example, see what JUI-F's Amjad Khan once said regarding the identity of Pakistan:

Pakistan was created for Muslims and Islam, but over the past 70 years it has been led astray by Western conspiracies and secular forces . . . The MMA's reunion, which we have been trying to achieve for some time, is to establish true Islamic values and create the Pakistan that was envisioned by the founding fathers as per the Two-Nation Theory. (K. K. [Shahid 2018](#))

To justify their positions regarding Pakistan being the Islamic Republic, Islamists continue to support the Two-Nation Theory. Leaders of JI and JUI-F often refer to Allama Muhammad Iqbal—credited for developing the Two-Nation Theory—in their speeches. This is despite the fact that the founders of both parties were against the creation of a separate country for the Muslims of the Indian sub-continent ([Jaffrelot 2012](#)). As [Tohid \(2003\)](#) argues, "While the religious parties were opposed to the creation of Pakistan, they have cashed in on the two-nation theory, arguing that the country was formed on the basis of the religious divide". JI leaders have been trying to promote similarities in the visions of Maududi and Iqbal in terms of the revival of Muslims. While addressing a conference on "Iqbal and Maududi's Pakistan" in 2019, JI chief Sirajul Haq said, "Dr Iqbal had a vision of an independent state for the Muslims of the Subcontinent and Maulana Maududi had worked hard in teaching them the lessons of Holy Quran and Sunnah" ([The News 2019](#)). Haq earlier had tweeted on this issue in 2017 on the Independence Day of Pakistan (14 August): "Pakistan was created on the basis of Two nation theory. We should work together to implement Islam teachings in true letter and spirit" (S. u. [Haq 2017](#)). In contrast, JUI-F leaders have spoken little about the Two-Nation Theory as their narrative has mainly focused on targeting non-religious parties and the West. For instance, the chief of JUI-F, Maulana Fazl-ur-Rahman, said in December 2022 that "international anti-Islam

forces are hatching conspiracies to politically and economically destabilize Pakistan . . . the agents of those forces were making efforts to weaken . . . the Constitution” (S. [Shahid 2022](#)). For Islamists, the Two-Nation Theory provides a justification for the Islamic Republic of Pakistan or an Islamic state.

The views of non-religious parties are not different from religious parties when it comes to the supremacy of Islam in Pakistan or the very fact that the country was created for the Muslims of the Indian sub-continent. From Bhutto’s Islamic socialism to Imran Khan’s vision of a model Islamic state (Riasat-e-Medina), there is enough to suggest that non-religious parties are also in favor of a theocratic state. Like the leaders of religious parties, leaders of most non-religious parties also refer to the Two-Nation theory and quote Muhammad Ali Jinnah to present their interpretations of the state identity, which are quite identical. There was, however, an occasion when Nawaz Sharif of PML-N came under attack following his speech to an audience comprising Sikh guests from India. Addressing the guests, he said, “many attributes of culture, including places of origin, food and dress, and a common Provider (Rab)” between Islam and Sikhism ([Rehman 2011](#)). While he made no mention of the Two-Nation Theory, religious groups such as the JI viewed his remarks as contradictory to the vision of Pakistan or the Two-Nation theory ([Rehman 2011](#)). During the PTI government (2018–2021), several party members made references to the Two-Nation Theory to criticize the Indian government’s targeting of Muslims. In addition to Imran Khan, Dr Firdous Ashiq Awan said, in her capacity as the Special Assistant to Prime Minister on Information and Broadcasting, that the “Two-Nation Theory of Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah had won in India and how Indians were remembering the heroes of the theory” ([Wakeel 2019](#)). The PPP is different in this regard because its leaders carefully associate Islamic identity with Pakistan. This could be because of their minority vote bank and because of the secular orientation of its key leaders; for example, Bilawal Bhutto, tweeted in 2020:

Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah August 11th 1947 promise: “you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion . . . has nothing to do with the business of the State. ([Zardari 2020](#))

There is a long history of parties moving from left to right in terms of their ideologies, and this could be because they find it hard to question the very foundation of the state, i.e., religion based on the Two-Nation Theory. Let us take the example of PPP’s Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and his ideals of Islamic socialism. In addition to aiming to eradicate feudalism and unregulated capitalism, Bhutto’s Islamic socialism “denounced the conservative religious parties and the clergy of being representatives of monopolist capitalist, feudal lords, military dictators, ‘the imperialist forces of capitalism,’ and being agents of backwardness and social and spiritual stagnation” (N. N. [Paracha 2013](#)). The JI was able to persuade hundreds of Islamic scholars (*ulema*) to label the PPP as “atheistic” and “anti-Islam” which eventually led to a split/conflict between the PPP and religious parties (N. N. [Paracha 2013](#)).

In terms of the relationship between the state and religion, PTI moved to the next level as its chief, Imran Khan, has been calling for creating a “Riasat-e-Medina” in Pakistan. According to [Surbuland \(2022, p. 5\)](#), “this is a powerful piece of rhetoric which claims to emulate the social-political values of the Prophet Muhammad in the present day”—exactly what the JI’s Maududi preached Here again, a gap in rhetoric and reality is noticeable as Khan has repeatedly praised the Western political institutions and good governance in China that has led to a large-scale poverty alleviation ([Surbuland 2022](#); [Standish and Khattak 2021](#)). Khan’s ideals are not very different from Bhutto’s Islamic socialism. Khan benefited by emphasizing the idea and rhetoric of “Islamic socialism” to establish legitimacy in the eyes of Pakistan’s Muslim people. The poor and working class of Karachi were the most ardent new supporters, as evidenced by a journalist’s report from October 2018 ([Judah 2018](#)). Khan also used his emphasis on the idea of “Islamic socialism” to disparage the practices carried out by earlier governments. Because the underprivileged in Pakistan have

had “no safety other than their own families or tribes,” according to Khan, the country has never genuinely been an Islamic state (Campbell 2018).

## 2.2. Reforms and Anti-Westernism

A prominent feature of the selected Islamists is noticeable through their outright opposition to certain reforms concerning security and women’s rights and how they have justified their positions by linking their rhetoric with secularism. In 2014, JI’s Liaqat Baloch called Pakistan’s security reforms regarding counterterrorism “a conspiracy to turn Pakistan into a secular country” (Dawn 2014). Baloch mentioned madrassah reforms in Pakistan that were mainly introduced following the start of the “War on Terror”, and he used such examples to target the PML-N government of that time. He said, “the secular lobby in the country was out to shake the foundations of the mosques and the madrassahs to fulfill a western agenda” (Dawn 2014). In March 2016, JUI’s chief Maulana Fazl-ur-Rahman considered the Punjab Government’s Protection of Women Against Violence Bill against Sharia and declared that he would oppose it (Ali 2016). The religious parties unanimously opposed the women’s rights bill by deeming it a conspiracy “to make Pakistan a secular country” (Ali 2016). This kind of anti-secular discourse is frequently employed by religious parties as a political weapon against governments.

The targeting of other self-proclaimed secular or non-religious parties is a key feature of Pakistani Islamists. This anti-secular discourse is frequently employed by religious parties as a political weapon against governments. For instance, Sirajul Haq, the leader of the JI, criticized the PML-N administration by claiming that “the Prime Minister’s slogan of a liberal and secular Pakistan and PPP leader Bilawal Bhutto’s move for a political alliance against the religious parties was an indication that whereas the Qibla of the rulers was the US and Washington” (S. Haq 2016a). Even in the Panama Leaks corruption scandal, Sirajul Haq offered a religious viewpoint: “only liberal and secular people were named by the Panama Leaks for tax evasion and there was not a single religious scholar or [madrassa] head facing corruption charges” (S. Haq 2016b). Earlier during the Musharraf era, JI was openly against various reforms that Islamists in general and the JI in particular had viewed as secular.

The opposition of Pakistani Islamists to secularism is strongly linked to their historic anti-Westernism. In addition to often delivering anti-Western speeches, Islamists have also been engaged in rallies against Western countries. Following the publication of blasphemous cartoons by Charlie Hebdo in 2015, hundreds of protestors from the JI and JUI-F protested across Pakistan. In response, the Senate of Pakistan adopted a resolution against Charlie Hebdo cartoons and shared this with the European Union’s ambassador to Pakistan (Haider 2015). Following another occasion of a French magazine publishing blasphemous cartoons, Islamists came out on the streets of Pakistan demanding the government expel the French Ambassador in Pakistan (Baloch and Ellis-Petersen 2021). It is no surprise that the JI and JUI-F, being anti-Western, were at the forefront in such demonstrations in Pakistan. For instance, addressing a rally in Peshawar, JI’s Ibrahim said,

The Organization of the Islamic Cooperation should call an emergency meeting and take a collective stance over the issue. The European countries must be conveyed the message that the insult of Islam and Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) will never be tolerated. (J. A. Khan 2015)

A more recent case of JI and JUI-F’s anti-Westernism and a desire for a stricter form of Sharia was observed in their reactions following the Taliban’s takeover in Afghanistan in August 2021. Like many other religious or right-wing leaders, for example, Maulana Abdul Aziz of Lal Masjid in Islamabad (Momand 2021), JI and JUI-F leaders have also praised the Taliban’s victory against the US. Soon after the Taliban’s takeover, JUI-F’s leader Maulana Fazlur Rehman sent a congratulatory message to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and the JI expressed pleasure over the Taliban’s remarkable victory (S. Khan 2021). By examining such reactions from a variety of segments in Pakistan, especially Islamists, Abbas and Ahmed (2021) argue that the reactions of the JUI and JI are linked



to their involvement in the Afghan–Soviet War as “they have been trying to equate the Taliban’s victory with Fatah-e-Mecca, the conquest of Mecca, where Prophet Muhammad entered peacefully into Mecca”. For the JI, often anti-Americanism or anti-Westernism and secularism are interlinked because their leaders tackle both issues together in their speeches. Sirajul Haq of the JI, for example, in August 2021, addressed a gathering in which he expressed that a strong Islamic government in Afghanistan will inspire the Muslim world. After blaming the US for killing innocent Muslims globally, Haq claimed that his party would not allow any conspiracy to turn Pakistan into a secular state (Azikhel 2021). Haq has been very vocal against the US and has been labeling the country as an enemy of Pakistan, Islam, and religious parties in the country. Earlier, following the 2018 general elections in Pakistan, Haq addressed a gathering in KP with the following remarks:

The US was saying it was glad over the defeat of the religious parties in this country and that the Pakistanis have rejected extremism and terrorism. In fact, the US itself was promoting terrorism and extremism in the world . . . People were always ready to lay down their lives for Islam and the Holy Prophet and no one can dare to convert this country into a secular state. (Dawn 2018)

The prominent non-religious political parties are somewhat similar in relation to anti-Westernism, albeit at a limited scale, but have tried to promote reforms and projects on minority rights in Pakistan. Based on his anti-Western and pro-Taliban rhetoric, Imran Khan of the PTI has been viewed as both the left and right-wing (Afzal 2019).

Thinking of anti-Westernism, one cannot ignore the era under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of the PPP. His politics shifted from left-wing as he began using Islam, pan-Islamism, and anti-Westernism in Pakistan, which was facing new challenges or realities following its disintegration in 1971. Following the creation of Bangladesh in East Pakistan, Bhutto led Pakistan away from Western security alliances that he had deemed useless to address Pakistan’s security needs vis-à-vis India, as the US had offered no help to Pakistan during its 1971 war with India. Bhutto turned to the ummah after breaking with the West to advance Pakistan’s national goals, namely, economic growth and security. Naturally, this sparked a resurgence of pan-Islamism in Pakistan (Ahmed and Akbarzadeh 2023). Bhutto’s goal was to strengthen pan-Islamism by developing close ties with Muslim nations. In January 1972, he travelled to Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey in order to promote that agenda (Rizvi 1993). Bhutto’s pan-Islamic foreign policy sought to lessen reliance on the US financially by enlisting the aid of wealthy Muslim nations such as Libya and Saudi Arabia. He was effective in fostering ties with important Muslim nations, for instance, by planning the second Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) conference in Lahore in 1974, where Colonel Gadhafi called Pakistan “the citadel of Islam in Asia” (Bhutto 2010, p. 111).

The PML-N, or its top leadership in this regard, cannot be labelled anti-West. In fact, Nawaz Sharif is currently living with his sons, who are British citizens, in London. The party, however, has been carefully treading in Pakistan’s political landscape, in which Islam has prominence. This is evident as the PML-N’s leadership has never spoken against reforms that could pave the way for secularism or more minority rights in Pakistan, for example, changing the blasphemy laws. In 2020, Nawaz Sharif ordered the removal of blasphemous content from social media (Reuters 2017).

### 2.3. Religious Minorities

The Islamists narrative on anti-secularism is linked to how they view minority rights in Pakistan. While promoting Sharia, Islamists have frequently criticized what they deem Western-motivated secularism under the disguise of minority rights. This resistance is led by prominent religious parties, specifically the JI and JUI. This is even though minority rights are part of their election manifestos (see examples below).

Minorities will enjoy rights to education, employment and other civil liberties . . . Any discrimination, injustice or bias towards minorities will be discouraged. (JI 2013, p. 31)

Minorities will be equal citizens of Pakistan and they will have all freedoms guaranteed in Islam and the constitution . . . Non-Muslim minority in the country will enjoy religious freedom, civil rights, and impartial opportunity to access to justice. (JUI-F 2013, p. 11)

Talking about minority rights is one thing, but believing in religious freedom is another, as that would require some fundamental changes in the constitution of Pakistan. The two most prominent religious parties, namely, the JI and the JUI, have shown through their actions that they are against secularism and minority rights. Both parties were successful in opposing reforms in the past, subsequently, rolling them back, which accounts for their inflexibility. The Sindh Assembly approved a bill in November 2016 that forbade the forced conversion of anybody under the age of 18 to any religion. All religious parties, especially the JI and JUI, strongly opposed this by considering it un-Islamic. The JI pressurized the PPP-led government in Sindh, which eventually gave in by withdrawing the bill (Ghori 2016). Former Pakistani minister Javed Jabbar remarked, “Religiosity has also bred murderous extremism, gravely damaging the nation internally, and totally distorting its image”, after praising the Sindh Assembly’s Act in response to criticism from religious parties (Jabbar 2016). In addition to maintaining their positions regarding the supremacy of Islam/Muslims in Pakistan, the two parties have never been seen publicly condemning attacks on people of other religions and their worship places. In fact, the JUI-F was found responsible for a major attack in 2020 on the Shri Paramhans Ji Maharaj Samadhi, a Hindu temple, in KP. More than 300 persons were booked for this attack, including JUI-F’s district leader Maulana Mirza Aqem (Chaudhry 2020).

When it comes to the issue of minority rights, most non-religious parties have very different positions. While Imran Khan was blamed for defending Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, leaders of the PML-N and PPP have repeatedly talked about the misuse of these laws in Pakistan. In 2017, Nawaz Sharif (then Prime Minister) accepted that Pakistan’s minorities are “unjustly treated” (Reuters 2017). From the PPP, its current chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has been vocal regarding the misuse of blasphemy laws and the need to change these laws (Hussain 2011). Still, neither the PPP nor the PML-N made any such move under their governments. The PTI was accused of opposing religious forms in the shape of changing the blasphemy laws to forge stronger alliances with religious parties such as the JI. Leading up to the 2018 general elections, Imran Khan said at a gathering in Islamabad, “We are standing with Article 295c and will defend it” (Barker 2018). The Article 295c of the Pakistan Penal Code allows the death penalty or life imprisonment for the criminal offence of defiling the name of the Prophet Muhammad (Amnesty 2021).

#### 2.4. Secularism

Pakistan’s journey from secularism to theocracy is a clear sign of the Islamists’ victory. While initially against the Two-Nation Theory or the idea of a separate homeland for the Muslims in the shape of Pakistan, for example, Maulana Maududi of the JI was skeptical about the nature of a new state under secular leaders such as Jinnah, and the Ulema such as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind) were less interested in the creation of a Muslim state (Jaffrelot 2012). Islamists were quick to recalibrate their strategies after 1947. Soon after the creation of Pakistan, the JI began supporting the creation of an Islamic state. Then, the JI’s chief, Maududi, and more than other 30 Islamic scholars began deliberating on Pakistan’s first constitution. In fact, Maududi was invited by Jinnah to deliver some lectures on the foundations of the Islamic system and governance (Qazi 2017).

The JI has been engaged in the process of defining an Islamic state. Hence, the party and its founder, Maulana Maududi, headed demonstrations to declare Ahmadiyya a non-Muslim minority in Pakistan. Surbuland (2022, p. 3) argues, “Maududi sought to articulate an Islamic politics that was exclusionist in nature”. In 2002, JI’s chief at the time, Munawar Hussain, said that his party would continue its struggle against secularism as Pakistan was created for Islam, not secularism (Nawai-i-Waqt 2002). Despite negligible electoral success, Islamists have maintained some influence in policy-making in some selected areas,

such as Islamic law. The Council of Islamic Ideology is completely under the direction of Islamists, demonstrating their influence in matters of religion, national identity, and religion. Looking at the Musharraf era, the MMA (a coalition of religious parties) wanted to implement Sharia in its true form in the country. MMA was formed before the 2002 general elections. While promoting Islamization, JUI's chief Maulana Fazl-ur-Rahman said that "true Islamization" was required to address the victimization of religious parties (K. K. Shahid 2018).

The demands of the Islamists have been met by successive governments, but it is crucial to note that non-religious parties and their governments and even military regimes have taken steps that led to the state's involvement in religious affairs. There were regimes, for example, of Ayub Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, that claimed to be secular, but under pressure from Islamists, such as the JI, they paved the way for Islamization, which can be seen as signs of those governments managing religion. This does not mean that Khan and Bhutto were fully behind certain religious and constitutional reforms, but they did so for their survival. A major wave of Islamization happened under a left-leaning so-called secular party, the PPP, and a clear example of that is Pakistan becoming a theocracy through the 1973 constitution (Hamdani 2022).

Scholars have talked about competing ideas concerning the state–religion relationship and diverse understandings of secularism in Pakistan (Surbuland 2022; Ahmar 2012). They have, however, ignored a gap between rhetoric and reality, as even the non-religious parties are reluctant to either openly advocate for the separation of religion from state affairs or address barriers to secularism, such as the blasphemy laws, in Pakistan. The PPP's case under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was different as he was using religious labels in domestic politics, such as Islamic socialism, and foreign policy through a tilt towards pan-Islamism (N. N. Paracha 2013). Bhutto, however, never claimed to be a pious Muslim, unlike Imran Khan. While Khan has spoken of minority rights in Pakistan, he is also fearful of being labelled a secular. This could be because of various reasons, such as other politicians often labelling him as a Western/Zionist agent (Yasmeen 2013).

There remains confusion in Pakistan regarding secularism, and this is created by the ones who see secularism as anti-Islam. This could also be, as Ahmar (2012, p. 219) argues, due to the lack of awareness as the "Urdu translation of secular is 'atheist', which makes it very difficult for an ordinary Muslim Pakistani to resist and challenge the misinterpretation of secular and secularism". In response to allegations of promoting secularism, the PTI published an article on its website in its defense. In this blog, the author justified how Imran Khan is not secular as he is someone who talks about "Riasat-e-Medina", justice, and welfare in Pakistan (Mumtaz 2018). It seems that in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, no politicians would like to carry the secular label.

Looking closely at the election manifestos of selected non-religious parties, it can be clearly seen that they are more Islamic than religious parties in terms of the promotion of Islam and Islamic Studies in Pakistan. This is particularly the case of the PML-N's 2018 election manifesto, in which under "religious affairs: peace and tolerance", the party carefully crafted its position on the issue of minority rights:

PML(N) wants to make Pakistan a peaceful and progressive country wherein people can live their lives in accordance with the teachings and requirements of Islam as set out in the Holy Quran and Sunnah; wherein adequate provisions shall be made for minorities to freely profess and practice their religions and develop their cultures; wherein citizens shall be guaranteed fundamental rights of freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith, worship and association; and wherein adequate provision shall be made to safeguard the legitimate interests of minorities. (PML-N 2018)

While the PPP has a history of using religion in domestic politics and foreign policy, especially under the era of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, its election manifestos have used words that are absent from the election manifestos of the PML-N and PTI. This could be because Bhutto was still a secular despite giving in to the demands of Islamists—a sign of his



government managing religious matters in Pakistan. Here, noticeably, is the promotion of religious harmony and tolerance to prevent religiously motivated violence in Pakistan. The party's 2018 election manifesto also talked about taking action to stop the forceful conversion of religious minorities (PPP 2018, p. 49). Such issues are also context-specific to Sindh where the PPP dominates and where a Hindu minority faces forceful religious conversion. More than 90 percent of Pakistan's Hindus live in Sindh (Singh 2019), making the community a significant vote bank for the PPP. This was also evident in the outcomes of the 2018 generation elections when PPP's Mahesh Malani (a Hindu) from Sindh became the first non-Muslim parliamentarian after 2002 (Samoon 2018). While not mentioning the word secularism, the party advocated for the rights of religious minorities and pledged its struggle for an egalitarian Pakistan (Zardari 2020; PPP 2020).

The youngest party in comparison to the other chosen in this paper, the PTI, is more engaged in discussions on Pakistan's identity and *raison d'être*. Hence, its 2018 election manifesto started with the following quote from the founding father of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah: "We should have a State in which we could live and breathe as free men and . . . where principles of Islamic social justice could find free play" (PTI 2018, p. 4). The theme of justice is central to the party's vision and mission, as is also reflected in this name, where the word "insaf" means justice. Despite the secular leanings of Imran Khan—noticeable through some actions under the PTI government, such as declaring the Panj Tirath Hindu religious site as a national heritage and the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor for Sikh pilgrims from India (Z. S. Ahmed 2021)—there was no mention of the party aiming for a secular Pakistan.

Non-religious parties are also religious in many ways. First, none of them have ever claimed that they are secular or that they support the separation of state and religion in Pakistan. Second, non-religious parties also understand that there are certain no-go areas if they need to survive in the political and social landscape of Pakistan, as Islamists would react strongly to any such reforms as they have almost always done in the past. The blasphemy laws in Pakistan have been criticized for their misuse in terms of targeting religious minorities. It has, however, been a sensitive topic, as speaking against these laws can have serious consequences. In 2011, Punjab's then-Governor, Salman Taseer, and Pakistan Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti were assassinated for speaking against Pakistan's blasphemy laws. While religious parties supported the murderer of Taseer, leaders of non-religious parties remained largely silent (Bajoria 2011). The head of PML-N, however, condemned the attack but also said that Taseer should have "adopted a more balanced approach" (Talwar 2011).

Most recently, the PTI government walked on this path. For the party's leader, Imran Khan, who was labelled a Western/Zionist agent (Yasmeen 2013) and secular, it was not easy to initiate certain reforms. However, the party has never claimed to be secular and, in fact, has promoted greater involvement of Islam or true Islam, as Imran Khan says, in every sphere of life. During the PTI's government, the party acted like a religious party in various ways. For example, its government in Punjab made the teaching of the Quran compulsory in schools and the party boasted on its website: "A historic step taken by the PTI Government—for . . . a nation that was created in the name of Islam to understand and follow the spirit and ethos of the faith holds a central place" (PTI 2020). On the issue of a single national curriculum, the party faced a backlash from Islamists; for example, the JI's chief felt that a single national curriculum was an attempt to secularize Pakistan by removing Islamic content from subjects such as Pakistan Studies, Urdu, and History (Business Recorder 2021). In response, the PTI government changed the name of its proposed curriculum by dropping the word "single" to just the National Curriculum of Pakistan (Dawn 2022). In 2021, Khan opened Al-Qadir University in Jhelum for Sufi teachings and on the occasion said,

Islam and science were both working alongside each other . . . What is the purpose of Al-Qadir University, how can our religion become relevant in the lives of our people. The [university] will develop the minds in Pakistan. Right now youth is

highly influenced by the West . . . but as humans are they [youth] growing in the right way, are they going down the right path? (Arab News 2021)

It is important to make sense of why the Islamists oppose secularism or secularization in Pakistan. To understand, one needs to look at both the JI and JUI, which are products of Islamic revivalist movements during the colonial era. During the British colonial rule in the Indian sub-continent, Islamists focused on Islamic fundamentalism. The current positions of Islamists regarding secularism in Pakistan have not changed since the colonial era. As argued by Iqtidar (2012, p. 57), “The Islamists are vehement in their public insistence on dislodging the idea of secularism as universal, claiming it to be a parochial, European experience—with some justification”. As was the case of JI’s Maududi, the current leadership of the party also looks at modernism in connection with Europeanization or Westernization. Hence, Maududi’s portrayal of “divine sovereignty” was seen as a reaction of modernity as he “refused to accept colonial epistemic hegemony” (Iqtidar and Scharbrodt 2022, p. 278). While founding fathers of JUI had accepted secular democracy in the light of Qur’an and Sunnah, Maududi rejected secular democracy by calling it *taghuti nizam* (satanic system) (Engineer 2010). As far as the matter of the Islamists’ positions on secularism are concerned, they have not changed since the colonial era or the time of Islamic revivalist movements in the Indian sub-continent.

As far as the selected non-religious political parties are concerned, they are not similar in terms of their ideologies. The PPP is center-left, the PTI right-of-center, and the PML-N center-right. Knowing this distinction is important in terms of understanding their positions on secularism and secularization in Pakistan. Seen as a secular man, the founding father of the PPP, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, took many steps that advanced the entanglement of state with religion (Chacko 2016). The party’s interim constitution stated, “Islam is our faith” (Chengappa 2002, p. 29). While the party’s leaders, including Benazir Bhutto, have made references to Islam in their speeches (Laila et al. 2020), the PPP stands out in terms of promoting secularization in the country by speaking on issues such as the blasphemy laws and minority rights. This is in line with the party’s center-left ideology, unlike the PTI and PML-N, which have leaned towards Islam.

### 3. Conclusions

Pakistan was created based on the Two-Nation Theory as a nation-state, and this theory or the vision continues to serve as a lens through which Pakistan’s identity is perceived and shaped by major political parties. The analysis shows Islamists have very rigid positions on issues concerning secularism, modernity, and secularism in Pakistan. As is clear from the analysis of the JI and JUI-F, one can see that the parties’ current positions on these matters are no different from the founding fathers of these parties, such as Maulana Maududi and Mufti Mahmood, who were openly against secularism. While non-religious parties have used religion in domestic politics and foreign affairs, they have demonstrated different trajectories on issues covered in this paper. Often for the sake of their political survival, civil and military elites made concessions to Islamists, and this was evident during the earlier decades following the creation of Pakistan under Ayub Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Both were secular but managed religious affairs, involving the state more in religious practice and Islamic thought, similar to the case of General Musharraf’s “Enlightened Moderation”. The trend of Islamists acting as pressure groups against certain reforms has continued as almost all ruling parties had to backtrack on proposed policy reforms, for example, the Sindh government’s proposal to ban the forced conversion of religious minorities and the PTI’s proposal on a single national curriculum.

The analysis of five political parties in this paper shows that there is no opposition to the idea that Pakistan was created based on the Two-Nation Theory, and therefore, it is not a secular state. Among the parties, the PPP is the only party that claims to be secular or whose key leaders are viewed as secular. In the case of Islamists, it is clear why they refrained from using the term “secularism” as, for example, their leaders have a long history of viewing secularism as a Western conspiracy and incompatible with Islam. While

the religious parties have long been blaming the West for the Muslim world's downfall, anti-Western sentiments were also promoted by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto of the PPP, and the case of Imran Khan is similar.

Islamists resist any changes to what they view as their hard-fought success, for example, through Islamization. This is evident through their opposition to changing the blasphemy laws, but leaders of PML-N and PTI have also defended the country's blasphemy laws. The PPP is an exception in this case because its leaders have most often talked about the misuse of blasphemy laws against religious minorities. The PPP, when in government, made no move to change the blasphemy laws. Moreover, like other parties examined in this study, the PPP has never claimed to be secular but to be the ones that also believe in minority rights and, most of all, in its egalitarianism. Unlike the PPP in the past, for example, under Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and today's PTI, PML-N was not publicly advocating for a model Islamic welfare state through ideas such as Islamic socialism and "Riasat-e-Medina", but like other political parties, it has also never aimed for the separation of religion and the state. It seems that the status quo suits the political leadership of the chosen parties or today's political elites as that maintains majoritarianism in Pakistan.

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Article

# Islamist Populist Nation-Building: Gradual, Ad Hoc Islamisation of the Secular Education System in Turkey

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**Abstract:** The founders of the secular Turkish Republic, the Kemalists used secular nationalist education to build a secular Turkish nation and to create their own version of modern pro-Western secular Turkish citizens. This paper argues that Turkey's current ruling party, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) has been using the same system of education to create its own desired citizens with Islamist Populist ideals. This has been done without changing the secular principles of the constitution and laws on national education since there are several constraints that would prevent AKP to have open and declared pro-Sharia changes to the law. Thus, unlike many other Islamists in the other parts of the world, the paper shows that the AKP has chosen to undermine the secularity of the system, constitution, and law in an ad hoc, gradual and undeclared fashion. The paper concludes by noting that no matter the change in political actors and their ideologies, education is monopolized by the state for political purposes.

**Keywords:** religion; Islam; Islamism; populism; education; jihad; nation-building; Turkey; AKP; Erdogan

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## 1. Introduction

The education system is secular and has long been highly centralized in the Republic of Turkey (Yilmaz 2014). The Kemalists relied heavily on secular nationalist education to create their own version of modern pro-Western secular homogenous Turkish nation (Yilmaz 2005, 2016). This identity was disconnected from Ottoman history and religion, and thus the European-inspired Kemalist education system attempted to fashion young Turkish people into strong supporters of the nationalist and secular regime, and to view the Ottoman past and Islam as retrograde forces or irrelevant.

The AKP has used the same Kemalist system of education to propagate its own ideals, though with an entirely different goal in mind. While the Kemalists used the education system to secularize and westernize the young people of Turkey, the Erdoganists instrumentalized the same system to Islamize them (Yilmaz 2018). All this has been done without changing the secular principles of the constitution and laws on national education since there are several constraints that would prevent the AKP from having open and declared pro-Sharia changes to the law. Thus, unlike many other Islamists in the other parts of the world, it has chosen to undermine the secularity of the system, constitution, and law in an ad hoc, gradual and undeclared fashion (Yilmaz 2022). The educational system, national curriculum and schools are the most manifest grounds of this phenomenon, as education is a crucial component of the AKP project of Islamization of the secular Turkey. By exposing students to conservative religious themes in schools, the AKP have tried to cement Islamist ideas in children, with the ultimate aim of creating a 'pious generation' that will devote themselves to building an Islamic society.

The paper goes beyond AKP policies and funding preferences to explore the theoretical underpinning of the education system, which under AKP rule is undergoing indigenization and nationalization. This change is then explored in the context of decreasing government

support for secular education in general, and increasing government support for Islamism and Islamic studies, which have been brought to the forefront in the schooling systems.

## 2. Methodology

Even though there were signs of the AKP's authoritarianism in its second term, it is usually agreed that after it managed to change the constitution in 2010 to get rid of Kemalist tutelage and its third general election victory in 2011, the AKP indisputably took an authoritarian populist turn and the opposition has intensified its claims that the party has been trying to transform Turkey's secular system (Yilmaz and Albayrak 2022). Thus, to determine the extent to which the AKP has changed the education system towards an Islamist Populist direction, this study scanned reforms that have been made in the education system of the country since 2011. The legislative activities for these reforms, the AKP leaders' declarations and statements in favor of these changes, the media reports on these changes, academic reports on the issue, statistical figures, increasing funding for religious schools vis-à-vis the comparative neglect of secular schools in the last decade, increasing religious content versus decreasing secular content in the curriculum, religious groups' increasing activity in education, and the evidence provided by civil society groups and the opposition figures on Islamisation were systematically analyzed. Changes towards Islamisation in education are presented in the paper.

## 3. Education Reform and the Erosion of Secular Education

After its third general election victory in 2011 and its authoritarian populist turn (Yilmaz et al. 2022; Yilmaz and Shipoli 2022), the AKP started to take bold steps in restructuring the education system. Turkey's education system had, since the 28 February 1997, military coup, which removed Islamic parties from power, been shaped according to priorities and sensitivities of the secular ruling elite. Before 28 February, secular education was compulsory for only 5 years at the primary level. Following this period of compulsory state-supervised education, parents were free to choose to send their children to either a secular school which focused on academic education, or a vocational school. However, among the vocational schools available were the Imam Hatip middle schools, which taught religious courses in their curriculum. Parents, therefore, were able to send their children to a religious middle school if they wished. However, following the 28 February coup and the subsequent secularist crackdown on Islamism, an extra three years of compulsory education were introduced, and all vocational middle schools were shut down. While the change was promoted as an extension of compulsory education, the new system crafted by secularists clearly targeted the Imam Hatip middle schools and was designed to close them down (Nor and Ibrahim 2020, p. 118). This system remained untouched until the beginning of the third term of the AKP, beginning in 2011. The party's third election victory, which unequivocally vindicated the party, gave the AKP the confidence to take bolder steps towards ending secular control over Turkey's education system. On 30 March 2012, the AKP led government passed the "Primary Education Law no 6278", which altered the education system, requiring students to attend 4 years of primary, 4 years of secondary, and 4 years of high school. (Gün and Baskan 2014, p. 230). Facing mounting criticism from the secular opposition, the AKP framed the new law as an attempt to encourage vocational training and to provide families with greater choice. Nevertheless, it has become obvious that the major goal of the government in changing the system was to increase religious courses and empower Imam Hatip Schools, which were considered to be the "backyard" of the National Outlook movement.

Having put the law into practice, the government immediately opened 1099 Imam Hatip Middle Schools, whose number was only 601 in 1998 (Gün and Baskan 2014, p. 233). However, no new vocational middle schools were opened. The Ministry of National Education also accepted that opening vocational middle schools other than Imam Hatips was not on its agenda (Gün and Baskan 2014, p. 231). In a 2015 speech, Erdoğan himself

boasted that “since my government came to power in 2002, the number of ‘imam school’ students had risen sharply from mere 60,000 to 1.2 million” (AA 2015).

Many secularist critics believe that the education reforms were created to strengthen Imam Hatip schools in the national education system and make them superior to the secular system. Therefore, the backbone of the reform was to change a continuous 8-years education system to allow the transfer of graduates of primary school more easily into Imam Hatip schools.

#### 4. Increasing Investment on Imam Hatip Schools

The Imam-Hatip Schools have always been controversial in secular Turkey. These schools were first opened in 1924 under the Law of *Tevhid-i Tedrisat* (Law of Unification of Educational Instruction) and were designed to replace madrasas as the chief site of religious training. However, they were closed in 1929 due to a shortage of students, largely because Islamic preaching was at the time not particularly lucrative, but also due to constraints on entry to university education (Aşlamacı and Kaymakcan 2017, p. 281). They remained closed until 1951 when the Justice Party, which came to power with the support of conservative voters, reopened them throughout major cities at the middle school and high school levels. As of 1970, the number of the Imam-Hatip schools reached 72. Under the Fundamental Law of National Education (*Milli Eğitim Temel Kanunu*) the Imam Hatip Schools were given a new status as Imam Hatip High Schools, and graduates were granted the opportunity to enroll in the social sciences departments of universities, just like the graduates of secular high schools. The partnership of the Islamist National Salvation Party (*Milli Nizam Partisi*) in three successive coalition governments in 1970s, and the revival of Islamist movements, increased the interest in these schools, and by 1980 their number reached 374 (Aşlamacı and Kaymakcan 2017, p. 282). Since the reopening of the Imam-Hatip Schools, their mission has also changed fundamentally from institutions that train religious officers, to providing religious courses along with scientific education. Thus, students at these schools often received religious education but didn’t attend the faculty of theology and become religious officers. The increasing popularity of Imam Hatip schools in the 1980s and 1990s, and their graduates growing power in Turkish society and politics, changed secularists’ attitude towards these schools. (Aşlamacı and Kaymakcan 2017, p. 283). While the secularists came to view these schools as the backyard of the National Outlook Movement, and therefore worried about their role in Islamizing Turkey, conservatives and Islamists continued to argue for their essential role in the education system, stressing the rising public demand for religious education. The postmodern coup on 28 February 1997, aimed at curtailing the influence of Imam-Hatip Schools and returning them to their previous mission of training religious preachers. The new law therefore closed Imam-Hatip Middle Schools, substantially reducing the chances of their graduates entering faculties other than theology at Turkey’s universities. These changes immediately decreased the number of enrolments in the Imam-Hatip High Schools. However, when the AKP took power in 2002, perceptions of Imam Hatip schools once again started to turn positive, and between 2003 and 2012 the number of students at these schools increased two-fold, although the overall number of Imam Hatip schools remained the same (Aşlamacı and Kaymakcan 2017, p. 283). Furthermore, the decision of the Council of Higher Education in 2009 to remove disadvantages against graduates of the Imam Hatip schools, which had prevented many from enrolling in universities, made a substantial contribution to the increasing interest in these schools.

The Imam Hatip schools made a resounding comeback after the educational reform of 2012. The AKP’s “Primary Education Law” not only opened the way for building new Imam Hatips at the middle school level, but also initiated a period in which these schools systematically promoted and enjoyed positive discrimination in line with the agenda of the ruling party. Thus, the reopening of the Imam Hatip Schools has been interpreted as the realization of Erdoğan’s promise to raise pious generation. In response to the leader of an opposition party that accused Erdoğan of exploiting religion for political gain, Erdoğan

replied “We will raise a pious generation. Do you expect a party with a conservative democratic identity to raise an atheist youth?” (Hurriyet 2012). As Coşkun and Şentürk (2012, p. 170) stated:

“[The AKP] It considers the IHSs as an instrument for educating what Antonio Gramsci calls “organic intellectuals”, whereas previous right-wing populist parties perceived the IHSs as a tool for populist policies. Thus, these schools have become an instrument for creating a *cemaat* that is loyal to the AKP’s rule. IHS graduates will be the organic intellectuals of the *cemaat*, who harmonize modern urban life with an Islamist and conservative lifestyle.”

The AKP has indeed given the Imam Hatips a special mission. As Former Minister of Education İsmet Yılmaz once said:

“Now Imam Hatip has a meaning. Probably Mr. President has also made contribution to that . . . Those who are educated in these schools have a different vision. That vision bestows additional responsibility upon us. Those educated at these schools are committed to their national and moral values; love their county, work for their nation, consider a day without any progress a loss and work hard with this understanding to become successful.”. (İleri Haber 2018a)

The immediate result of the new ‘4+4+4’ schooling system was the mushrooming growth of Imam Hatip middle schools and high schools. The middle schools were divided into two groups: schools opened in new premises, and those opened within the premises of existing Imam Hatip High Schools. When the new law entered into force, 1099 Imam Hatip middle schools were immediately opened and the number of Imam Hatip High Schools jumped from 537 to 708, and 94,467 and 380,771 students enrolled in these schools respectively. Since then, the number of these schools increased steadily reaching, 3535 and 1583 respectively, with a total number of 1.3 million students attending these schools as of 2019 (T24 2019).

The AKP made a special effort to increase the number of Imam Hatip schools, either by incentivising the creation of these schools, or by compelling families to register their children in them. The elimination of the points system, which put the graduates of Imam Hatip High Schools in a disadvantaged position compared to their peers from the secular high schools, was the most important factor behind the growth of these schools. However, another important factor was the privileged position given to the schools by the Erdoğan government. With the transition to the new schooling system in 2012, the share of the Ministry of National Education’s budget going to Imam Hatip Schools began to gradually increase year on year. A Reuters review of the government budget and investment plans in 2018 showed that spending on Imam Hatip high schools for boys and girls aged 14 to 18 doubled to 6.57 billion liras (\$1.68 billion) in that year, which was nearly a quarter of the total secondary and high schools budget. Imam Hatip schools received 23 percent of all funding from the Ministry’s budget (double the spend per pupil at secular high schools) despite the 645,000 Imam Hatip students making up only 11 percent of the total high school population. The budget and investment plans also showed that the government planned to complete construction of 128 Imam Hatip high schools in 2018 and to build a further 50 (Butler 2018). According to “The 2019 Investment Plan of the Presidency” the government planned to build 162 Imam Hatip high schools and 151 Anatolian high schools by 2021, but only nine science-based high schools (*Fen Liseleri*), which provide the highest quality education and are highly popular among the college-bound students. For 2019, the government earmarked only 30 million Turkish Lira for these schools, while the Imam Hatip schools were again granted a hefty 640 million Turkish Lira in the budget (Çepni 2019).

The AKP government obviously invests more in Imam Hatip Schools than secular schools. Indeed, David Lepeska reported that the AKP offered many privileges to Imam Hatip Schools:

“The mothers were bothered less by the religious curriculum and taxed classroom space than by a lack of equity: every Imam Hatip student gets a tablet computer

and digital lessons (while the other secular middle school students lug around heavy textbooks); their bus to school is half-price; and their classrooms come decked out with smart boards, projection tools and better laboratory facilities". (Lepeska 2014)

In many places, due to so-called technical scarcity, children and parents have been 'automatically' forced to enroll in Imam Hatip Schools (Letsch 2015; MeForum 2017).

Even before the 4+4+4 law, the Ministry of National Education decided to close an entire category of secular public high schools which they deemed educationally inadequate and introduced an entrance exam for all high schools except the vocational high schools, which include the Imam Hatips (CDN 2015). This meant that students who do not qualify to enroll in a secular high school would have no choice but to enroll in either a vocational high school or an Imam Hatip High School. Therefore, when this new system entered into force in the 2013–2014 academic year, many high schools were converted into vocational or Imam Hatip High Schools, causing a backlash against the new system. In 2013, over 1,112,000 students took the placement test for high schools. With only 363,000 slots available, the remaining students were distributed automatically to vocational high schools, which led to the enrolment of at least 40,000 students in Imam Hatip Schools against their will (Cornell 2018). The government seemingly intended to limit the number of secular schools, building more religious institutions to channel students to these schools one way or another.

Ceylan Yeginsu, who prepared a story for the New York Times, explained how the AKP's policies force students to attend Imam Hatip Schools. She argued that families prefer secular schools; however, the centrally organized exam forces them to make a critical decision over their child's education. If their children are not very successful on the exam, they cannot go to private secular schools or secular public schools. When they want to transfer, secular schools reject them by claiming that there is a lack of vacancy. Some families even offer bribes for transferring their children to secular schools (Yeginsu 2014).

Many secular schools began to be converted into imam Hatip schools, surprising many families who wished their children to have a secular education. Parents are therefore increasingly worried that the secular schools their children attend will be transformed into Imam Hatip schools. Yeginsu reports the story of a family thus:

"In August, the Yesil Bahar Secondary School in Kadikoy, one of Istanbul's more liberal districts, was among hundreds of secular schools converted to religious ones. Parents staged protests, and the conversion was reversed. "They provide free transport and meals for these schools and tell people it's the same education with a few extra religious classes, so people are easily persuaded," said Ozden Aras, a teacher at the school who was active in the protests". (Yeginsu 2014)

The government's intentions can be terrifying for secular families. According to DW: "In Istanbul alone, 67 secular schools have been converted to Imam Hatips, many in staunchly secular parts of the city as of 2012. Ali Boga, member of parliament for the AKP reportedly said: "We will increase the number of these schools in records. We have the chance to turn all schools into Imam Hatip schools" (Jones 2012). Or as Orhan Kemal Cengiz observes, the reforms transformed "religious schools from a selective option to a central institution in the education system" (Cornell 2015).

Government officials argue that the number of the Imam Hatip schools have skyrocketed merely due to strong demand from the public. Nazif Yılmaz, Director General for Religious Teaching at the Ministry of National Education, rejected the notion that the government has opened too many Imam Hatip Schools, stressing that the portion of these schools was 9.18% before the February 28 post-modern coup, and 13.57% in 2019 (Sputnik 2019). The Minister of National Education, Ziya Selçuk, also claimed in 2019 that the Imam Hatip Schools had reached their full capacity (Evensel 2019). However, the figures show that as the number of the Imam Hatip schools continues to increase, the number of students enrolled in these schools has been decreasing. According to the official figures of the Ministry for National Education, between 2015 and 2019 the number of Imam

Hatip High Schools increased by 43.7% but the number of their students decreased by 10% (Buyukbayrak 2021).

### 5. Increasing Religious Courses in the School Curriculums

Erdoğan's education reforms extended beyond boosting Imam Hatip Schools. The reforms also greatly expanded the religious content of secular middle and high schools by introducing new courses to the curriculum. The history of religious courses at schools parallels that of Imam Hatips. After the foundation of the republic, religious education was regulated by the Law of *Tevhidi Tedrisat* of 1924. However, after the introduction of the principle of secularism to the constitution, religious courses were gradually removed from the curriculums after 1927 (Genç 2018, p. 4). Similar to Imam Hatip's reopening, the Justice Party re-introduced elective religious courses in 1950. Between 1950 and 1982, school practices on religious education varied, but religious courses were taught at schools beginning with an elective course in primary schools. After the military coup of 1980, religious education was made compulsory in the new constitution in a radical break from the past practices, but these reforms merely offered religious education as elective course out of the concern that compulsory religious education would clash with the principle of secularism. At the time, protecting secularism was not a primary concern, rather religious education was considered a way to de-politicize and unify the polarized nation around common values (Genç 2018, p. 5). The content of the Religious Culture and Ethics course was designed to increase harmony among Turkey's various religious sects by encompassing every sect in the country and providing students with information about religion in a more general sense (Genç 2018, p. 6). In reality, however, the Religious Culture and Ethics lessons largely focused on the Sunni version of Islam, which predominates in the Turkish society; thus, the reforms largely strengthened the identification of Sunni Islam with Turkey itself.

Religious education has always been controversial in Turkey, not just in terms of its incompatibility with the secular character of the republic, but also because the content of the religious courses promotes Sunni Islam above other religions and forms of Islamic practice, thereby estranging the Alevis, who form a sizeable portion of the Turkish population. The religious courses' textbooks only superficially and briefly refer to the Alevi sect. Technically, parents have the right to ask that their children be exempted from religion classes. But while requests from non-Muslim students are generally accepted, Alevis have not been granted the same status and flexibility. In 2008, the Turkish Council of State ruled that the current content of these courses constitute a breach of European Convention of Human Rights to which Turkey is a party, as this convention requires respect for freedom of belief (Bia Net 2008). However, in 2012 the Council of State gave a totally different verdict, overruling a lower court's decision against compulsory religious courses on the grounds that the content of the Religious Culture and Ethics doesn't focus on religious education, but on general knowledge about religion. In 2010, the Ministry of National Education revised the content of the religious courses taught at the middle schools, yet this didn't prevent the European Court of Human Rights ruling in 2014 against Turkey in a case in which 14 Turkish citizens objected to compulsory religious courses. The court suggested that the Turkish government should grant citizens the right to demand exemptions from religious courses.

Not only was the controversy on the compulsory religious courses not resolved by this ruling, but the 4+4+4 reform increased students' exposure to mandatory religious classes, as the legislation forced them to attend compulsory or elective religious courses for a straight nine years from grade four to grade 12. Needless to say, more than 95% of the material shown to students in these courses is about Sunni Islam (Lepeska 2014). The law stipulates that "Elective courses on Quran and the Life of Prophet will be offered at middle schools and high schools", but no other elective courses are mentioned (Law No. 6287 2012). All public schools, including Military High Schools, which have long been under strict secular surveillance, were obliged to offer these elective courses (Aljazeera 2012). However, people who think that religious education should be optional became increasingly concerned that even allowing elective religious classes may cause compulsion, as schools can only offer a



limited number of elective courses due to physical limitations and shortages of teachers, thereby leaving the students with no option but to elect to study religion courses (Gün and Baskan 2014, p. 231). This is, indeed, what happened after schools included religious courses in their curriculum. In 2017, a number of middle school principals reportedly made religious courses mandatory without consulting the parents of the children in a district of Izmir, a staunchly secular city in Turkey. The Izmir branch of Eğitim-Sen argued that the Directorate of National Education in Izmir asked all schools in the city to report the number of students who chose religious courses, putting pressure on school administrations to force students to choose these courses (Evrensel 2017). A similar incident occurred in Istanbul. In 2018, a middle school administration made 'elective' courses on the Quran and the Life of the Prophet mandatory for all students, claiming that all parents preferred their children to studies these subjects despite their being more than 20 other elective courses (Uygun 2017). An opposition lawmaker criticised the practice of forcing the students to choose religious courses, claiming that in Balıkesir a district governor ordered school administrations to force students to 'choose' religious courses (DuvaR 2020).

A representative of the Union of Eğitim Sen suggested that school administrations were directing students to pick these Islamic courses by limiting the number of elective courses or by arranging take-it-all religious course packages for students (T24 2016). Thus, "students could receive up to six hours of religious education per week. Meanwhile, the number of total hours of school per week was shortened, and thus, several other classes were either merged or abolished, such as that on "human rights, citizenship and democracy." In theory, these classes are elective; in practice, they may not be. School administrators decide what elective classes are to be offered" (Cornell 2015). Even non-Muslims are forced to take these 'elective' courses. For example, in Diyarbakır, a first grade student in a high school who is Christian and is exempt from Religious Culture and Ethics Course was told that he had to select one of the three Islamic elective courses (Basic Religious Information, Quran and Mohammed's Life) since no other elective course was offered, otherwise he would fail because he did not complete the required number of courses and the student was forced to select one of these courses" (Gün and Baskan 2014, p. 232).

Newsweek published a voice recording alleged to be that of Bilal Erdoğan, who is heard saying: "My concern about Imam-Hatip Schools is that we try to increase their availability". "We are at 10% (of overall pupil numbers); likely soon it will be 15%. Do we want to increase the percentage of available Imam-Hatips to 25%? Or should we, on the other hand, try to establish a strong structure for the other 85%?" Acknowledging that further increasing the number of Imam-Hatips may be "unrealistic", the voice suggests that school administrations could pressure students to take optional religious classes in order to boost Islamic content in normal schools. "If some schools manage to assign 11 h out of 40 to elective religion classes, that would be like having Imam-Hatips" (Cornell 2015).

In 2014 the AKP took another decisive step to enhance its grip on the education bureaucracy by creating legal amendments that strengthened the government's control over the appointment of school principals, who have a decisive influence on what courses schools offer (Cornell 2015). The new law, intended to punish Gulen Movement followers within the Ministry of National Education, made it possible to more easily replace senior managers within the ministry, and led to the dismissal of 8403 school principals and deputy principals nationwide, and the subsequent appointment of pro-AKP figures (CDN 2015). The *Sol* daily newspaper claimed that almost all of the new school principals appointed by the AKP were members of AKP-affiliated Education Union (Haber Sol 2017). *Ahval News* also published an interview with the General Head of the Eğitim-Sen Union, Feray Aytekin Aydoğan, criticising the AKP's education policies. According to Aydoğan, more than 70% of all school principals are members of Eğitim-Bir-Sen, a union affiliated with the AKP. Through these appointments, we may surmise that the AKP can ensure that the Quran and the Life of the Prophet courses are studied by most students in Turkish schools (Karatas 2018).



Diyanet also used its considerable influence to boost demand for religious courses in schools. The religious body prepared a khutbah, which was delivered in all mosques in Turkey on 2 February 2018, just as the new school semester began, recommending to families that their children should select religious courses. The Khutbah read: “As you know, Quran, the Life of Prophet and Fundamental Religious Knowledge courses are taught in our schools as elective courses. We should pay necessary attention to make sure that our children select these courses” (Ileri Haber 2018b). Diyanet was also instrumental in filling the vacancies of religious teachers at schools. In some cities, imams associated with Diyanet were tasked with teaching religious courses at schools due to shortage of religious teacher with the introduction of elective religious courses (Atalay 2017).

The pro-government daily newspaper *Akit* published a story suggesting that these Quran and the Life of the Prophet courses ought to be compulsory in all public schools. *Akit* claimed that families face difficulties in some schools as the school administrations do not allow students to take these courses. The newspaper also claimed that if these courses were to turn into compulsory courses, the necessary teaching staff could be supplied by theology faculties (Akit 2018).

Ertugrul Kurkcu, an opposition MP from the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy, strongly criticized the 4+4+4 system. “The reforms are not only about integrating the Koran into the national education system”, he argued. “Rather they are designed to “integrate the Ministry of Religious Affairs, or Diyanet, into the national education system because the system now comes from a secular tradition and does not have the resources to deliver such an education” (Sabral 2012). Kurkcu estimated that the new system will require the recruitment of large numbers of new staff to teach religion courses. Thus, he rightly assumed that Diyanet will involve itself in the national education system by sending its imams, preachers and Qur’anic School Instructors into the public schools to teach and facilitate the ‘elective’ Quran and the life of the Prophet courses.

The content of the textbooks students were required to read as part of the new elective religious courses also stirred controversy. It appears that the Board of Education, which is responsible for preparing the content of the curriculum and textbooks, instrumentalised elective religious courses to impose an Islamist and conservative worldview on school children. The course books contain contentious statements regarding secularism, the family, and traditional customary societal rules. For example, some of the contentious statements in the textbook about the Life of the Prophet are as follows: “A wife’s obedience to her husband is a prayer”. The book includes further statements in the section on ‘the duties of conjoins’: ‘our religion does not leave the family without a leader. Since the men have more physical power than women, the responsibility of a family has been assigned to men in the first place’. In another section, titled ‘the types of unacceptable marriages’, it was stated that ‘those marriages with an atheist, polytheist, or apostate are forbidden’. The book also comments on the psychological aspects of marriages and articulated that ‘the marriage is a motive in human nature’. Based on this premise, the book further comments that ‘one should consider that people marry in early ages based on custom’. The book also warns the students about the process before marriage. ‘Youngsters should be careful during the acquaintance process, they should not harm the holy institution of family union, because the result of every acquaintance process may not end up with a marriage. In this regard, youngsters should not flirt during acquaintance and decision process.’ The book also articulates that cohabiting without a solemnized marriage is forbidden. ‘A person must protect his or her chastity until marriage, and one can only experience sexual intercourse after having solemnized marriage.’ The book never quotes from the Civil Code; however, it mentions religious institution of ‘mehr’, which is an Islamic element of secular marriage (Diken 2017a). The chair of Board of Education Alpaslan Durmuş said upon being asked about sex separation in education: “Allah says it, not me. Should I correct him, or what?” (Altuntaş 2017).

## 6. Islamisation of the Curriculum

The Ministry of National Education carried out a comprehensive overhaul of the curriculum between 2015–2017 that further eroded secular education. A study of textbooks written before and after the reforms found that the new textbooks are ‘based on political-Islamist discourse and issues related to women and gender equality have been almost totally removed’ (Aratemur-Çimen and Bayhan 2018, p. 3). Speaking at the opening ceremony of the 2019–2020 academic year, Erdoğan boasted that his party “revised the curriculum with a liberal, democratic, transparent and objective approach. We have completely cleared the textbooks of ideological elements that despise the beliefs of our nation and civilisation and cultural values of our people” (Yaman 2019).

The new education policy of the AKP prioritizes the *ummah* over equal citizens of the Republic such as Muslims, Christians, Jews and others. This is a clear indication of the AKP’s desire to return to a certain period of Ottoman rule in which Muslim subjects were regarded first class, and others were classified based on their religious orientation. In other words, the new policy aims to restore the order before the reformist Tanzimat period. As Yanarocak notes:

“The Tanzimât period (1839–1876), a period of reformation and modernization of the Ottoman Empire aimed at granting equal status to Muslims and non-Muslim subjects, was considered, until 2002, as beneficial. In recent years, however, an anti-Tanzimat undertone appeared in the school textbooks. The democratic ideal of “equal rights for all” is described in the following example as abandoning Islamic customs and traditions, leading to the empire’s collapse. Islamic solidarity supersedes ethnic consideration. All Muslims are brothers”. (Yanarocak 2016, p. 17)

The new curriculum thus endeavours to shape a Turkish-Islam consciousness among Turkish citizens in which Islam is portrayed as the only valid monotheistic religion for all humanity, while rivalry between Islam and Christianity is underscored (Yanarocak 2016, p. 12).

As corollary, an Islamic discourse which declares Western civilization antithetical to Islam has been spread throughout Turkey’s schools. For example, Bilal Erdoğan, who has played a role in organizing the AKP’s educational policies, has called upon Turkey to “end the Western civilizational invasion of the Islamic civilization . . . and we understand now that the invaded thing is not our soil but our minds, our heads” (ARTI Gercek 2017a). In another speech, Bilal Erdoğan speculated that the ultimate goal of the West is “to enslave us. From their music to foods, clothes and lifestyle. The reason why block flute has been in the music course curricula for years is not so simple. Or, the reason of the emphasis on the rhythmic gymnastics in physical education lessons is not simple” (Cumhuriyet 2017a). Bilal Erdoğan thinks that these lessons are systematically imposed on Turkish/Muslim students by the Western powers in order to degenerate and corrupt them. When the new curriculum was adopted, Alpaslan Durmuş, the Head of Educations Board (which was responsible for writing the curriculum), said that they incorporated indigenous and national values into the new curriculum and “(dodged) the Eurocentric approach” (Egitimcaddesi 2017).

One of the most striking demonstrations of the Islamisation of Turkey’s school curriculum is entry of the notion of *jihad* into school textbooks. “In elementary school religion classes, teachers will promote the nonviolent meaning of the word *jihad*—“to struggle”—as “love of homeland.” Among the curriculum’s changes, the notion of *jihad* has garnered particular attention” (Bilefsky 2018). “The concepts of *Jihad* and Gaza (two variations of Holy War) are introduced in the medieval sections of International Studies and Social Studies textbooks. Holy War against non-Muslims ‘in order to protect or spread the Islamic religion’ constitutes part of the curriculum, with no qualifications.” (Yanarocak 2016, p. 13).

Yaşar well sums up the manner in which *Jihad* is taught in Turkey’s schools post 2017, describing how “the way of teaching *Jihad* is an example of mixing religious and political contents in the curricula, by defining *Jihad* as a divine service and emphasizing at the same time its importance in the protection of the fatherland. *Jihad* is mentioned together with

democracy, and called a pillar of Turkish civilization. By this definition, the Islamic religion and the Turkish nation, are fused together. Who wishes to be a good Muslim, must be a good Turk and vice versa, saving its fatherland with *Jihad*, if needed." (Yaşar 2020, p. 11; see also Yılmaz and Erturk 2021).

The Minister of National Education, İsmet Yılmaz, in reaction to criticism of the new curriculum's use of *jihad*, remarked "*Jihad* is an element in our religion; it is in our religion ... The duty of the Education Ministry is to teach every concept deservedly, in a correct way. It is also our job to correct things that are wrongly perceived, seen or taught" (Bilefsky 2018). Though Yılmaz asserted that *jihad* means primarily an inner struggle of the self in order to appease the debates, the official Turkish dictionary (TDK) along with many other sources defines the word Jihad as a "war fought in the name of religion" (MeForum 2017). Indeed, any suggestion that the AKP primarily viewed *Jihad* as a peaceful internal struggle was somewhat undercut by the party's framing of Turkey's military operations in Syria as *Jihad*. CHP politician Bulent Tezcan criticised the AKP's rhetorical use of *Jihad*, asserting that "by embedding *jihadism* in the education of values, they try to infect the brains of our little children with the same ideas that transforms the Middle East into a bloodbath" (MeForum 2017; Altuntaş 2017).

The inclusion of Jihad in the school curriculum may be understood as a reshaping of education in accordance with the Islamist ideology of the AKP and Erdogan. This ideology has increasingly glorified Jihad, martyrdom, and sacrifice of life to protect the nation and the *ummah*. An AKP member of the Turkish parliament's national education commission, Ahmet Hamdi Çamlı, summarized his government's stance: "*Jihad* is the primary component of Islam. It even outranks prayer (Namaz–Salaat). As for the Ottoman sultans, in order to not abandon Jihad, they chose to not go on Hajj. Our ministry made a very good decision. If prayers are religion's tent pole, then *Jihad* is the tent itself." Camli said: "Our ministry made a very on-point decision. If prayers are the pillars of the religion, Jihad is the tent. Without the pillars the tent is useless. "There's no use in teaching mathematics to a child who doesn't know Jihad" (Osborne 2017b).

The professional union of Diyanet employees, Diyanet-Sen, has distributed colouring books which promote Jihad for children attending kindergartens supervised by the Ministry of National Education. Following sustained criticism, Vice-Director General of Diyanet-Sen defended their actions by claiming that he did "not understand what is wrong with emphasizing Jihad. *Jihad* also means peace. *Jihad* does not only means going war with your gun and artillery." Yavuz Oğhan, a program speaker of the RS FM, has also defended the colouring books distributed by the Diyanet-Sen, claiming that Jihad is brotherhood and even kindergarten-age children can understand this." He further remarked "This is our culture. Of course, the colouring book has been prepared by the pedagogues and experts. Our children should not read 'Pinocchio' and 'Little Red Riding Hood', they should read the biographies of world-renowned men, for example the biography of Necmettin Erbakan. Because there are lessons for us in his life" (T24 2016).

Reports show that when Jihad is discussed in Turkey's schools, students are taught to comprehend the term according to its "non-peaceful" meaning. For example, the Enderun School Foundation of Esenler, Istanbul, has urged 4-to-6-years-old children not to recite the 'Andimiz' oath, which has been recited by all students in Ministry of National Education schools, but instead recite a special religious oath: "Alaikum Selam. How nice is this word? Long live Islam. The Quran in our hands. Our faith is in our hearts. We are Muslims who believe in a single God. We never leave this road. We cling to the Book and the Sunnah (of Prophet Muhammad). We abstain all the prohibitions (of Islam)."

An opposition MP once asked a parliamentary question about the Jihadist oath. However, the speaker of the TGNA Kahraman refused to answer, claiming that these issues belong to the private sphere of life and no question ought to be asked on such issues (Ahval 2018). In another example, in an event organized by a Quran course in Sinop students as young as 5-6 years old performed in a drama wearing soldiers uniforms and carrying guns. When opposition lawmaker Barış Yarkadaş objected to the involvement of students

in events associated with violence and militarism, and asked the Ministry of National Education to end the practice in a written motion, the Ministry replied that it doesn't see anything wrong with the drama. Yarkadaş responded that the Ministry encourages Jihad with arms and new massacres (Sozcu 2017). In a similar event, a primary school in Istanbul was criticised for hanging a banner which reads "Whatever you do you cannot prevent ramp of the Turkish nation. Whatever you do Islam will be victorious" (Nazlier 2016).

The Islamisation of the school curriculum not only included the introduction of Islamic courses and notions, but also the removal of non-religious courses including science and history classes. The changes included the shifting of emphasis within the education towards figures representing Islam and Turkishness and away from non-Muslim historical figures, ideas, and discoveries (Yilmaz 2021a, p. 189). The number of hours spent on philosophy and biology courses were reduced, while Religious Cultures and Ethics courses were doubled from one to two hours a day. Moreover, the paper on the Theory of Evolution was removed from high school textbooks, and all references to Darwinian or 'neo-Darwinian' theory removed (Karapehlivan 2019). Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister, Numan Kurtulmus, said that Darwin's Theory was "old and rotten" and therefore did not necessarily have to be taught. Satisfied that they had relegated Darwin's theory to the dustbin of history, the Ministry of National Education replaced it with Creationism. However, the Minister of National Education indicated that that evolution via natural selection may still be taught in universities, where the students had presumably reached a level of education where they could properly interpret the theory. Despite this concession, Istanbul's Marmara University refrained from publishing an academic article on the theory of evolution, stating that the publication would harm the institution, a decision made, perhaps, because of the increasing authoritarianism of the AKP's rule. Mehmet Balik, chairman of the Union of Education and Science Workers (Egitim-Is), was courageous enough to condemn the new curriculum, criticising "the new policies that ban the teaching of evolution and requiring all schools to have a prayer room". (Osborne 2017a) "These actions", he said, "destroy the principle of secularism and the scientific principles of education" (Osborne 2017a).

## 7. Downgrading Principles of Ataturk in National Education Curriculum

The AKP's new curriculum deeply troubled secularists, who were concerned that students were not being taught enough about the country's first leader, Ataturk. Where once the importance of Ataturk's role in Turkey's War of Independence was emphasised in schools, the new curriculum downplays his legacy and decreases the quantity and quality of references to him. İsmet Yılmaz, Turkish Minister of National Education, stated that the ideology Atatürkism will be removed from the school textbooks, and that Atatürk's life story will no longer be a major focus of classes decreased. These acts were merely a continuation of the AKP's strategy of removing secularism from the education system.

In 2012 the AKP eliminated Atatürkism as the education system's official ideology. Prior to 2012, all textbooks had to comply with the core principles of Turkey's secular constitution, set in place by Ataturk. After the AKP's 2012 reforms, Islamist social and political ideas were permitted to appear in textbooks. Over time, Islamist began to dominate (Yilmaz 2021b). For example, by 2018 Atatürk's name was referred to only once in the social sciences textbooks prepared for primary and middle schools (CNN Turkey 2018). It is very clear, then, that the AKP has long pursued a strategy of Islamizing Turkey through a revised national curriculum (Yilmaz 2018).

The 15 July failed coup attempt provided the AKP with the fertile ground it required to create a new national identity around myth of this event and rewrite the history of the nation to emphasise the victory of Erdoğan over Turkey's internal and external enemies. Just as the War of Independence was once used to exalt national leaders, the failed 2016 coup attempt became instrumental in exalting Erdoğan as the hero of national will (Yilmaz 2021a, p. 191). The '15 July victory of democracy' was introduced in the new curriculum as a new subject at different grades (Karapehlivan 2019). The textbooks that were revised after the 15 July incident draw an analogy between Turkey's War of Independence and the coup,

and use ‘visuals that accompany stories of 15 July and texts of martyrdom, veteran status, heroism, commemorations, and monuments aim to mythicize the day and transmit it to new generations as a landmark historical event’ (Aratemur-Çimen and Bayhan 2018, p. 25). The keywords that were chosen to portray 15 July in the textbooks are ‘Jihad’, ‘legend’ and ‘epic victory’ (Çepni 2017a). Thus, the incident represents “a new phase in the imposition of a new form of Turkishness, an Islamized version of national identity, and the creation of a pious generation, which have constituted one of the key strategic projects of the AKP since the party’s third term in power since 2011” (Lüküslü 2016).

After this incident, the AKP government did not miss any opportunity to indoctrinate its cause to millions of students in the national education system. By the time the schools were opened in September 2016, thousands of teachers had already been dismissed, more than half of the textbooks had been scrapped due to containing ‘terrorist’ content, and others now appeared in revised form, having been purified of any content antithetical to Erdoganism. Primary, middle and high school students spent most of the first day of the school year watching videos about the ‘triumph of democracy’ over the ‘coup perpetrator traitors’ and listening to speeches equating the civilian protests that aborted the coup with historic Ottoman victories and war of independence (Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017, p. 873). The new textbooks portray the 17–25 December corruption operations along with 15 July as coup attempts and blame the Gulen movement for both incidents (Çepni 2017a). The Ministry of Education also ordered all school administrations to form a “15 July corner” at schools next to the “Atatürk corner” to depict the incidents that took place on 15 July night. It turned out that some school administrations especially wanted to convey the violent and appalling aspects of the events, hanging in the corner pictures and illustrations of violent clashes between groups, and the arrest of military officials accused of perpetrating the coup attempt (Nazlier 2016). The Ministry of National Education sent a circular to the schools ordering that in the first week of the academic year, all teachers must educate students and organize activities about the failed coup (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Education 2016). The official circular also notes that teachers must educate students in harmony with religious and national values. (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Education 2016).

The Erdoğanist and pro-AKP propaganda in schools has moved far beyond merely indoctrinating schoolchildren but has begun to impact all educational cadres. Reports show that school principals have largely ceased managing teachers based on their classroom performance. They instead blacklist teachers who express—or are suspected of possessing—unIslamic or anti-AKP opinions. Teachers forget their essential duties, such as enriching the students by demonstrating positive behaviours, and instead attempt to destroy ideas contrary to the Islamist Neo-Ottomanism espoused by the government. For example, one teacher ordered a student whose father is a known Gulen Movement member to stand up in front of his class. He then instructed all other students to spit his face. In another example, a teacher posed with his students, who are primary school children, in front of the ‘martyrdom corner’ in the class holding nooses in their hands, implying that they will hang the traitors (Hurriyet 2016).

## 8. The Islamisation of Schools

The de-secularization of the educational sector does not remain confined to introduction of religious courses in the curriculum. The AKP government has formally inserted into the public education religious practices that were labelled a sign of *irtica* and considered a red line which could not be crossed for the secularist establishment ten years ago. As the AKP strengthened its grip on all public institutions including the military, which was once the self-proclaimed guardian of secularism, it has gained the freedom to promote Islamist practices in the public sphere, including in schools and public offices.

Previously, schools did not have *masjids*, and therefore students were not allowed to pray at schools. Under the AKP, however, praying at school became a common and encouraged practice. In 2017, the regulations for opening new schools or educational institutions were changed, and newly found educational institutions were now permitted—



even encouraged—to build *masjids* for men and women (Hurriyet 2017). As of today, most Turkish schools have *masjids*, and students are encouraged and sometimes forced to join prayers at schools. For example, in Afyonkarahisar the Ministry of National Education and the Provincial Religious Authority (Müftülük) cooperatively organized an activity to motivate students to pray called simply “Let’s go to Pray”. Furthermore, all the students in the city are brought to prayers every day during the 15-days mid-year school holiday. The Provincial Religious Authority called upon teachers of ‘Religion and Ethical Knowledge’ to motivate students to attend prayers. These same teachers have also been assigned to take roll call, and to obtain student signatures as proof of prayer attendance. The Provincial Religious Authority (Müftülük) also assigned imams to collect students’ signatures in order to confirm students’ attendance at Friday prayers (Çepni 2017b). In another example, the Sub-governorship of Fatih in İstanbul ordered the Sub-Provincial Directorate of the National Education Ministry to announce to all public and private schools that it is recommended they attend morning prayers. All students in the Fatih sub-province have thus been invited to the morning prayer at Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Mosque. The initial request for students to attend prayer appears to have originated in the Imam Hatip Schools in Fatih and was then approved by government authorities (ARTI Gerçek 2014).

In the aftermath of the July 15 coup attempt, the impact of pro-AKP private foundations and *jamaats* have become more visible in the educational sector and have been incentivised by the government to fill the void left in the wake of the Gulen movement’s destruction. Not only did these foundations and *jamaats* open many new private schools, but they also penetrated public education through various official cooperation schemes based on protocols signed between the Ministry of National Education and these religious foundations and associations. Reports show that tariqas and *jamaats* are involved in many phases of public education, including the preparation of textbooks and curriculum, the teaching of religious courses, and in ensuring the participation of students in extracurricular religious activities held by these religious groups. For example, the Server Life Foundation, which is associated with *Nakşibendi* tariqa, has partnered with the Ministry of National Education in the last few years to distribute books published by the foundation and organize knowledge contests at schools. A book titled “Propriety School”, which was distributed at school in 2020, included controversial content suggesting that “music is illicit”, and “movies that features women in leading roles are problematic.” Another book entitled “Communication, Tact and Customs” also suggested that handshaking between men and women is forbidden. Responding to the criticism, Minister Ziya Selçuk said they examined the content of books before distributing them to the students, which is even more scandalous as the Ministry apparently sees no problems in the radical content it publishes (Evrensel 2021). In another case, the General Directorate for Lifelong Learning of Ministry of National Education signed a protocol with *İlim Yayma Cemiyeti*, a pro-AKP religious association, to organize and teach various courses. *Birlik Vakfı*, a religious foundation whose founders included President Erdoğan himself, also joined this protocol (Bildircin 2018).

The schools have been opened to the preachers from the pro-government tariqas and foundations to teach religious ideas and practices to children, in line with the Islamist religious and political indoctrination of the government. According to a new project, called “values operations” (*değerler harekatı*), religious values including martyrdom, mercy, austerity, and spiritual cleaning were taught by members of Diyanet and tariqa among other Islamist organizations (Ballıktas 2017). It has been also reported that this project and its curricula will be guided and crafted by the commissions outside the National Educational Ministry, including non-government religious groups (Ballıktas 2017).

The Ensar Foundation, which has drawn negative press due to its involvement in the sexual abuse of children in its dormitories, or by its personnel, has conducted several projects with the Ministry of National Education. According to a partnership with the Ministry, the Ensar Foundation gave ‘values education’ for all students enrolled in Imam-Hatip schools in Nigde (Diken 2017b).



There are many examples where school children, from kindergarten to high school, have been taken under the supervision of religious institutions associated with tariqas and jamaats. In Elazığ, 6–10-year-old children have been encouraged to march in the main street of the city carrying posters on which a statement read “Dad, teach me how to pray”. The activity has been organized by the Quran Generation Platform (“Kur’an Nesli Platformu”) together with Humanitarian Relief Foundation (İHH), which became notorious after the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident, and its support for *jihadi* activities. Students were also encouraged to pray in the Cultural Centre of Elazığ Municipality, although female students were excluded from the program to avoid the mixing of genders (ARTI Gerçek 2017b).

The Lovers of the Prophet Platform, a civil Islamic organization allied with Turkey’s Hezbollah, organized an exam of ‘The Prophet’s Life’ in public schools. Reportedly, the exam took place in 75 provinces and 300 thousand students attended the exam. The Lovers of Prophet Platform also organizes ‘Holy Birth Week’, mass meeting, which celebrates the birth of the Prophet Muhammad every year in Diyarbakır (Kronos 2018; Demokrat Haber 2015).

The Anadolu Gençlik Derneği (Anatolian Youth Organization, AGD) of the NO movement has been effectively organizing several campaigns, conferences and activities in the schools, including free travel to the Hagia Sofia for morning prayers, and to the Gallipoli battlefield. AGD also organizes events in order to strengthen Islamic “values” such as martyrdom, *jihadi*, and piety. For example, the students planted 600 thousand young trees in memory of martyrs, while a large number of AGD volunteers wore a turban called a *sarik* (AA 2018). When AGD and similar organizations were prohibited in schools, such as occurred when their ‘Siyer-i Nebi’ activity in the Private Mersin American College aroused negative attention, they initiated a sort of blacklisting and called upon the government to investigate school leaders and encouraged them to reconsider their bans. In response to Private Mersin American College, attempting to curtail the activities of AGD on campus, AGD’s Mersin branch declared: “We strongly demand Andrew Leathwood, the school coordinator, to be punished due his negligence in ministry instructions, and to be declared as *persona non grata*, who thinks that they are in the soils of the USA. Additionally, we want this school to be shown as an enemy to this nation’s values by not letting us propagate our activity regarding our Prophet, in every platform. Today, it is apparent that the mission of the USA in Tarsus, who speculates the Muslim soils like Iraq, Syria, is to raise soldiers for the imperialism deviated from the Tarsus youth, who benefited from knowing their prophet” (Mersin Time 2017).

The Sub-Provincial Directorate of National Education Ministry of Bayrampaşa in Istanbul sent an order to all schools in the province regarding the organization of a special program to celebrate the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. In this order, the Directorate also asked all students to attend the program. After public criticism of the program, representatives of the Directorate responded that these activities are organized nationwide under the protocols signed with many foundations such as TÜRGEV. Once members of the public began to object to the protocols and organizations, which did not belong to the regular school curriculum, the Directorate answered that the Ministry of National Education planned and ordered the programs so nobody ought to object to them (Diken 2017c).

The secularist opposition condemned the AKP for “surrendering public schools to the tariqas”. Speaking at a parliamentary session, CHP lawmaker Barış Yarkadaş described how in the Bahçelievler district of Istanbul, the Directorate of National Education forced students to pray under the supervision of a tariqa. He also mentioned another example where the Directorate of National Education in Maltepe district of Istanbul was allegedly handed over to a jamaat, and the directorate notified students that teachers would now visit them at home for religious instruction (Sozcu 2017). Finally, Eğitim-İş, a worker’s union in the education sector, prepared a report for the first term of the 2019–2020 academic year which noted that the protocols signed with foundations and associations operating essentially as the legal faces of tariqas, have increasingly put the education sector under the control of tariqas and jamaats (Çepni 2020).

## 9. Anti-Secular Practices at Schools

The AKP's policies of Islamising the school curriculums, appointing teachers on the basis of party affiliation, jamaat or tariqa affiliation, and government complacency about the tariqas' and jamaats' penetration into the educations sector, led to the emergence of extreme practices at some schools. In the central Anatolian city of Tokata, a female teacher reportedly told female students that they "deserve rape" for not wearing an Islamic headscarf. The teacher threatened the students, admonishing them by saying "You don't cover your head anyway, so raping you or doing evil to you is permissible (in Islam)." One of the parents told a news agency that the teacher "insulted 13-year-old girls for not wearing a headscarf during a Quran class, which is an elective course. This teacher cannot lecture my daughter" (Letsch 2015).

Through the excessive politicization of headscarves, children who do not cover their heads automatically are marginalized within sections of Turkish society on the basis that 'they are more prone to immoral acts'. In some state schools, campaigns are initiated by teachers in order to urge girl students to cover their heads and bodies. For example, according to *Evrensel* daily, a teacher from Şanlıurfa province organized a celebration for newly covered girls. In pictures shared via Facebook, girls are seen holding placards reading "I covered (myself) and then I became happy", "God-willing you will cover too", "I did it because it is a command of my God" (Evrensel 2017). In another example, Şırnak province Silopi district director of national education distributed free headscarves to girl students. In addition to its religious ascription, the headscarf has also a traditional meaning reminding women that they have secondary status within society. In this respect, for example, in one of the kindergartens, girls wearing headscarves washed the feet of the boys in a so-called theatrical performance, which signifies women's traditional submission against the men (Cumhuriyet 2017b).

One of the teachers in İstanbul's Beykent Adem Çelik Elementary School has reportedly banned the name of a female student. The girl's family claimed that the teacher banned the name of their daughter (İrem) upon claims that it means 'fake heaven'. Other families have also reportedly complained about the same teacher. The complaints have been brought to the National Assembly as a ministerial question to be answered by the Minister of National Education. The complainants argued that the teacher had taught several superstitious beliefs to students, such as 'Angels do not enter the house in which dogs live', and 'Only grandmothers give the names for the babies, if others do they become sinners' (ARTI Gerçek 2017b).

Athletic student swimmers' training has been segregated by sex at the Olympic Pool in Van, which is owned by the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Families of students have complained about the segregation, claiming that this policy damages team spirit. Representatives of the Ministry of Youth and Sports responded to the criticism by claiming that there had been not enough number of trainers to serve the students. After increasing complaints, the policy has reportedly been abandoned (Diken 2017b).

Kartal Sub-Provincial National Education Directorate ordered a public school under its authority to motivate students to become more religious by sending questions to Nihat Hatipoğlu, a theologian and religious TV showman. The order to increase students' religiosity was supported by the Governorship of İstanbul (TR724 2018).

One of the professional unions of education (Eğitim Bir Sen, which is known an ally of the AKP) has demanded the removal of the compulsory course of 'Service of Alcoholic Drinks' from the curriculum of Hotel Management and Tourism Vocational Schools. The Union demanded from the Ministry of National Education to remove this course in theory and practice as a compulsory criterion for graduation. Upon this demand, the Ministry of Education decided to remove the course named 'Preparing Alcoholic Drinks and Cocktail' from the curriculum of the Hotel Management and Tourism Vocational Schools starting from the 2017–2018 academic year (Hurriyet 2017).

## 10. Conclusions

The first two segments of this paper describe in detail the policy measures the AKP has taken to support an education infrastructure designed to spread Islamist ideology and ultimately create a generation which views the AKP as the embodiment of Islam. The first indication of this change was the increasing number of Imam Hatip Schools all over the country. Erdogan argued that this change was a way to decolonize Turkish children's minds, which had been infected by Western ideas such as secularism. Hostility towards the West and xenophobia are used to justify a new system of education which supposedly frees children from the chains around their ankles. This new education system is thus reoriented to support Turkish and Muslim moral values and love for the Turkish nation, people, and Allah. The Imam Hatip Schools are the flagships of this change. Significant amount of the education ministry's funding is going to these schools, which has made them more popular due to their superior facilities and services. This has encouraged parents to send their children to these religious schools. However, the Islamist syllabus largely fails to prepare students for university studies, particularly in the STEM and humanities areas. Despite this, the AKP persists in supporting Imam Hatip Schools, which they consider the core site of 'resistance' against Western style secular schooling.

Beyond the Imam Hatip Schools, there is also change taking place in secular or non-Islamic schools. Removal of the theory of evolution demonstrates how the AKP has managed to damage education outside the Islamic school system. Evolution by natural selection is seen as a Western idea by the AKP. Other than selectively tailoring science books, the regime has introduced compulsory religious courses. The content of these courses is based on Sunni Muslim teachings, and has even been imposed on military schools, once a stronghold of Kemalism. This has left groups such as Alevites with little flexibility to opt out of these subjects.

Not only are religious classes in schools increasingly forced upon students, even when labelled as 'elective' subjects, but their content is conservative, Islamist and jihadist. Often, the teachings of the Quran and other Islamic literature are misused and distorted. Ultimately, the changes in the syllabus are part of a wider programme of social engineering, aimed at creating a new generations of Islamist AKP voters and members.

The most radical aspect of this change in the curriculum is the inclusion of *jihadist* themes. The anger and fear that is brewed in the syllabus is transformed and rationalized through the need for Jihad. This Jihad is not a struggle between the *nafs* (Freudian Id) and the conscious self; rather it is a violent struggle against the enemies of Islam as understood by the AKP and their Islamist allies. In their conception of this battle between good and evil, Muslims are encouraged to wage *Jihad* by rebelling against the Western ideas and institutions that have enslaved their minds. *Jihad* is presented as more than just a fight for faith, but this notion is mixed with nationalistic jingoism.

Islamist movements and radical brotherhoods are allowed to open schools and Islamize pupils quite openly, and they are also allowed to interfere with public schools. In fact, the government has been collaborating with these groups. Once such example is that of Nakşibendi *tariqa*, which has partnered with the Ministry of National Education in the last few years to distribute books published by the foundation and which organizes knowledge contests at schools. These books carry with them extremist notions that forbid music and shaking hands between men and women. The large-scale triumph of these organizations over secular education has only been possible due to the AKP's financial support.

Extracurricular activities at educational institutes have also been changing under AKP rule. Groups such as Love of the Holy Prophet, which has links with Hezbollah, have called for nationwide celebrations of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad via rallies and conferences. In some provinces, school authorities have also taken steps and issued directives to schools to celebrate the 'prophet's birthday', while at the same time celebrations such as Christmas and Nowruz are discouraged. The activities organized by these groups show children wearing Arab styled turbans, and some schools have even gone as far as to handout free scarfs to young girls and celebrate when a student chooses to wear a scarf.

Even secular schools are forced to oblige when their students are forcefully taken to prayers under the supervision of *tariqas*.

This article started by reminding the readers that the AKP uses similar methods in creating their desired citizens and using education for social-engineering purpose that Kemalists had used previously. The Kemalists used secular Turkish nationalist education to create their desired typology of Turkish nationalist, secularist and pro-Western citizens. This policy has alienated and discriminated against many of Turkey's religious, ethnic and political groups who have resented the Kemalists and have pursued politics of victimhood. Among them, the Islamists have proven to be the most successful, and they been ruling the country for the last two decades. Especially in the last decade, with their authoritarian turn, they have employed revanchist policies based on their resentfulness and victimhood. All these have been done at the expense of other religious, political and ethnic groups such as the Alevis, leftists, secularists and Kemalists. As a result, Turkey is very polarized, and the dissident groups feel victimized, like the Islamists felt previously. It is obvious that we are witnessing a vicious cycle of revanchism where opposing groups do not see the others as legitimate and try to assimilate or eliminate them. Education is among the most potent of tools in this struggle. There are no promising and strong signs coming from today's opposition groups that when they come to power, they will not transcend this vicious cycle.

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## Article

# The Pioneering Formulation of the Concepts of Secularity and Secularism in the Arab-Islamicate World(s): Butrus al-Bustani's *The Clarion of Syria*

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**Abstract:** This paper critically discusses the pioneering formulation of secularity and secularism in the Arab-Islamicate world(s) found in Butrus al-Bustani's *The Clarion of Syria* (1860–1861). This discussion is conceptually based on the distinction between 'secularity' as an analytical concept, and 'secularism' as a normative and ideological concept. Here, secularity is understood to refer to (structural) distinctions, whether practical or theoretical or cognitive, between the religious and the non-religious. Secularism refers to the ideological promotion of such a differentiation and distinction between religion and, in particular, politics or the state. This paper provides a conceptual analysis of secularity, secularism, and secularization, highlighting the differences between them, as well as the epistemological and methodological requirements for drawing a distinction between them in modern and contemporary Arab thought. It also reflects on the linguistic and historical context, looking at the concepts of secularity and secularism in Arab thought prior to al-Bustani's *The Clarion of Syria*.

**Keywords:** secularity; secularism; Butrus al-Bustani; *The Clarion of Syria*; Arab-Islamicate world(s)

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## 1. Introduction

In contemporary Arab thought, the concepts of secularity, secularism, and secularization are so ambiguous that definitions can vary to the point of contradiction. Indeed, their ambiguity may be the only idea unanimously agreed upon. 'Abd al-Wahab al-Missiri, for example, claims that the term secularism is "one of the most common and exciting terms for division", failing to have any "definite meanings, dimensions and implications" (al-Missiri and al-<sup>ʿ</sup>Azmeh 2000, p. 11). Muhammad 'Abed al-Jabri goes so far as to say that "there is no motto adopted by modern Arab thought which has been a cause of ambiguity and misunderstanding like the slogan secularism" (al-Jabri 2009, p. 53). On this basis, Ahrari seems justified in claiming that "the most serious problem which the issue of secularism faces in the Middle East today is definitional" (Ahrari 1996, p. 103). To understand and resolve this definitional problem, this paper will rely on the conceptual framework adopted and developed by the Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences "Multiple Secularities—Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities" at the University of Leipzig (Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr 2020b; Darwish 2022b). According to this conceptual framework, secularity, as an analytical concept, concerns what *is*. It refers to the institutional and practical differentiation, and the theoretical or epistemological distinction, between the religious and the non-religious. The normative concept of secularism, by contrast, concerns what should be, taking a position in favour of secularization, and highlighting its advantages. Of course, as I shall demonstrate, the distinction between the two concepts does not prevent them from overlapping, nor deny the juxtaposition and entanglement of the analytical and normative dimensions of both concepts. However, the normative dimension inherent to the concept of secularism is thicker or stronger than the normative dimension to the concept of secularity.

The conceptual framework on which this paper is based is a heuristic methodological tool that “can serve as a tertium comparationis in historical-sociological research on religion and its relation to its environment” (Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr 2021, p. 288).<sup>1</sup> It assumes that secularity, as a distinction and differentiation between the religious and the non-religious, is multifaceted and goes “beyond the west and beyond modernities.” It is not based on a particular or specific understanding of religion, nor of what should be classified as religious or non-religious. The paper aims to show how secularity has been formulated in the Eastern and Arab-Islamicate context(s). It argues that al-Bustani’s pioneering formulation of the concepts of secularity and secularism in *The Clarion of Syria* is (one of) the best-case studies in the distinction between secularity and secularism from outside of a Western context. It also provides a deep insight into the distinction between the religious or spiritual and the non-religious, civil, or political in the Eastern and Arab-Islamicate world(s). Through a critical discussion and analysis of secularity and secularism in the Arab-Islamicate world(s), it is argued that Butrus al-Bustani’s *The Clarion of Syria* has played a pioneering and significant role in the formulation of these concepts. Moreover, *The Clarion of Syria* offers us an opportunity to show that secularism is not necessarily anti-religious, but that it can also take a neutral stance towards religion, or even exist as a religious secularism. By exploring and demonstrating the heuristic features of the conceptual framework, the paper will also highlight the limitations of such a conceptual framework or methodological tool. The conceptual framework should not be reduced or limited to a dualistic or dichotomous oppositional structure.

This paper begins by providing a conceptual analysis of secularity, secularism, and secularization, highlighting the differences between them, as well as the epistemological and methodological requirements for drawing a distinction between them in modern and contemporary Arab thought. This is followed by a section reflecting on the linguistic and historical context, by looking at the concepts of secularity and secularism in Arab thought prior to al-Bustani’s *The Clarion of Syria* (al-Bustani 1990, 2019).<sup>2</sup> The rest of the paper analyses al-Bustani’s secularist conception of secularity, and his pioneering formulation of the two concepts of secularity and secularism in *The Clarion of Syria*.

## 2. Conceptual Distinctions in the Arab-Islamicate World(s): Secularity, Secularism, Secularization

The analytical concept of secularity refers to the structural or institutional differentiation and the theoretical or conceptual distinction between the religious and the non-religious. One Arabic translation for secularity is al-*al-mānīyya*. This definition retains only one of José Casanova’s three traditional theses of secularization theory, these being (1) the decline of religion or religious beliefs and practices, (2) the privatization of religion and its gradually increasing absence from the public sphere, and (3) the differentiation between religion and other social spheres, or between the religious and the non-religious or secular (Casanova 1994, pp. 11–39). In the same vein, the definition retains only one of the three criteria in Charles Taylor’s conceptualization of secularity: the institutional differentiation between religion and other levels of society, particularly between religion and the state or politics (Taylor 2007, pp. 1–2).

The analytical concept of secularization refers to the process of institutional differentiation between the religious and the non-religious. It is useful here to distinguish between two Arabic terms expressing two different aspects of secularization: *ʿAlmana* as the act of secularizing and *Taʿalman* as (the process of) being secularized; both could be translated by the English term secularization. *Taʿalman* refers to the objective process of being secularized, the result of secularization, and its structural foundations. It is an internal process that is not (necessarily) the result of an external and intentional agent. It could instead exist as a “secularity without secularism”, i.e., a process of institutional differentiation or conceptual distinction, without an ideological stance or attitude towards this process. By contrast, *ʿAlmana* highlights human agency in the intentional activity of secularizing. The distinction between these concepts is important, as the process of secularization is not

always an intentional process or the realization of a prior desire, intent, or vision. The secularization process is not necessarily accompanied by secularism.

Secularism is a normative concept, referring to an ideological position that adopts, advocates for, and praises the process of secularization, stressing its advantages or necessity. It can be mapped onto the Arabic term *al-‘almānawīyya*.

The analytical nature of secularity and secularization, which are conceived as ideal types, means that they describe and analyse what *is*, while striving to avoid reference to what *ought to be*. Nevertheless, contrasting a descriptive or analytical nature with a normative or ideological one does not negate the possibility of there being a normative dimension to an analytical concept. Secularity and secularization are closely related to the ideological political field and to other normative concepts, such as modernity, democracy, and religion. Therefore, it is important to simultaneously distinguish between descriptive analytical and ideological normative concepts, on the one hand, and to highlight the relativity of this distinction, on the other. The normative aspect inherent to the concept of secularism is more thick and clear, which is why it can be said to be a “thick normative concept”, meaning that it includes two main dimensions at the same time: a non-normative analytical dimension and a normative or evaluative one.<sup>3</sup>

Secularity, as differentiation and distinction, is not limited to the political field, but may occur in any and all fields of human society, including education, science, the economy, or sports. By contrast, debates in the Arab-Islamic world(s)<sup>4</sup> often refer to secularism, and its relation to the state, politics, and religious authority, taking a normative and ideological stance. Among the most important and prominent definitions in this regard are the separation of religion or the Church from the state or politics, or the separation of religious authority from political authority. The focus on ideological and normative secularism, and the denial or ignorance of the other dimensions to this phenomenon and related phenomena, has led to widespread misunderstanding in many debates (Darwish 2022a).

Distinguishing between the concepts of secularity and secularism does not mean the two are entirely separate. As mentioned, both concepts may have a normative dimension (to varying degrees). In addition, their descriptive content also intersects. Secularism necessarily includes, or is based on, a distinction between the religious and the non-religious. Nevertheless, there is no (necessary) correspondence between secularity, secularism, and secularization. There may be secularization, a process of differentiation, without the existence of a consummate secularity, a theoretical or epistemological distinction. Secularity may exist without a secularism promoting it. Secularism may exist without successful secularization. In other words, society can be secularized without a clear distinction at the cognitive level, and without an ideological position on this secularization. In this regard, an important thesis is that the “problem of secularism” in the Arab-Islamic world(s) does not lie in the extent to which the political system has been secularized, but rather in the extent of ideological, public, and popular acceptance of this secularization.<sup>5</sup>

In Arab (secularist and Islamist) ideological discourse, secularism is sometimes considered a necessary feature of democracy, where citizens must be treated equally regardless of their religious affiliations. However, it is sometimes presented as going beyond this, being a comprehensive philosophy in its own right—an ideological, cognitive, ethical, and political view of the world and human existence, in contradiction and conflict with the religious view. This is the case, for example, in the “comprehensive secularism” of ‘Abd al-Wahab al-Missiri (al-Missiri 2002), and the “secular humanist paradigm” of Sadiq Jalal al-‘Azm (al-‘Azm 2005).

It should be noted and emphasized that the analytical concept of secularity is, in fact, not in an oppositional relationship with religion. Secularity includes both the religious and the non-religious and refers to the differentiation and distinction between the two. It does not demand the existence of a separation, estrangement, or mutual exclusion between them, as is found in the common ideological definitions of secularism in the (Arab) political field (with a particular focus on separation of religion from the state or from politics). Differentiation does not negate overlapping, interlacing, and intersection, nor does it

mean there is complete or absolute heterogeneity between the two parties. The concept of secularism could relate to a duality, instead of a dichotomy, and that duality need not become a dichotomy with two contradictory poles, except in a particular form of secularism. Distinction and differentiation may sometimes take the form of complete separation, but this is only one of the possible forms of secularity. Indeed, secularities are multiple and variant, as are secularisms.<sup>6</sup> Secularity and secularism can form part of a religion itself. For example, it can be understood that Christianity—in saying “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Matthew 22:21), for example—includes a secular(ist) vision that distinguishes between the religious and the non-religious and promotes this distinction. The same could be said of Islam. The distinction between religion and the world is present in the hadith “You are more knowledgeable about the affairs of your worldly life”, and even more clear in the Islamic and Islamist slogan “Islam is religion and state”. The latter includes a distinction not only between religion and state, but also, implicitly, between religion and Islam. In this sense, Islam includes both religion and non-religion (Jackson 2017).

Why has the terminological and conceptual distinction between secularity and secularism been so rare in (contemporary) Arabic language and thought?<sup>7</sup> In order to answer this question, one should consider two issues; one etymological, relating to the grammatical rules of the Arabic language, the other conceptual, relating to the meaning, and normative or pejorative dimension, of “secularism”.

Concerning the etymological issue, the word al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>almānawīyya (secularism) does not comply with the rules of derivation and suffixes in the Arabic language. On this basis, many have denounced and rejected its use. The suffix wī/wīyya is normally used to derive an attributive adjective or noun in cases in which it is not possible or convenient to add either yā<sup>ʾ</sup>, or a combination of yā<sup>ʾ</sup> and tā<sup>ʾ</sup> marbūṭa together. For example, it is added to the word yad (hand) to become yadawī (done by hand), because adding the suffix yā<sup>ʾ</sup>/ī to form yadī creates the meaning “my hand”. According to these rules, the grammatically correct counterpart to the English suffix “ism/ist”, with the hyperbolic meaning of ideology, doctrine, theory, or religion, is the suffix āni/āniyya. For example, the word al-tārīkh (history) becomes al-tārīkhāniyya (historicism).<sup>8</sup> On this basis, attention should be paid to the etymological peculiarity of the word al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>almānīyya. Customarily, al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>almānīyya is derived from the word <sup>ᶜ</sup>alam or <sup>ᶜ</sup>ālam (world), through the unfamiliar deletion of the letter ā after the letter <sup>ᶜ</sup>ayn (the initial <sup>ᶜ</sup>). However, the most significant peculiarity lies at the end of the word, which already includes the suffix āni/āniyya. It is considered undesirable to add the same suffix twice, which would render the word <sup>ᶜ</sup>al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>almānāniyya. Using a different suffix for this term to designate what is expressed by the English suffix “ism/ist” is considered preferable. The Arabic suffix wī/wīyya, in use since its theorization by Yasin Al-Hafiz, Abd-Allah al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>Arwi, Tayeb Tizini and other intellectuals in the 1960s, appears to be the only common and reasonable option in this regard.<sup>9</sup>

With regard to the ambiguity between al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>almānawīyya’s analytical and normative dimensions, terms ending in the suffix wī/wīyya appear to have such a pejorative connotation that it might be hard to grasp their descriptive or analytical meaning. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the prevalence of a pejorative usage does not negate—or should not negate—the descriptive meaning included in the concept. As mentioned earlier, it is important to distinguish between the phenomena of secularity or secularization and the ideology that adopts or supports them. The word “ideology” is itself often used in a negative, insulting, or derogatory sense in Arab discourse. However, the use of these words should not be restricted to that negative sense. A conceptual and terminological clarification is therefore needed to designate and distinguish the precise normative and descriptive dimensions of these concepts and terms. Terminological diversity, i.e., using a variety of terms to refer to different concepts, is necessary to allow and enrich a multiplicity of meanings.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Secularity and Secularism: On Linguistic and Conceptual Analysis, History and Genealogy in the Arab-Islamic World(s)

In Arabic language or culture, the word al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>almānīyya is predominantly used to refer to both the concepts of secularity and secularism.<sup>11</sup> This word has a long history in the Arabic language and culture; it has been in use since at least the tenth century when it was used to distinguish between lay priests and monastic priests, in an Arab-Christian context (bin al-Muqaffa<sup>ᶜ</sup> 1978, p. 95; Tarabishi 2006, p. 2017). In the nineteenth century, the word appeared in a French-Arabic dictionary (Bocthor 1828, p. 310), and in the first modern Arabic dictionary (al-Bustani 2009, Mujallad 6, Bab al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>Ayn, p. 289). In the French-Arabic dictionary, “séculier, ère” is given two definitions. It refers firstly to the secular clergy “qui vit dans le siècle”, not committed by vows to a religious community, as opposed to the regular clergy who do take vows committing them to this religious community and life. Secondly, it refers to the laity (séculier, mundain, laïque) as opposed to the clergy. The first modern Arabic dictionary mentions only this second definition.

In the nineteenth century, the term “secularity” (al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>almānīyya) did not refer to an ideological position either praising or denouncing the differentiation or distinction between the religious and the non-religious. The contemporary, normative usage of this word did not arise until the twentieth century (al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>Azmeh 2020, p. 7). Nevertheless, the prior absence of use of the term al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>almānīyya (secularity) for this purpose does not mean that the concept of “secularism” did not exist beforehand. Indeed, this ideological concept was already present in the second half of the nineteenth century. One should take care to distinguish between the terminological history of words, and the history or genealogy of concepts. There is a distinction between the history of the concepts of secularity, secularism, and secularization in the Arab-Islamic world(s), on one hand, and the history of the words associated with them, on the other.

The advent of the concept of secularism in the Arab-Islamic world(s) did not occur simultaneously with the first uses of the terms al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>almānawīyya or al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>almānīyya. The concept existed prior to and formed independently of the terms. There is no doubt that the words we choose to express an idea or a concept influence that idea or concept, and its reception and understanding by others. However, we must not lose the separation between concepts, their history, and analysis, on one hand, and the words used to express them, on the other. This is because concepts can exist without being associated with a particular term, or they may be expressed differently in different languages (e.g., secularity, al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>almānīyya, laïcité, Säkularismus, etc.) or even within the same language (e.g., Arabic having al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>almānīyya, al-duniyawīyya, al-dahriyya, al-dahrānīyya, etc.). History and conceptual analysis should not rely, either exclusively or primarily, on linguistic or terminological analysis or the terminological history of words.<sup>12</sup>

Al-Bustani’s *The Clarion of Syria* provides clear evidence of the relative independence of concept and words. In it, the concepts of secularity and secularism are formulated without the terms al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>almānīyya or al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>almānawīyya.<sup>13</sup>

Arguing that al-Bustani provided the first historical formulation of the (modern, positive) concept of secularity does not encompass a denial of the existence of precursors to this concept in Arabic texts prior to *The Clarion of Syria*. Al-Bustani was the first to both present a clear secularist discourse calling for the separation of religious or spiritual and political or civil authorities, and to theorize, promote, and justify it. Apart from Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq’s text, *Leg over Leg or The Turtle in the Tree* (al-Shidyaq 2013), no Arabic text preceding Bustani’s included an explicit call for such separation. It is absent, for example, in the texts of Rifa’<sup>ᶜ</sup>a Rafi’ al-Tahtawi (1801–1873) (al-Tahtawi 2004) and Khair al-Din al-Tunisi (1810–1890) (al-Tunisi 1967). These authors “attempted, using Islamic concepts, to justify the adoption of Western institutions, considering such adoption a return to the true spirit of Islam, not the introduction of something new to it” (Hourani 1983, p. 69).

In Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq’s text, *Leg over Leg*, we find real signs or harbingers of secularism—a proto-secularism, perhaps—in an Arab text that predates *The Clarion of Syria*. Al-Shidyaq was a Maronite who converted to Protestantism, and then later to Islam. His



strong criticism of the (Maronite) Church was closely linked to the death of his brother As'ad al-Shidyaq, who, because of his conversion to Protestantism, was excommunicated by the Church, and subjected to arrest and torture for six years, until his death in 1830. In his severe attack on the Maronite Church, Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq stressed that it had no right or authority to interfere in such cases, especially given that that Christ himself recognized civil authority as being "Caesar's authority", respecting its independence from, and superiority over, religious authority. His argument was based on Jesus' famous phrase: "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21). Al-Shidyaq focused more on attacking the (Maronite) Church than on developing and promoting secularity, however. He based his stinging criticism on the idea that the clergy had no religious, civil, or political authority with regard to his brother's actions (al-Shidyaq 2013, pp. 1, 19, 297). Thus, we find in al-Shidyaq's *Leg over Leg* a general distinction between the civil and the religious, one of the two basic dimensions of the concept of secularity. However, al-Shidyaq never developed this into a secularism with clear outlines and foundations, with a clear call for a separation between the religious or spiritual and the political or civil.

Although al-Bustani's texts in general, and *The Clarion of Syria* in particular, were central in creating the pioneering formulation of secularism in the Arab-Islamic world(s), many researchers fail to give this foundational contribution sufficient consideration. For example, the chapter in Azzam al-Tamimi's book *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East* dealing with "The Origins of Arab Secularism," (Tamimi 2000, pp. 13–28) fails to mention al-Bustani at all. In fact, he is only referred to once in the entire book, where his dictionary Muhit al-Muhit is cited. In a general study of secularity, secularism, and secularization in the Arab world(s), another scholar, Wu, confined himself to two and a half lines to point out that both al-Bustani and al-Shidyaq had criticized the Church. Wu agreed with Nazik Saba Yared (Yared 2002, p. 25) that al-Bustani and al-Shidyaq's positions were identical—or at least similar—as both "sought the separation of the spiritual from the temporal power of the Church, and not from that of the Ottoman Sultan" (Wu 2007, p. 58) This paper argues that al-Bustani's contribution to the formulation of Arab secularism in *The Clarion of Syria* was pioneering, foundational, and an important turning point.

#### 4. Secularity and Secularism in Butrus al-Bustani's *The Clarion of Syria*

*The Clarion of Syria* is a periodical, newspaper,<sup>14</sup> or series of eleven pamphlets<sup>15</sup> that was published between September 1860 and April 1861, directly after the "strife" (fitna) or sectarian civil war that erupted in 1860 in what is now Lebanon and Syria.<sup>16</sup> The first three pamphlets were titled *The Clarion of Syria* (1–3), the subsequent eight pamphlets (4–11) followed the format of, for example, *Syria's Clarion or the Fourth Patriotism* (substituting in fifth, sixth, etc.) (Khuri 1995, p. 45). Although the content of the pamphlets makes the motivation behind them and their connection to the civil war clear, it is not clear why al-Bustani stopped writing them. It may be that he "stopped publishing them after the situation calmed down and people's conditions in general settled" (de Tarazi 1913, p. 46). Equally, al-Bustani continued to publish his ideas in newspapers, texts, and other projects that can arguably be considered a continuation of *The Clarion of Syria* in other forms.<sup>17</sup> Al-Bustani did not announce himself as the author of this series of pamphlets when they were first published, instead signing them "from a patriot". They were directed specifically at those whom al-Bustani addressed in the pamphlets as "countrymen". Later, in 1869, he revealed in Muhit al-Muhit that he was the author (Hanssen and Safieddine 2019, p. 7).

In the following two subsections, we will show al-Bustani's pioneering contribution on the question of secularity and secularism in the Arab-Islamic world(s). The first part focuses on the concept of secularity in *The Clarion of Syria* through a discussion of its forms of analytical distinction between the religious and the non-religious. The second part concerns the normative secularism present in the text; that is, al-Bustani's ideological attitude vis-a-vis this distinction.

#### 4.1. Secularity in *The Clarion of Syria* by Butrus al-Bustani

Jens Hanssen states that al-Bustani “categorized and divided the world into conceptual opposites”, but only gives examples that express binary or dualistic oppositions: “past/present, religion/politics, civilization/barbarism, Europe/Africa, victims/perpetrators, civil war/civil society” (Hanssen 2019a, p. 37). Despite the strong presence of such binaries, the conceptual world in *The Clarion of Syria* is not composed exclusively of binaries or even dualities. There are also triple and quadruple conceptual oppositions or relations. Additionally, the dualities Hanssen lists, whilst having distinct components, are not necessarily contradictory binaries, not being normative dichotomies with two mutually and normatively exclusive poles. In other words, the conceptual world al-Bustani presents in *The Clarion of Syria* is neither limited to, nor centred on, either a dualistic or a binary view. The text includes a significant number of descriptive or analytical contrapositions that do not take on a binary or dichotomic form. The three-sided distinction between the religious, the civil, and the moral is one of the most prominent examples that show that al-Bustani’s conceptual world is not purely dualistic, nor necessarily dichotomic. With these issues in mind, it can be said that there is a strong presence of dualities and non-binary conceptual distinctions in many of the contexts and issues addressed by al-Bustani in *The Clarion of Syria*. In some contexts, these conceptual distinctions are presented as merely descriptive and analytical pairs, but it is not uncommon for this to be accompanied by an explicit or implicit evaluative and normative dimension, praising one side, and highlighting its advantages or necessity, whilst condemning the other(s). With the presence of the normative dimension, dualistic distinctions are turned into binary and dichotomic hierarchies. However, the normative dimension sometimes takes a different form, not being based on a hierarchical comparison of opposing sides of conceptual distinctions, but on the need for such distinction and differentiation to begin with.

In *The Clarion of Syria*, secularity appears in the form of a repeated and emphasized distinction between what is religious or spiritual, on one hand, and what is civil, moral, or political, on the other. As for secularism, it manifests itself in the call to separate these two aspects, especially when they are embodied as two authorities: a religious or spiritual authority and a civil or political authority.

In the first six pamphlets, al-Bustani confines himself to describing the differentiation or distinction between the religious and the non-religious. The secularist normative attitude toward this distinction starts in the seventh pamphlet, where the call for adopting this distinction and not mixing or merging the two spheres appears quite clearly. In the following I present some examples, from *The Clarion of Syria*, of secularity as the distinction between the religious and the non-religious.

In *The Clarion of Syria*, al-Bustani makes a continuous and stable distinction between the religious, the literary, and the civil or civic. In the third pamphlet, he distinguishes between “religious, moral, and civic duties”, arguing that, according to such duties, “the treacherous oppressors and those who are in positions of responsibility” should immediately take the initiative to help the oppressed and victims of the civil war, and provide them with what they need by any means possible (al-Bustani 2019, p. 73). In the fourth and seventh pamphlet he distinguishes between “civil, moral, and religious freedoms/rights”, with these being among the rights that the “people of the homeland” should enjoy in the country (al-Bustani 2019, pp. 77, 96). The same distinction can be found in the sixth pamphlet, where he writes about the rejection or ignorance of “religious, moral, and civic duties” as one of the negative effects of the civil war (al-Bustani 2019, p. 91). In the fifth pamphlet, he also distinguishes between “religious, moral, and civil interests and public welfare” (al-Bustani 2019, p. 80), which was disrupted and damaged by the civil war. In the seventh pamphlet, he considers the lack of three types of wisdom (religious, moral, and civil) as a source of enmity, social division, and family factions (al-Bustani 2019, p. 94).

It is noticeable that, in the contexts referred to here, the distinction between the religious, the civil, and the moral in al-Bustani’s conceptual world does not dissolve into binaries or dichotomic oppositions with contradictory sides. There is an overlapping

entanglement between the two sides, and the distinction and differentiation by which secularity is defined does not necessarily include a separation or normative hierarchy between its two ends.

In this regard, one of the most important distinctions is that between the religious and the civil. In the fifth pamphlet, al-Bustani writes of “civil and religious prejudices (al-aghrād)” (al-Bustani 2019, p. 73).<sup>18</sup> In the ninth pamphlet, he distinguishes between “religious and civil interests”.<sup>19</sup> He also distinguishes between Sharia and custom, and between religion and politics (al-Bustani 2019, pp. 86, 96, 109). Al-Bustani’s distinction between religion and the world (al-Bustani 1990, p. 27; 2019, p. 83) is an extension and evocation of an old distinction in Arab-Islamic culture. In his book, *al-ʿIqtisād fī al-ʿIqtisād*, Al-Ghazali distinguishes between “religion order” (niẓām al-dīn) and “world order” (niẓām al-dunyā) (al-Ghazali 2013, 2014). In *Adab al-Din wa-l-Dunya*, al-Mawardi distinguishes between Adab al-Din and Adab al-Dunya, as is clear from the book’s title (al-Mawardi 2013). The distinction between religion (al-dīn) and the world (al-dunyā) can be seen as one of the precursors of secularity that already existed in this culture before the establishment of modernity and import of Western secularity. This is Rushain Abbasi’s main thesis in his recently published paper: “Did Premodern Muslims Distinguish the Religious and Secular? The Dīn—Dunyā Binary in Medieval Islamic Thought.” (Abbasi 2020).

Secularity in the Arab-Islamic world(s) is founded upon a tripartite distinction between the religious, the civil, and the moral (ʿadab/ʾadabī). The distinction and differentiation between the religious and the moral is of particular significance here, having been present almost from the start of Arab-Islamic culture. Armando Salvatore has argued that the “soft distinction” between ʿadab and religion, shariʿa, or hadith is the “mother of the distinctions” between the “religious and non-religious” in Arab-Islamic culture (Salvatore 2018, 2019, pp. 35–51). Salvatore concludes that “ʿadab provides a narrative and normative umbrella to a proliferating grid of concepts, practices and institutions that have been identified as potential carriers of a secular ethos of distinction within pre-colonial, Islamic history” (Salvatore 2019, p. 38). He calls this secularism “secular civility” (Salvatore 2018, pp. 14, 17).

The distinction between the religious and the civil is the one that is most central to the secular vision expounded upon in *The Clarion of Syria*, and may be seen as the “father” of the modern distinction between the religious and the secular in the Arab-Islamic world(s). Albert Hourani claims that it “is through al-Afghani above all that [the idea of ‘civilization’] reaches the Islamic world” (Hourani 1983, p. 114).<sup>20</sup> However, we should not forget that the concepts and terms civil (madanī) and civilization (madanīyya) have existed since the early Arab Renaissance, and thus were used before al-Afghani’s writings. The distinction between the religious and the civil is present not only in the texts by al-Shidyaq, it is also one of the most prominent and important “secular” distinctions in *The Clarion of Syria*. What is interesting about the term “civil” is that it can be used in one context to express what is religious or Islamic, and in another to describe what is secular or non-religious. This ambiguity can be seen in its dual use, on the one hand, in contemporary Islamic discourse about the civil state as an Islamic state, and, on the other hand, as a synonym for the concept of “secular” or one of its components or dimensions. The latter is the case in *The Clarion of Syria*.

ʿAziz al-ʿAzmeḥ is correct in stating that the term “civil” was once used to refer to what came to be seen later as “secular”, (al-ʿAzmeḥ 2020, p. 7) such that that the word “secular” became a direct replacement for the word “civil”. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the concept of civilization (madanīyya) is not (necessarily) a mutually exclusive negation of the concept of “religious”, but is (also) intertwined with it. This overlap is clear when there is an equality between the concepts of the religious and the Islamic. This broad, double, and “fuzzy” meaning of the concepts of the civil (madanī) and civilization (madanīyya) may help to explain why it has positive connotations for many religious “Islamists” and non-religious “secularists” alike: Butrus al-Bustani, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Farah Anton, Muhammad Abdo, Francis al-Marrash, and Rashid Rida, for

example, all see these concepts in a positive light. We will show the centrality of the ideas of the civil and civilization in al-Bustani's thought, in our discussion of the secularist vision of *The Clarion of Syria*.

#### 4.2. Secularism in *The Clarion of Syria* by Butrus al-Bustani

In *The Clarion of Syria*, al-Bustani not only draws a distinction between the religious and the non-religious, but also emphasizes the paramount importance of this distinction. He adopts an explicit and firm normative stance towards it, especially regarding its embodiment in political authorities or forces. One should note, however, that the first pamphlet, which outlines most of the various distinctions between the religious and the non-religious, does not adopt an explicitly normative stance on those distinctions. Moreover, al-Bustani does not use the terms "politics", "political", or "politician" in any of the first four pamphlets, and hardly uses them in the fifth and sixth. However, from the seventh pamphlet, al-Bustani's secularist position appears explicitly and directly. In this, he writes:

Anyone who studies the histories of religious communities and peoples knows the harm visited upon religion and people when religious and civil matters, despite the vast difference between them, are mixed. This mixing should not be allowed on religious or political grounds. But how often has it had a hand in the present destruction? God knows, and so do you. And since this patriot is not from the band of fools, he also knows.

(al-Bustani 2019, pp. 95–96)

This text mixes description with evaluation, with what *ought to be* being intertwined with what *is*. In this mixture, evaluation is based on description, implicitly or explicitly including it, and description establishes evaluation, necessarily leading to it. Al-Bustani first presents the necessity of distinction or separation of the religious and civil spheres in his description of the "histories of religious communities and peoples". Here, he asserts the negative effects of mixing (or not differentiating between) religious and civil matters. The damage resulting from such mixing affects both politics and religion, something that the "patriot" who is "not from the band of fools" must necessarily be aware of. This implicit normative judgement is nonetheless still stated in terms of a description of what *is* or *was*. He moves on from this to talk explicitly of what *should* or *should not be* permissible in religion and politics, stating that the lack of differentiation and distinction between religious and political matters should not be permissible from either a religious or a political perspective.

Further, al-Bustani emphasizes the necessity of treating all people equally, providing them with full rights regardless of their (religious or sectarian) affiliation. This call includes a distinction between decrees and laws, i.e., between distinct rights granted to specific persons, sects, or groups, and the equal "religious, civil, and moral rights" applying to all, regardless of "their affiliation to particular persons or communities" (al-Bustani 2019, pp. 95–96). This distinction between (religious or sectarian) affiliations and the rights of citizens, or "countrymen" as al-Bustani puts it, forms a constituent basis of the secular demand for democratic, legal, political, and moral equality between citizens, regardless of their different religious affiliations. *The Clarion of Syria* contains a repeated presentation and clarification of this distinction, as well as a strong emphasis on its importance and urgent necessity.

In the ninth pamphlet, al-Bustani strengthens his secularist discourse, and begins to formulate it in the language of a "separation" that must take place, or the "dividing line" that should be established between religious and civil matters, if the two are to both be successful:

As long as our people do not distinguish between religion, which is necessarily an intimate matter between the believer and his Creator, and civic affairs, which govern and shape social and political relations between the human being and their fellow countrymen or between them and their government, as long as our

people do not draw a sharp line to separate these two distinct concepts, they will fail to live up to what they preach or practice.

(al-Bustani 2019, p. 107)

At this juncture, it is useful to recall the distinction between the concepts of secularity and secularism. The analytical concept of secularity refers to the distinction or differentiation between the religious and the non-religious, while secularism, an ideological vision that favours, desires, defends, or promotes secularity, often speaks in the language of separation, seeking to establish clear and strict borders completely separating the religious from the non-religious. The prevailing (secular) definitions of secularity and secularism in the Arab-Islamic world(s) are the separation of religion, church, or religious authority from the state, politics, or political authority. Undoubtedly, separation is a form of differentiation, but this special case only occurs in three possible scenarios: (1) within the framework of an ideological discourse, as is generally the case in the contemporary Arab-Islamic world(s); (2) stemming from the secularization of the political sphere following a violent struggle between political and religious authority, as in revolutionary France or Atatürk's Turkey; or (3) within the framework of an authoritarian or totalitarian political regime, as in China and North Korea today, and in the Soviet Union in the past. Such separation is often the result of a negative view of religion and is carried out to spare the state and society its actual or perceived dangers. In such cases, secularism is conceived and presented as protecting the state and society from religion, as part of a continuous effort to exclude it from the public sphere. This is the case, for example, with French *laïcité*. Separation can, however, also aim to protect religion and religious people from state interference, control, or limitation of (religious) freedoms and rights, especially when the separation is only partial. A case in point is secularism in the United States.

Although al-Bustani used the language of separation, his secular discourse was not at all anti-religious. In order to understand his language of separation, it is necessary to look at the historical context in which al-Bustani was writing, and to which he was responding in *The Clarion of Syria*. The separation that he demanded is closely linked to the bloody and violent conflict that was taking place at the time, in the form of civil war and religious sectarian strife.<sup>21</sup> Al-Bustani was aware of the risks surrounding the process of separation, so showed flexibility by pointing out that it could take place gradually, and in stages. He believed that the historical context should be considered when implementing these procedures, that it “depends not only on place, time, existing mood, and circumstance, but also on the informed opinion and the judicious will of those entitled to rule” (al-Bustani 2019, p. 117).

The secularist discourse in *The Clarion of Syria* reaches its climax in the tenth pamphlet, where the strongest and clearest call for secularism is to be found. Here al-Bustani emphasizes the necessity of erecting “a barrier between leadership or spiritual authority, on the one hand, and politics or civil authority, on the other” (al-Bustani 2019, p. 117). He seeks to justify this necessity, not only pragmatically, but also with a theoretical justification based on the natures of (and essential differences between) the two fields of religion and politics. He emphasises their fundamental differences, claiming that

The [leadership or spiritual authority] is linked—by itself and by nature—to interior and fixed matters that do not change with time and circumstance, whereas [political authority] is related to external matters that are not fixed but can change and be reformed depending on place, time, and circumstance. The two are distinct and incompatible. It is well nay impossible to reconcile both in one person.

(al-Bustani 2019, p. 117)

Al-Bustani expands on the damages and negatives that can result from mixing (or not separating) religious or spiritual authorities with civil or political ones and goes as far as claiming that: “without separating both types of authority, it is no exaggeration to say that no civilization can exist, live, or grow” (al-Bustani 2019, p. 117).

Civilization is a central concept in *The Clarion of Syria* and is attributed great significance in all of the pamphlets. Furthermore, al-Bustani dedicated the entire last pamphlet, *On Civilization*, to clarifying his vision of the concept. In *The Clarion of Syria*, al-Bustani justifies the necessity of a separation between religious and political authorities by appealing to its impact on, and relevance to, civilization (as he describes it). As we have seen, al-Bustani believed “the existence, life and growth of civilization” to be necessarily conditional on the occurrence of secularization in the political sphere. The close relationship between the concepts of “civilization” and “the civil” in al-Bustani’s secularist ideological vision, his stressing of the importance of being civilized, and the separation between the civil and the political, may give the impression that his secularism adopts an anti-religious and hostile discourse toward religion. Indeed, the belief that secularity is necessarily anti-religious is common in Arab–Islamicate culture, with some Arab secularists providing a partial justification for such a belief.<sup>22</sup> The impression of al-Bustani’s secularism possibly adopting an anti-religious stance is reinforced by the close interrelationship, in traditional theories of secularization and modernization, between modernity, democracy, the decline in religious beliefs and practices, the privatization of religion, and the differentiation between the religious and the non-religious (secular).

However, al-Bustani’s belief in separating the religious and the civil was certainly not accompanied by a negative view of religion. On the contrary, al-Bustani adopted a positive, essentialist view of religion, seeing it as an indispensable condition and a necessary aspect of civilization. In the eleventh pamphlet, in his discussion on the most appropriate and important aspects of civilization, he emphasizes that “the first of those is religion. [ . . . ] True religion is the foundation of true civilization” (al-Bustani 2019, p. 128). A similar sentiment is to be found in the seventh pamphlet, where he states that the return, existence, and persistence of peace between people, and the overcoming of the factors that led to its loss during the civil war, depends on certain conditions, the most important of which are:

[ . . . ] living and attentive religions to teach their children to view those who hold different beliefs neither with contempt nor with scorn, as is now often the case, but with care and affection, as among members of one family whose father is the homeland, its mother the Earth, and God the single creator, with all members created out of the same substance, sharing the same destiny [ . . . ].

(al-Bustani 2019, p. 95)

In the ninth pamphlet, diagnosing the causes of the civil war and the many great crimes committed in it, al-Bustani states that “those despicable wars and terrible atrocities were the logical consequences of irreligious and uncivilized proclivities. Without reforming their ways, they will likely fall deeper into misery, and not recover from their downfall” (al-Bustani 2019, p. 107). He is careful not to criticize religion, not wishing to offend the sensibilities of religious people. Instead, he emphasizes that true religion is free from all negatives, “because a true religion is from God, who is the truth and its source [ . . . ]” (al-Bustani 2019, p. 100).

According to al-Bustani, secularity and secularism are not anti-religious at all. The secularism he theorized and practiced is in fact a “religious secularism” in more ways than one. Firstly, it considers religion and secularity to be inseparable and necessary conditions for civilization. Secondly, it sees secularism as itself being based on religion, not contradicting or fighting against religion. Thirdly, its explicit and primary goal is to improve the condition of religion, not to harm it; al-Bustani’s religious secularism seeks to act for the good of religious people, not their exclusion. It should be stressed once again that secularity and secularism are not necessarily antagonistic nor external to religion; they can overlap and intertwine with it, and even be based on it. Al-Bustani’s secularist position takes religion—though not any specific religious text—as its basic and fundamental foundation. There is rarely any explicit or even implicit reference to religious texts in *The Clarion of Syria*. When such reference is made, it is usually to Islamic texts or sayings, rather than to the Bible or other Christian texts (al-Bustani 2019, p. 68). One should, therefore, not rush to label al-Bustani’s view as a “Christian secularism” or a “secular(ist) Christianity”,



as many have. Abdulatif Tibawi linked al-Bustani's writing in *The Clarion of Syria* to his Christian religious lineage or affiliation, and his evangelical milieu (living among American missionaries), despite acknowledging that al-Bustani "had become somewhat estranged from the American mission by 1860" (Tibawi 1963, pp. 137–82; Hanssen 2019a, p. 37; Zeuge-Buberl 2017, p. 173).

By the time of the writing of *The Clarion of Syria*, Albert Hourani demonstrates, al-Bustani "had himself broken out of the closed community of the Maronites to become a Protestant, and self-exile may well have turned his mind to the thought of some wider community to which he could belong" (Hourani 1983, p. 101). Nevertheless, Hourani considers that "in a sense he is still writing as a Christian to Christians [ . . . ]" (Hourani 1983, p. 101). The most prominent claim about al-Bustani's Christianity (or Christian thought) and secularism can be found in Hisham Sharabi's book *Arab Intellectuals and the West*. Sharabi classifies all Arab intellectuals primarily on the basis of their religious lineage, in particular "Christian Westernizers" versus "Muslim Secularists" (Sharabi 1970, pp. 7–23). In this context, Sharabi adopts the hypothesis that the distinctive nature of the Christian approach to Arab heritage lies in its secular orientation (Sharabi 1970, p. 17).<sup>23</sup> What about secular (ist) Muslims, though? How can we talk about a secular (ist) orientation being unique to the Christian standpoint, whilst at the same time talking of secular Muslims? The answer, for Sharabi, is clear: "Obviously, the Muslim secularist could never be as truly secular as the Christian Westernizer" (Sharabi 1970, p. 21). According to this logic, a Christian can only be secular, and the secularism of a Muslim cannot live up to the secularism of a Christian.

Despite the rich and insightful knowledge provided by Sharabi's approach, it suffers from a three-dimensional unilateralism: religious, non-dialectical, and external. Its religious unilateralism can be seen in the way it takes religious lineage as the fundamental criterion for classifying thought and thinkers. It does not consider the possibility of thinkers transcending this involuntary affiliation, at least partly and relatively, through the voluntary adoption of ideas, values, and orientations that are different or even contrary to those prevalent in their religious milieu. Its non-dialectical unilateralism can be seen in its focus on involuntary religious lineage, without considering the effects of voluntary adoption of thought, resulting from voluntary affiliation. It also does not consider the possibility of other intellectual, moral, political, and economic influences that may outweigh the influence of religious lineage. Sharabi's approach is also characterized by an external unilateralism, interpreting texts by factors that are external to them, and claiming a necessarily causal link between religious lineage or affiliation and intellectual stance.

Sharabi therefore considers texts as mere reflections and expressions of an author's background, without addressing the logic or content of those texts independently. According to such an approach, *The Clarion of Syria* is thus an expression of Christianity, regardless of its content, and regardless of what views its author had actually adopted. Such a unilateralist approach, however, cannot explain the fact that, on the subject of secularism, for example, the "Christian" 'Azmi Bishara agrees more closely with the "Muslims" Muhammad Abid Al-Jabri and Burhan Ghalioun than he does with his fellow "Christian" George Tarabishi.

Al-Bustani's secularism is, in reality, much closer to that of the "Muslim" Fouad Zakaria, than to Tarabishi. However, Tarabishi's hard secularism is closer to that of Sadik Jalal al-ʿAzmi and 'Aziz al-ʿAzmi. Even in the so-called Arab Renaissance, there was an anti-secular trend in a group of Christian Arabs, whose voice became prominent in the Catholic weekly newspaper *al-Bashir*, published between 1870 and 1947. Mohammad Magout points out that, "Al-Bashir was for the most part concerned with European politics and the issues of Catholic denominations in the region. It defended the Catholic Church against any perceived attacks by other periodicals, asserting the rights of the Pope to temporal power and rejecting any claims that the authority of the Church is limited to spiritual matters only" (Magout 2019, p. 10).

Neither Al-Bustani's secularism, nor Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq's earlier proto-secularism, are directly related to the alleged Westernization of Arab Christians and their alienation

from their Islamic milieu, as Hisham Sharabi suggested. In the case of al-Shidyaq, it was directly, closely, and publicly linked to problems within Christianity, occurring between Catholic Maronites and Protestants. Al-Bustani's writing was rooted in the context of a religious or sectarian civil war that was, particularly at its outset, between Druze and Maronites. While al-Shidyaq focused his critical discourse on Maronite ecclesiastics in particular, al-Bustani viewed matters from a broader and more comprehensive perspective. His call for separation had a theoretical basis in his analysis of the essential natures of religion and politics, and a practical basis in the negative effects of non-separation, and the positive effects of separation.

In agreement with Butrus Abu-Manneh, and counter to the unilateralist view, we suggest that al-Bustani's thought "led the way to Arabism, politically to Ottomanism, and inevitably to Syrian nationalism" (Abu-Manneh 1980, p. 300). In addition to his call for the separation of religious or spiritual and civil or political authorities, al-Bustani's secularism in *The Clarion of Syria* is also embodied in his nationalism or patriotism, and his call for unity, harmony and solidarity among Syrians, regardless of their religious and sectarian affiliations. With this, al-Bustani was calling for a non-religious national association to be prioritized over religious associations. To use the terminology of distinction and differentiation, we can say that the patriotism that al-Bustani theorized and promoted in *The Clarion of Syria* is distinguished from allegiances or political units based on religion, sect, or denomination. He lays out, by way of contrast, the practical impossibility of, or lack of logic in, the idea of an "Islamic nation"<sup>24</sup> or a "Christian nation" (al-Bustani 2019, p. 108). It was these concepts that al-Bustani devoted most of his efforts to countering, in his eleven pamphlets highlighting the disadvantages of sectarianism, religious fanaticism, and intolerance among religious communities. From al-Bustani's point of view, patriotism does not contradict religion. In fact, he was keen on repeating the phrase "love of the homeland is an element of faith" (al-Bustani 2019, pp. 106–107, 59–61), using it as a slogan for the magazine *Al-Jinan*, which ran from 1870 to 1886.

## 5. Conclusions

Al-Bustani wrote *The Clarion of Syria* as a direct response to the events of the civil war and religious sectarian strife that took place in what is now Lebanon and Syria in 1860. In diagnosing the causes of these events, he focused almost entirely on internal religious factors, which he saw embodied in religious and sectarian fanaticism and intolerance. To address the effects of the war, and to avoid its recurrence, al-Bustani distinguished between the religious or the spiritual and the political or the civil, pushed for a separation between them, and called for political groupings not to be based on religious or sectarian ties and affiliations. He believed secular or non-religious patriotism to be the solution, or an essential part of the solution, without adopting a negative stance towards religion itself. In fact, he saw complementarity and positive interaction between religion, secularism and nationalism as a necessary condition for "the existence, life and growth of civilization". Although we find the seeds of secularity or secularism, as a distinction between the religious and the non-religious, in Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq's work, and even in Arab-Islamic culture since its inception, al-Bustani was the first in the Arab-Islamic world(s) to properly theorize secularism, and take a clear, positive stance towards secularity. Al-Bustani's theorization of secularism, and his secularist defence of it, include arguments and ideas that are still present in the Arab-Islamic world(s) today. His formulation of secularity and secularism represents their positive conception, while the negative conception of them as hostile and anti-religious crystallized and spread later. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani presented the first such negative formulation in the modern Arab-Islamic world(s), in his text *Refutation of the Materialism* (al-Afghani 1968). It is necessary to study the descriptive and normative implications of both the positive and negative formulations and consider the arguments of those who adopt them. Doing so furthers our understanding of the concepts of secularity and secularism in contemporary Arab-Islamic culture as thick normative concepts.

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## Notes

- 1 For more details concerning the broader contemporary transnational discussion on the role of religion, and the “identity crisis of the academic study of Religion”, see (Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr 2020a, 2021).
- 2 I will generally refer to the English translation of al-Bustani’s text (al-Bustani 2019), unless a reference to the Arabic text (al-Bustani 1990) is necessary.
- 3 Bernard Williams was the first to coin the term “thick ethical concept” in his book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, in 1985. Here, he describes this concept as having only one normative dimension, either negative or positive. However, numerous scholars in (meta-)ethical philosophy have argued that thick ethical concepts can be characterized by an “evaluative flexibility,” which means that “a thick concept can be used to indicate some pro stance in one case, and a con stance in another, and yet we can still be talking of the very same concept” (Kirchin 2017, pp. 4, 49–53; Williams 2006).
- 4 Marshall Hodgson (1922–1968) distinguishes between two adjectives, “Islamic” and “Islamicate”, the former referring to Islam as a religion, while the latter refers more broadly to the culture historically associated with Islam and Muslims, even when it is present among non-Muslims (Hodgson 1974, pp. 56–59).
- 5 Gudrun Krämer stresses the existence of a strong (political) secularization in the Islamic context: “Since the modernizing reforms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Arab governments have been secular in the sense of being non-clerical and making no claims to religious authority” (Krämer 2015, p. 126). The exception here is the Moroccan king, who combines political and religious authority. Based on his descent from the Prophet, and his ability to grant religious blessing (baraka), the Moroccan king possesses religious authority alongside his political authority. Kramer notes: “Significantly, then, the one contemporary Arab ruler credited with religious authority has used it not to implement Sharia but to adapt it to modern conditions, a policy widely acclaimed by secular human rights activists” (Krämer 2015, p. 126).
- 6 Concerning the idea of “multiple or variant secularities”, see (Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr 2016; Zemmin 2021). Regarding the idea of “multiple secularisms”, see (Stepan 2010, pp. 114–144).
- 7 The distinction between these two concepts often occurs in the context of translated texts (specifically from English and French). See, for example, the translation from French (Arkun 1996). For texts translated from English, see (Mahmood 2018). One of the rare and important exceptions in this regard is (Barut 1994, pp. 229–245).
- 8 ‘Abd al-Jalil al-Kur, one of those who strongly objects to the use of the suffix *wī/wīyya* as the counterpart to the English and French suffix “ism/ist”, wrote in this regard: “Arabic has three suffixes of attribution, the first of which (*ī/īyya*) is used as a regular suffix at the end of every noun to derive an attributive adjective and noun (*sha‘bī/sha‘bīyya*, *‘ilmī/‘ilmīyya* [scientific], *‘islāmī/‘islāmīyya* [Islamic]), and the second (*wī/wīyya*) is used as a regular suffix for a noun where it is not possible to use the first suffix (*yadawī/yadawīyya*, *shafawī/shafawīyya* [oral], *lughawī/lughawīyya* [linguistic]); and the third (*ānī/ānīyya*) is an irregular/unusual suffix because it exceeds the other two by two letters (*ānī*) and is used to denote the meaning of exaggeration (*sha‘bānī/sha‘bānīyya* [populist/popularism], *‘almānī/‘almānīyya* [secularist/secularism], *‘islāmānī/‘islāmānīyya* [Islamist/Islamism], similar to *rūḥānī/rūḥānīyya* [spiritual/spirituality or spiritualism] . . . )” (al-Kur 2013).
- 9 Yasin Al-Hafiz uses the terms *‘iqtisādawīyya* (economism) and *tiqnawīyya* (technicism). See (al-Hafiz 1975, p. 24). In many of Tayeb Tizini’s texts, the suffix *wī/wīyya* is used as counterpart to the English suffix “ism”, seen, for example, in his use of the terms *al-salafawīyya* (salafism) and *al-‘asrawīyya* (modernism) (Tizini 1994, pp. 17, 18, 29).
- 10 On this basis, the term “Islamicate” is used in this text to refer to the culture associated with Muslims and Islam, in order to distinguish it from Islam purely considered as a religion, as is referenced by the word “Islamic”, and from the ideological adoption of Islam, as is referenced by “Islamism”. The concept of “Islamicate” allows for consideration of the Christian Arab, Butrus al-Bustani, and the Iranian Muslim, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, under one umbrella, that of “Arab-Islamicate culture”.
- 11 In the second half of the twentieth century, an intense debate took place between Arab intellectuals over whether the word “secularity” (*‘almānīyya*) derives from “science” (*‘ilm*) or “world” (*‘ālām*). The eventual near-unanimous consensus was that the correct linguistic derivation is from *‘ālām*, and not *‘ilm*. ‘Aziz al-‘Azmeḥ is one of the many scholars who argues this. See, (al-‘Azmeḥ 1992, pp. 17–18). However, in the recently published English translation of this book, the two paragraphs in which al-‘Azmeḥ expressed this belief were not included. See, (al-‘Azmeḥ 2020, pp. 7–8). This debate was not limited to texts in Arabic. See, for example, (Ahrari 1996, p. 113, n.).
- 12 Fou’ad Zakariyya believes that “the uproar over the derivation of the term *‘ilmānīyya*’ from either *‘ālām* or *‘ilm*’ is highly ex-aggerated, since the meanings are intertwined” (Zakariyya 2005, pp. 14–15). Arguing for avoiding excessive focus on the

linguistic and historical analysis of the word when seeking to understand the concept it refers to does not mean underestimating the importance of understanding the meaning of the word and its derivation, especially when terminological change relates to a conceptual change in meaning. On this basis, I agree with Zakariyya that current Arab thought places an excessive focus on the linguistic, terminological and historical analysis of the term, but I wish to stress that one should not underestimate the importance of this debate. We should equally avoid becoming indifferent toward its content, stating that all terms and meanings are equal and acceptable.

- 13 This issue is not only related to the concepts of secularity or secularism, but extends to many others. I agree with Ussama Makdisi and Jens Hanssen that the idea or phenomenon of “(anti)sectarianism” is one of the main themes of *The Clarion of Syria*, even though the text does not contain any distinct, clear, or specific term referring to this phenomenon. Hanssen wrote in this regard, “If, as Kosellek has argued, history does not depend on language to happen, then sectarianism can exist avant le mot” (Hanssen 2019b, p. 60). See also, (Makdisi 2019).
- 14 Jurji Zaydan describes *The Clarion of Syria* as “the first Arab bulletin that appeared in Syria” and the first “unofficial Arab newspaper among Arabic language readers” (Zaydan 2011, p. 39). Ibrahim Abdo points out that it was “the first newspaper in the Levant” (Abdo 1948, p. 45).
- 15 Philippe de Tarazi and Ibrahim Abdo claim that the number of issues of *The Clarion of Syria* reached thirteen. However, there is no evidence to support this. See (de Tarazi 1913, p. 64; Abdo 1948, p. 46).
- 16 Jens Hanssen and Hicham Safieddine point out that al-Bustani coined the Arabic terms “civil war (al-ḥarb al-aḥliyya)” and “homeland (al-waṭan)” (Hanssen and Safieddine 2019, pp. 6, 10).
- 17 It should be noted that Butrus al-Bustani later issued or contributed to three newspapers or journals bearing the following names: Al-Jinan 1870–1886 (a bi-monthly scientific, political, literary, and historical journal), al-Janna 1870–1886 (a political and literary newspaper, published once or twice a week), and al-Jinina, 1871–1875 (an almost daily political newspaper).
- 18 Al-gharaḍ, pl. al-aghrāḍ, is a term used by al-Bustani to denote sectarian orientation, which was the target of fierce criticism in *The Clarion of Syria*.
- 19 There is an error in the English translation. The Arabic text concerns religious and civil interests, and not political and religious interests, as the English translation suggests. See, (al-Bustani 1990, p. 52; al-Bustani 2019, p. 111).
- 20 Hourani wrote, in this regard: “The idea of civilization is indeed one of the seminal ideas of nineteenth-century Europe, and it is through al-Afghani above all that it reaches the Islamic world. It was given its classical expression by Guizot, in his lectures on the history of civilization in Europe, and al-Afghani had read Guizot and been impressed by him. The work was translated into Arabic in 1877, and al-Afghani inspired ‘Abduh to write an article welcoming the translation and expounding the doctrine of the book.” (Hourani 1983, p. 114).
- 21 For more details on this issue, see (Makdisi 2000, pp. 118–165).
- 22 ‘Aziz al-‘Azmeḥ and Sadiq Jalal al-‘Azmi’s work represent expressive examples of the secularist vision that reacts to religion with contempt, and considers it practically and fundamentally incompatible with modernity, democracy, secularity, and human rights, or what al-‘Azmi later calls the “secular humanist paradigm”. According to al-‘Azmi, “As for religion; because of the nature of its firm, stable and circumscribed beliefs it still lives among eternal verities and looks backward to seek inspiration in its infancy. Thus, it has always provided the metaphysical and obscurantist justification for the social, economic and political status quo, and it has always formed and continues to form the best bulwark against those who expend great efforts to make a revolutionary change” (al-‘Azmi 2015, p. 23). This secularist negative view of religion is echoed in some of his other work published in the same period, including (al-‘Azmi 1968, 2007). Al-‘Azmeḥ expressed a similar secularist view of religion in his discussion with ‘Abd al-Wahab al-Missiri, establishing a dichotomy between what he called the “scientific secular view and the superstitious religious view”. See, (al-‘Azmeḥ 2000, p. 156).
- 23 In the same vein, he emphasized that “A distinctive characteristic of the Christian’s attitude, and another product of his existential situation, was a strong tendency toward rationalism” (Sharabi 1970, p. 16).
- 24 Many, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, saw religion as offering a potential social and political bond, and advised Muslims to adhere to the religious association in which “the Turk meets the Arab, the Persian meets the Hindi, and the Egyptian meets the Moroccan” (Rida 2006, p. 324).

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# Beyond Fixed Political Models of Religion–State Relations

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**Abstract:** Some of the dominant academic approaches to Muslim politics continue to assume the centrality of Islam on the question religion’s relationship to the state and the possibility of successful democracy in Muslim-majority states. On the one hand, based on findings from large N-surveys, some scholars have argued that most Muslims in many Muslim-majority states desire a political ‘third model’ that is neither secular nor theocratic. Instead, they want democracy and a public role for shari’a and Islam. However, this literature does not fully explain what such a third model would mean for certain individual rights in practice. It also assumes a normative position that tends to favour one or another version of ‘Islamic’ democracy. On the other hand, some other scholars have argued that one or another form of a secular Muslim democracy is possible. Both views assume that the reinterpretation of religious resources is crucial to achieve the desired ends. This ‘reformist Islam approach’ to Muslim politics does not seriously consider the implications of servicing Islam, even in its more reformist forms, for political ends. Through a combination of theoretical and normative arguments and in-depth interviews conducted in the Maldives, this article argues that the plurality of viewpoints and underlying reasonings for those viewpoints among ordinary people suggest the necessity to move ‘beyond Islam’. As such, an alternative discursive democratisation approach that considers this plurality and takes discourses more neutrally without privileging religious discourses can be more capacious. Instead of fixating on a particular model of the religion–state relationship and a particular type of discourse (e.g., reformist Islamic), a discursive democratisation approach points to democratic possibilities and how the religion–politics and religion–state nexuses may be shaped and reshaped through discourse contestations within public spheres in Muslim-majority states such as the Maldives.

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## 1. Introduction

Some of the dominant academic approaches to Muslim politics continue to assume the centrality of Islam on the question of the religion–state relationship and the possibility of successful democracy in Muslim-majority states. This article focuses on what I have elsewhere called the ‘reformist Islamic approach’ (Zahir 2021) to Muslim politics, which assumes that ‘reformation’ (An-Na’im 1990), ‘reformulation’ (Hashemi 2009, p. 12), ‘re-orientation’ (Hefner 2005, pp. 6–7), or ‘reflexive elaboration’ (Casanova 2001, p. 1076) of Islam is necessary for successful democracy in Muslim-majority states. In other words, it suggests ‘liberal’, ‘civil’, ‘enlightened’, or what we may call ‘reformist Islam’ is not just a positive but even a necessary force for democracy in Muslim-majority states (An-Na’im 1990, 2008; Abou El Fadl 2007; Hashemi 2009; Hefner 2000, 2001, 2005, 2012; Kurzman 1998, 2011; Stepan 2000; also see Zahir 2021). While contesting the essentialism of the so-called ‘civilisational approach’ à la Huntington (1996), which assumes Islam is inherently inhospitable to democracy and secularism, it still assumes the centrality of ‘Islam’—Islamic scholars, Muslim intellectuals, and especially Islamic discursive resources—for democratic possibility.

This article does not reject the importance of religion in politics in Muslim-majority states. However, it suggests the need to go beyond ‘Islam’ by seriously considering what the pluralisation and contestation of discourses within contemporary Muslim societies in a

globalised context can mean for democratisation and Islam–state relations. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted in the Maldives, this article shows that, on closer examination, there are a variety of viewpoints as well as background reasonings for those viewpoints among ordinary people on religion–state relations and democracy even in as homogenous society as the Maldives. Some of these viewpoints and background reasonings go ‘beyond Islam’ but are still supportive of democracy and varying levels of distance between religion and the state, including secularism. What does this plurality of viewpoints and background reasonings mean for religion–state relations and democratic possibility? I propose that, notwithstanding path-dependent influences, religion–state relations and regime type would continue to be shaped and reshaped through contestation across multiple discourses, both religious *and* non-religious. Consequently, I argue that a ‘discursive democratisation’ approach that does not necessarily privilege religious discourses as opposed to others but posits the possibility for democratisation and re-working of religion–state relations through contestation across multiple discourses is more capacious both normatively and empirically.

After providing an overview of the methodology and the empirical context of the research, this article delves into the theoretical limitations of the reformist Islamic approach. It subsequently illustrates the diverse range of viewpoints and underlying rationales concerning the relationship between Islam, democracy, and the state in the Maldives. This, in turn, leads to the argument for a discursive democratisation approach that challenges the privileging of religious discourses by demonstrating how the plurality of discourses undermines any fixed notions of democracy and the relationship between religion and the state and instead creates possibilities for democratisation.

## 2. Methodology and Context

This article makes a theoretical and normative argument towards making sense of the plurality and contestation of discourses within contemporary Muslim-majority states. However, to make this argument, it draws from analyses of 32 in-depth interviews exploring how ordinary Maldivians view the relationship of Islam to democracy and the state conducted in the Maldives. Participants for these interviews were recruited based on purposive sampling to maximise variety and different demographic backgrounds (see Table 1). I also used the snowballing technique to recruit participants to increase the chances for capturing different viewpoints. However, the purpose of the research was not to generalise the viewpoints across the population, but to capture a variety of viewpoints that existed among ordinary people. While it was extremely challenging to recruit willing participants to talk about religion and politics, having worked in the civil society sector in the Maldives helped me in reaching out to potential interviewees.

**Table 1.** Background characteristics of the participants.

Interviewees	Gender	Age	Education Level	Self-Designated Political Ideology	Self-Designated Religious Ideology	Location
1.	Male	54	University	Liberalism	Islam	Urban
2.	Male	55	Basic	Democratic	Islam	Rural
3.	Male	27	Secondary	-	Islam	Rural
4.	Male	48	Basic	Democratic	Islam	Urban
5.	Female	24	Secondary	Democratic	Islam	Rural
6.	Male	30	Secondary	Democratic	Islam	Rural
7.	Female	51	University	Conservative	Islam	Urban
8.	Male	59	Basic	Democratic	Islam	Rural
9.	Male	30	Primary	Liberalism	Secular	Urban

Table 1. Cont.

Interviewees	Gender	Age	Education Level	Self-Designated Political Ideology	Self-Designated Religious Ideology	Location
10.	Male	32	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
11.	Male	31	Secondary	Democratic	Islam	Rural
12.	Female	51	Basic	Democratic	Islam	Urban
13.	Female	30	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
14.	Female	45	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
15.	Female	33	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
16.	Female	54	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
17.	Female	50	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
18.	Female	31	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
19.	Male	40	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
20.	Male	30	University	Liberalism	Secular	Urban
21.	Male	26	University	Liberalism	Secular	Urban
22.	Female	31	University	Liberalism	Secular	Urban
23.	Female	44	Basic	Democratic	Islam	Rural
24.	Female	27	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
25.	Male	35	Secondary	Democratic	Islam	Rural
26.	Female	31	Secondary	Democratic	Islam	Rural
27.	Female	33	Secondary	Democratic	Islam	Rural
28.	Male	49	University	Liberalism	Islam	Urban
29.	Female	22	University	Democratic	Secular	Urban
30.	Male	36	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
31.	Male	41	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
32.	Male	32	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban

Fieldwork for the interviews was conducted in the capital Male and Maafushi island in 2015 and 2016. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in Dhivehi. Analysis was performed using NVivo through an inductive coding process but guided by the research objectives of understanding how ordinary people viewed Islam's relationship to democracy and the state and the types of reasoning they provide for their viewpoints.<sup>1</sup>

Even though the Maldives has a small population of about 378,114 people (National Bureau of Statistics 2018), as a case study, the country is particularly interesting and valuable for the purpose of this research. This is so especially given the country's relatively homogenous linguistic and largely mono-religious nature. Islam, in its Sunni variety, has existed in the Maldives as the sole recognised religion for more than 800 years. Yet, the country underwent an impressive political liberalisation process from late 2003 to 2009, transitioning to an 'electoral democracy' for the first time in 2009 under a new constitution (Freedom House 2010). The constitution, however, institutionalises Islam in many ways: Islam is enshrined as one of the main bases of all laws and no laws shall be contrary to any tenet of Islam (Article 10 (a) and (b)). The judges are required to consider Islamic shari'a in matters on which the constitution and law are silent (Article 142). The constitution also explicitly limits citizenship only to Muslims (Article 9 (d)), effectively rejecting religious freedom. Similarly, since 2009, democratisation has also faced major setbacks. Freedom House (2013) has delisted the country as an electoral democracy since its 2013 in its annual reports. Given the democratic challenges and limitations, it may be tempting to lay blame on 'Islam' and to suggest reformist religious reinterpretations as the way forward. This article seeks to challenge this view through theoretical and normative arguments as well as by showing its limitations based on the variety of viewpoints and background reasonings for those viewpoints among ordinary people even in a relatively homogenous society such as the Maldives.

### 3. Limits of the Reformist Islam Approach

The civilisational approach has been one of the dominant approaches to Islam's relationship with democracy and secularism. While this approach has come under wide-

ranging critique, as [Hefner \(2012, p. 85\)](#), points out that ‘there has been surprisingly little progress toward a new consensus on democracy and Muslim politics.’ However, the reformist Islam approach assumes one or another version of reformist Islam is crucial and even necessary for successful democracy in Muslim-majority states and has increasingly become a dominant alternative. At least two related views have emerged through the reformist Islam approach on the questions of democracy and religion–state relations. The first, which I would call the ‘Islamic democracy’, view has been a long-standing argument by influential scholars of Muslim politics, including [Esposito and Voll \(1996\)](#), that there is the possibility for a non-secular Islamic democracy. Theoretically, they argue that the case for an Islamic democracy assumes the necessity of reinterpretation of Islamic resources:

A major issue in democratisation in Muslim societies is whether or not scholars and leaders have successfully made the transition from listing ‘democratic doctrines of Islam’ to creating coherent theories and structures of Islamic democracy that are not simply reformulations of Western perceptions in some Muslim idiom. ([Esposito and Voll 1996, p. 31](#))

This argument for Islamic democracy, therefore, assumes the centrality of religious resources and their systematic reinterpretations for the viability of democracy.

The theoretical case for a non-secular Islamic democracy has been buttressed by the findings of large-N surveys on Muslim opinions on these questions. Survey literature on Muslim public opinions suggests that most Muslims in many Muslim-majority states desire democracy ([Esposito and Mogahed 2007](#)). However, these findings suggest that most Muslims desire shari’a and Islam to play a public role. Thus, they want a ‘third model’ that is neither secular nor theocratic ([Esposito and Mogahed 2007](#)). However, the empirical case for a third model does not explain what exactly such a third model would entail in practice, especially for women, non-Muslims, and Muslim nonconformists ([Hefner 2012](#)). The challenges around these issues are at least partly assumed to be due to ‘the influence of certain religious authorities and ethico-legal legacies peculiar to the Muslim world’ ([Hefner 2012, p. 93](#)). How may a limited ‘third model’ then lead to deepened democracy? Here again, the reformist Islam approach assumes it is through reformation or reinterpretations of religious resources that such a deepening of democracy could be viable.

While such reinterpretations are possible and may exist, another question is as follows: could a third model or Islamic democracy ensure individual rights such as religious liberty and democracy without a certain secularism? Even though democracy may not require separation of religion from the state as assumed under mainstream secularism in democracies such as the United States or France, democracy arguably requires at least a certain religion–state ‘distance’ or what [Stepan \(2000\)](#) called ‘twin tolerations.’ The second strand, under the reformist Islam approach, or what I would call the ‘Islamic secular democracy’ view, takes up this challenge. It posits the possibility and even the desirability of certain secularism. However, this view too says that for such a possibility, reinterpretation of shari’a is crucial and even necessary ([Hashemi 2009](#); [An-Na’im 1990, 2008](#)). The scholars who subscribe to this strand, in fact, point out that reformist Islamic discourses espoused by Islamic scholars that support a ‘religious secularity’ ([Ghobadzadeh 2013](#); [Ghobadzadeh and Rahim 2012](#)) or ‘Muslim secularism’ ([Hashemi 2009](#)) do exist in some Muslim contexts, including in places such as Iran and Indonesia. Some scholars who subscribe to this view also buttress the possibility of religious secularism based on comparative historical lessons. [Hashemi \(2009\)](#) specifically refers to seventeenth-century England, where, he argues, the liberal philosophy of John Locke, using theological arguments, helped in the emergence of liberalism. [Casanova \(2001\)](#) argues that the current transformations within Islam are similar to the Catholic *aggiornamento*, which facilitated the third wave of democratisation. As a whole, both strands within the reformist Islam approach assume that the reformation of shari’a or reformist Islamic discourses is essential and even necessary for the potential realisation of democracy and an appropriate relationship between Islam and the state.

Besides the centrality given to religion and privileging of religious resources, I propose the reformist Islam approach is not reflexive enough of the possible implications of

centralising religious resources for politics, even when such resources may be 'liberal' or reformist. The centralisation of religious resources, even if they are reformist, could lead to the ever-embedding, not the retreat, of religion as a discursive frame of reference in the public spheres. While this may not be problematic, embedding religion as a discursive frame of reference means the outcomes that the reformist Islamic approach assumes and desires become paradoxically less deterministic. This is so because, especially under the contemporary condition of communicative abundance, it is ever more difficult to fix the substantive content of religion that inevitably has political implications. In other words, the ever-embedding of religion as a discursive frame of reference provides a language of politics that nourishes all sorts of strands of religion, which, instead of settling questions of religion vis-à-vis the state and individual rights, could open up controversy and conflict, impeding democracy and associated individual rights. Hence, the assumption that because religious reforms played crucial roles for liberal democracy in the West, so would reformist Islam play a similar role in Muslim-majority states does not seriously account for the very different historical contexts in which reformist religious actors and resources now exist.

The abovementioned theoretical points on the reformist Islam approach do not obviously reject the importance of religion in politics. Still, they suggest the approach's limitations and the need for alternative approaches that do not automatically privilege religious resources for democratic possibility and appropriate religion–state relations that could sustain democracy. Going beyond theoretical, normative arguments for democracy based on the plurality within Islam (specifically reformist Islam) and the survey literature positing a third model, what exactly do ordinary people think about the relationship between Islam and democracy and Islam–state relations? What are the background reasonings they offer for their viewpoints?

#### 4. A Variety of Viewpoints and Background Reasonings

The interviews conducted in the Maldives showed that the viewpoints of ordinary people on Islam's relationship to democracy and the religion–state relations are complex and multiple and cannot be reduced to a singular model of the religion–state relationship. They ranged from those supporting democracy with secularism to those that supported comprehensive enforcement of shari'a, as well as viewpoints that fell between these two. That is, there is no fixed model, including a fixed third model, as far as the views of ordinary people are concerned. Second, ordinary people also offered a variety of background reasons for their viewpoints. These reasonings included religious and secular reasonings that presupposed religious or secular ideological underpinnings, respectively. However, crucially, they also included reasonings based on lived experiences and certain religious discursive motifs that do not necessarily assume subscription to a comprehensive reformist Islam as such. For heuristic purposes, I discuss the variety of viewpoints and background reasonings that emerged from the interviews under the following labels:

1. Strong Secular View (SSV);
2. Religious Secular View (RSV);
3. Islamist State View (ISV);
4. Demotic Politics View (DPV);
5. Islamo-Nationalist View (IND).

##### *Strong Secular View (SSV)*

Three of the interviewees strongly resonated with this viewpoint, with at least four others leaning towards this viewpoint in some key aspects. The Strong Secular View (SSV) is most distinguished by its strong support for the privatisation of religion and support for secularism. Its general suspicion towards shari'a in politics also sets this viewpoint apart. It is characterised by strong support for (i) separation of religion at the institutional, personnel, and legal/policy levels of the state; (ii) privatisation of religion; (iii) freedom of religion; and, (iv) democracy. While SSV does not support religion being part of democratic politics, it nevertheless strongly supports religious freedom. This religious freedom includes the



freedom to believe in no religion and, in fact, believes there is no need for a single religion for co-existence. Those who held this viewpoint suggested that Islam does not necessarily contradict democracy, but only so if Islam is privatised. Hence, they are suspicious of religious freedom under an Islamic state.

Strikingly, those who held this viewpoint provided a variety of reasonings for their perspectives. Some who identified their religious faith as 'Islam' defended their view, though not through reformist Islamic reasoning. They simply downplayed what they saw as contradictory elements of the religion, which suggests a *de facto* 're-working' of religion in practice. One of them, interviewee-1, who identified Islam as his religious faith, nevertheless, argued there were '*laainsanee*' (inhumane) *hadd* punishments in shari'a that contradict democratic values. There was, he continued, no solution to this except not implementing shari'a because, as shari'a was divine, it could not be reformed. He concluded religion was a personal matter, not a matter for the state. Thus, his view was based on a selective rejection of aspects of shari'a through an intrinsic appeal of liberal motifs, not through reformist Islamic reasoning. Others resorted to comprehensive secular worldviews, including liberalism, to explain their positions. Interviewee-13, who identified herself as religious and worked for a civil society organisation, evidently upheld the global human rights discourse. She argued that democracy was not just about majority, but also about 'equal rights for minorities'. She believed there were aspects of Islam that contradicted democracy, but she simply rejected those aspects.

Beyond these reasonings, interviewee-16, who identified as very religious, provided reasoning based on her everyday lived experience. She prayed regularly, donned a veil, and was a Western-educated psychosocial support worker. She argued the following:

Religion should be a personal matter. The state can't impose religion. It's my core belief. I came to this conclusion through my experience (*thajuriba*) with vulnerable groups I have worked with. The state doesn't provide adequate services to these minorities because of non-Islamic label or the second-rate citizen status given to them . . . At the moment, I have three young men who are gay and two young women who are lesbian and two clients who are female sex workers. One of the three gay men is also a drug user. There is another who freely says he is an atheist. There is another struggling with his religious beliefs. They could be you or me . . . They are very skilled. They are suffering a lot because of government policies. But it is not just them [who suffer]. They live with families. We value families. So, their situation is affecting their families too. So, I came to the conclusion that religion should be separated from the state.

This reasoning based on her experiences with real people from diverse demographic, sexual, and ideological backgrounds clearly transcended the Islamic/secular binary, those experiences serving as rationales for upholding this particular viewpoint. Strikingly, the sociality of religion as opposed to any fixed shari'a precept in her everyday lived-experience as a psychosocial worker shaped her views whereby she supported the separation of religion from politics. This conclusion is similar to that reached by Ismail (2006, p. viii) about how religious positions could vary based on the social and everyday context.

#### *Religious Secular View (RSV)*

A total of five interviewees strongly resonated with RSV, with seven others leaning towards it in some key aspects. All of them identified either 'democracy' or 'liberalism' as their political ideology. However, in terms of religious background, they varied from identifying as 'Islamic' to 'secular'. RSV is a complex view, but it is most distinguished by its strong support for religious freedom, diversity, and its belief in the compatibility of Islam and democracy. It is also characterised by (i) support for the separation of religion from the constitutional level, (ii) being open towards Islam's role at the level of law and policy, and (iii) strong support for religious freedom and diversity in the public sphere.

While the RSV approach seeks the de-establishment of Islam from the constitution, at the level of law and policy, it is agreeable to apply shari'a if the latter does not contradict

human rights and democracy. All agreed shari'a should be, in principle, implemented, but not under the prevailing conditions in the Maldives.

The interviewees who associated with this viewpoint provided complex and varied background reasonings, including reasoning based on Islamic modernism, contemporary reformist Islamic discourse, human rights discourse, lived experience, and secular political liberalism. Interviewee-31, who identified his political ideology as 'democratic' and religious faith as 'Islam', for example, argued that there was no 'fundamental disagreement' between democracy and Islam, and that the Qur'an and Sunna stressed religious freedom. He argued while Islam is a perfect and complete religion and shari'a is divine, there is also room for different interpretations in applying specific rules. Thus, he argued, shari'a should be accommodated, and shari'a law should be part of the state and enacted through parliament. Similarly, at least two interviewees (14 and 24) appealed to the motif of '*shura*', while interviewee-32 argued the fact that the Prophet accepted non-Muslims under his rule showed religious freedom existed in Islam. This reasoning is similar to Islamic modernist views about the possibility for reinterpretation under Islamic *fiqh* (see Saeed 2007). Interviewee-9, who identified his political ideology as 'liberal' and religious background as 'secular', explicitly cited the contemporary reformist Islamic scholar, Khaled Abou El Fadl. Similarly, interviewee-21 also appealed to contemporary reformist Islamic discourse, while interviewee-29 argued that while 'shari'a is divine, interpretations are human', a view similar to the views of reformist Islamic scholars such as El Fadl and An-Na'im.

While these individuals clearly appeal to religious reasonings, there were others who provided different set of reasonings for this viewpoint. Interviewee-4, who identified his political ideology as 'democratic' and religious background as 'Islamic', provided reasonings that showed contextual religious adjustment under lived experience without explicitly reformist Islamic- or secular-based ideological reasonings. His viewpoint was deeply shaped by experiences running a tourism business under a new economic initiative in 2008. Under this initially controversial policy, guesthouses for tourists were, for the first time, widely allowed in inhabited islands in the Maldives. Until then, tourism was predominantly confined to uninhabited islands. This man explained how the initial reservation of local people towards local tourism was waning away under a thriving industry. He argued 'respect towards diverse people was necessary for local tourism to thrive' and suggested that locals 'no longer believe local tourism will negatively impact their Islam'. The beach area for tourists, who were allowed to wear bikinis, was initially fenced as per the rules, but when this research was conducted on the island, the fence had already started to fall down, and anyone walking near the area could see tourists in bikinis. This did not cause any apparent concern among the local community, who would welcome tourists with great fanfare. Tourists indeed freely roam around the island, which has guesthouses built throughout residential areas. His views, to be sure, had allegiance to Islam but were now shaped by the experiences in a fast-urbanising environment. This experience, combined with reasoning based on contextual issues of politicisation of religion and inconsistencies shown by religious leaders, more than any textual reinterpretation of religion, provided him with the reasons to believe there should be some de-partisanisation of religion and a separation between religion and politics. Hence, reasonings shaped by the sociality of religion (as opposed to specifically explicit religious discourses or reinterpretations) could support different viewpoints on religion vis-à-vis the state and democracy.

#### *Islamist State View (ISV)*

There were at least three interviewees who upheld this viewpoint, with one strongly resonating with this viewpoint. ISV strongly favours the implementation of a comprehensive shari'a by the state. It strongly rejects religious freedom and secularism. It does not believe shari'a can be reformed (as it believes shari'a is divine), but it supports a certain limited procedural democracy.

Interviewee-19, who identified his political ideology as 'religious democracy' and religious background as 'very Islamic', strongly criticised secularism and the West, blaming secularism and the West for the 'turmoil' in Muslim-majority states. He provided religious

reasonings, along with an appeal to lived experiences, for his views on the state and democracy. He criticised democracy but argued voting can be acceptable 'because it is, in effect, giving witness as in Islam. You are saying this person is better than that person. In Islam giving a witness statement is obligatory ('*wajib*'), but not doing so is a sin ('*faafa*'). Scholars say voting amounts to being a witness'. However, he argued that 'the majority rule [under democracy] has its limitations. Look at President Yameen. He was elected through a majority. And now [under him] social development is regressing so much.'

It is, therefore, clear he accepted democracy in its procedural sense with caution:

There are clashes between Islam and democracy, but *shura* exists in both democracy and Islam. But there is no *shura* on issues of *ibadat*. Even in democracy, there are matters that cannot be negotiated, for example, we cannot have a serious discussion to sell the country.

This viewpoint and the background reasonings, therefore, seem to be relatively straightforward in their close alignment with Islamist and Salafi ideologies in the Maldives. The leading proponents of Islamist and Salafi views in the public political domain particularly include Maldivians who had received their religious education in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Some of these actors are based in political parties such as the Adhaalath Party, state institutions such as the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, and civil society organisations such as Jamiyyathul Salaf, the most active Salafi organisation. They have increasingly become dominant voices in the public political domain within the context of political liberalisation since around 2003 and as a counter-current to more liberal or reformist viewpoints.

#### *Demotic Politics View (DPV)*

Seven interviewees strongly associated their views with what I consider a DVP, with at least two others aligning their views with key aspects of a DPV. Most of these individuals did not fully articulate explanations for their views beyond references to certain lived experiences. Hence, this was a viewpoint based on demotic lived experiences and based on dissatisfaction with the status quo of Islam vis-à-vis the state. One prominent theme these individuals talked about, in fact, was their dissatisfaction with the partisanisation of religion for political purposes (*dheen siyaasee kurun*). De-partisanisation of religion for them is not about the dis-establishment of Islam, much less privatisation; rather, they believed de-partisanisation could be achieved through an independent Islamic commission to adjudicate on religious matters and issues as opposed to a government institution such as the Islamic Ministry. This view stresses stronger enforcement of shari'a more than any other viewpoint except the Islamist State View. Unlike the ISV, however, it does not demonise secularism but seeks a certain de-partisanisation of Islam. Overall, however, it accepts democracy mainly as a procedure within 'Islam'. Interestingly, while it supports shari'a, it also believes shari'a should not be codified. Their lived experiences may explain this. These individuals believed that the Maldivian parliament was a partisan institution and its decisions were politicised.

While this viewpoint does not support full religious freedom, it de facto accepted the status quo, where it assumed some Maldivians were already not Muslims. In short, this viewpoint believes there should not be legally provided religious freedom, nor should citizenship be restricted by Islam, but the status quo in which non-Muslim Maldivians existed could be tolerated. This again shows the demotic lived experience that was shaping this viewpoint.

The political affiliations of those who associated with this viewpoint perhaps shed further light on the experiences that may have shaped their reasonings. Most of the interviewees with this viewpoint supported the Maldivian Democratic Party, which spearheaded activism for political liberalisation since around 2003, and was in power from 2008 to 2012. During this period, the political opposition deeply demonised the party and its leader, Mohamed Nasheed, as anti-religious (*laadheenee*) and anti-nationalist. They mobilised sections of the population and security apparatus to protest against the MDP government, finally forcing Nasheed to resign in 2012, mid-way in his tenure. Nasheed's forcible resignation

angered a large number of his supporters, who believed the opposition exploited religion for political ends to incite sections of the population. Hence, it appears everyday lived experiences, such as the partisanisation of Islam, shaped the views of the interviewees who associated with DPV and aligned with MDP.

#### *Islamo-Nationalist View (INV)*

Two interviews strongly associated with an INV with at least six others aligning with some aspects of INV. INV is a conservative political view. It rejects secularism, but it is not based purely on religious reasoning as it is shaped by non-religious constructions about the nation and what it means to be a Maldivian. While it draws from religion and culture, it most importantly draws from the notion of the 'nation'. It may indeed trump religion in its protection of the nation. It supports democracy and individual rights but is qualified by its fidelity to national identity based on belonging to Islam and based on the protection of 'tradition', 'community', and 'nation'. It stresses the uniformity of belonging to Islam but not the enforcement of comprehensive shari'a.

This is partly justified by appealing to a constructed non-religious narrative about the nation, while at a personal level, this view may support religious freedom. Interviewee-28 pointed out the following:

When the whole system, tradition or how things have been in the country are taken into account, or from a collective societal point of view, it is not a problem to stipulate in the constitution that to be a Maldivian, one has to be a Muslim. If it is only my own opinion, I believe there should be freedom [of religion]. As a nation, if we give full freedom, there will be extremism.

Yet, in theory, INV accepts that Islam allows religious freedom. It, therefore, disagrees that Islam requires 'chopping off the head' of someone who left Islam and believes there is no compulsion in Islam. Thus, the main motive for restricting religious freedom is contextual.

This view supports democracy as a 'procedure' and as a political system but believes it must be limited by 'community' and 'national' interests. Interviewee-28 summed up this position as follows: 'the view from my own conscience is not the same view I want to promote to maintain this nation as a nation'. He argued the following:

From my own personal view, I have no problem if someone is not a Muslim, if they did not pray, if they practised another religion, or even if they had no religion at all. But to maintain this nation as a nation, only one religion has to be practised publicly. So I have no problem with democracy in other respects, especially as a process or a system.

As with other viewpoints, the lived experiences of some also shaped their reasonings. Interviewee-5, who identified 'democracy' as their political ideology and 'Islam' as the religious background, pointed out, 'although religion should be a big part of democracy, the politicisation of religion was a major problem'. She continued, 'when one [politician] does something, it can be bad [for religious scholars], but when another does exactly the same thing, it is not bad'.

In sum, it is clear from the interviews that going beyond large-N surveys and the elite level of Muslim intellectuals and religious scholars, ordinary people have multiple viewpoints as well as a variety of background reasonings on religion's relationship to the state and democracy. To be sure, some of these viewpoints presuppose comprehensive worldviews and fully formed ideological or theological positions. Explicit religious discourses and reasonings are part of the public sphere. However, it is also abundantly clear that the sociality of religion and everyday lived experiences are important for their positions and background reasonings. In other words, there are non-religious reasonings and reasonings that even go beyond the secular/religious binary even in a relatively homogenous society such as the Maldives. What, then, may be the implications of the plurality of viewpoints?

## 5. Towards a Discursive Democratisation Approach

Given the plurality of viewpoints and background reasonings, I suggest that instead of an a priori privileging of any one viewpoint or background reasoning, as assumed, for example, under the reformist Islam approach, an alternative approach that takes discourses and actors more neutrally could better account for democratic possibilities. In this respect, I propose that the discursive democratisation approach, as proposed by scholars such as Dryzek (2000, 2006), is arguably a more capacious approach, both empirically and as a normative approach.

Discursive democracy is a version of deliberative democracy which, in general terms, is concerned with political deliberation on the part of citizens in order to increase the quality and legitimacy of democratic politics (see Dryzek 2000; Habermas 1996). Dryzek (2000, p. 2) stresses engagement across discourses prevailing in the public sphere as a way of increasing the authenticity of democracy, which is ‘the degree to which democratic control is substantive rather than symbolic’. As stated in these terms, deliberative democracy or discursive democracy assumes the existence of democracy along with certain individual rights. In other words, deliberative democracy has largely been theorised for democratic contexts as a normative approach towards making democracy more authentic.

However, at the heart of discursive democracy is the premise that democracy is an ‘open-ended project’ (Dryzek 1996, p. 4; Dryzek and Holmes 2002, p. 13), and, as such, what it offers does have relevance for certain contexts (such as the Maldives) even though limited democratic conditions prevail in them. Dryzek and Niemeyer (2010) has, in fact, attempted to extend the idea of discursive democracy to authoritarian contexts). For the purpose of this article, what the roles of discourses, when they are taken more neutrally with respect to their normative orientations, may mean for democratisation and religion–state relations is important. The roles that discourses play in this respect could come in many forms, including the following (Dryzek 2000, pp. 101–3):

- Discourses condition the way people think about issues;
- Discourses set the terms and vocabulary and framing of common issues;
- Horizontally, discourses can cause a cultural change in more democratisation directions.

Engagement across multiple discourses in the public sphere can therefore affect democratisation and religion–state relations by changing the terms of (dominant) anti-democratic discourses and negotiating existing religion–state relations.

Applying these insights to the Maldives, for example, what may be the possibilities for the deepening of democracy and re-working religion–state relations? Clearly, the mere plurality and contestation across multiple discourses do not automatically mean democratisation and re-working of religion–state relations. However, the relative weight of discourses matters and could impact not only vertical democratisation within the state and religion–state relations but also horizontal democratisation across society. Strong Secular View (SSV)-type discourses have increasingly become prominent with their polarised contestation with Islamist State View (ISV)-type discourses. However, in terms of their social bases, these discourses appear to be limited to individuals largely operating through social media, often based in ideologies of liberalism, socialism, or the international human rights regime. With SSV’s strong secularist positions (such as the privatisation of religion) and lacking religion-based rationales, it may currently not be resonant with the larger population. However, the future potential of SSV-type discourses with non-religious background reasonings should not be discounted.

More importantly, their limitations do not mean discourses that appeal to religion, including reformist religious reasonings, are particularly more advantaged either. Certain civil society actors, such as the NGO Maldivian Democracy Network, have tried to promote individual rights such as secularism based on reformist Islamic interpretations. In the Maldives, so far this has not been a religious scholar-led discourse. While only a few local religious scholars may support such attempts, given that the domestic public sphere is porous to external and global discourses, local actors behind these attempts have appealed to prominent global religious figures and have directly benefited from prominent global

religious voices. Hence, the renowned reformist Muslim scholar Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, for example, made a strongly worded comment in 2007 on the Maldives' attempts at codifying shari'a in a penal code by pointing to 'the incoherence and illegitimacy of attempting to codify shari'a' (An-Na'im 2007, p. 54). Tariq Ramadan, another reformist Muslim scholar, visited the Maldives in 2015 on a government invitation and was particularly vocal on the issue of attempts at the death penalty by the Maldivian government (Maldivian Independent 2017). Local civil society actors have also attempted to forge relations with overseas and international NGOs subscribing to reformist Islam. Examples of such overseas groups that local actors linked up with include Musawah and Sisters in Islam in Malaysia, who use reformist Islamic discourses to promote gender equality and other human rights values.

However, when the calls for democracy, human rights, or secularism have been accompanied by reformist religious reasonings, they seemed to have only further fuelled controversy and polarisation in society by bringing religion to the centre of public discourse and by making religion an ever more relevant language of politics. Consequently, Islamist State View (ISV)-type narratives promoted by Salafi groups have increasingly become more relevant and the more dominant voices on the questions of religion and religion's relationship to politics and the state. Further, civil society actors attempting to promote human rights, democracy, and secularism based on reformist religious reasons have come under increasing backlash and security threats. A case in point is the brutal murder, in 2013, of a reformist Islamic scholar, Afrasheem Ali, who had advocated for women's rights and music based on more reformist Islamic interpretations. Another example is a local NGO, Maldivian Democracy Network, who had used reformist Islamic reasonings for its campaigns, including the promotion of narratives supporting secularism. Under pressure from Salafi groups and conservative sections, the government de-registered the NGO in 2020.

Given these experiences, democracy-supportive discourses and types of reasoning should be taken more seriously. One such possibility includes democracy-supportive discourses based on reasonings based in demotic lived experiences. As shown in the interviews, such reasonings, for example, include ordinary people's experiences of crises in which partisanisation of religion is seen as the source of increasing polarisation in society. Some of the participants who supported the Religious Secular View (RSV), for example, pointed to their dissatisfaction with the partisanisation of religion as a reason for democracy with a certain distance between religion and the state. One individual forcefully pointed out that his 'recent experience with political parties, who have exploited religion as a political weapon has convinced me we should separate religion from the state', being an example of a demotic lived experience that could play an important role in democratisation. These views are linked to negative lived experiences rather than ideological and religious reasons.

## 6. Conclusions

Most observers of Muslim politics seem to agree that 'Islamic tradition in the very recent past has undergone an unprecedented process of pluralisation and fragmentation of religious authority' (Casanova 2001, p. 1059; see also Hefner 2005, pp. 1–36; Eickelman and Piscatori 1996). As Fox (2015) argues, essentially in every contemporary society, there is, in fact, a struggle between advocates of secular and religious ideologies to shape policies related to religion. Advocates of political-religious ideologies seek to increase religion's influence on state policies, and advocates of secular ideologies seek to decrease such influence. Fox rightly points out that secular and religious ideologies are not monolithic and they come in varieties, and, as a result, there are intra-ideological contestations too (Fox 2015, p. 36). This perfectly illustrates the situation even in the relatively more mono-religious and homogenous society of the Maldives. In this regard, SSV- and RSV-type discourses in the Maldives fall into the camp that supports political secularism. Yet, they have different visions for how political secularism should look. While ISV, INV, and DPV do



not support political secularism, they do not have an agreement among themselves either. In other words, there are both intra-camp disagreements and inter-camp disagreements.

There is no academic consensus on what the pluralisation of discourses means for democracy. However, in their rejection of the triumphalism of secularisation theory and essentialism of the civilisational approach, as Zubaida (2011) suggests, many scholars seem to have taken the side of the assumptions of the ‘multiple modernities’ thesis, which critiques the Western-centrism of the concept of modernity (see also Zubaida 2012). The talk of ‘pious democracy’ (Menchik 2017), ‘Islamic democracy’ (Esposito and Voll 1996), or ‘third model’ democracy (Esposito and Mogahed 2007), for example, arguably underpins the normative assumptions of the multiple modernities thesis. While, admittedly, democracy varies according to specific cultural and social contexts (Keane 2009), given the plurality of discourses, the views of those scholars (e.g., Dryzek 1996, p. 4; Dryzek and Holmes 2002, p. 13) who suggest democracy must be taken as an open-ended project merit attention. As an open-ended project, a critical approach to democracy applies as much to secular liberal democracies (thus to the assumptions of secularisation theory and civilisation approach) as to other forms of democracies. This means while a particular model of democracy and religion–state relations may have the dominant public preferences behind them at a given point in time, contestation across multiple discourses has the potential (while difficult) to modify them, especially in critical junctures. There is, in this sense, no point in a fixation on current, imperfect models, a claim that applies to Western democracies as it does to Muslim states.

Some other scholars, who see the limitations of a third model, have suggested that secularism is possible and desirable for Muslim-majority states. However, just like those scholars who assume reinterpretation of Islam is crucial for even Islamic democracy while rejecting the essentialism of the civilisational approach, these scholars also centralise and prioritise reformist religious resources and actors. In this, they point not only to the existence of reformist Islamic discourses supporting religious secularity but also to the experiences of the West. Yet, I have argued that the centralisation of religious resources, even when they are reformist or liberal, could further embed religion as a political discursive frame of reference. While this may not be an issue in itself, this could further fuel, instead of settling controversy over religion vis-à-vis the state and democracy, precisely because we cannot determine the substantive content of religion, especially in contemporary contexts. A comparatively more homogenous case of the Maldives precisely points to this predicament.

Consequently, this article proposed a discursive democratisation approach that takes discourses more neutrally and that does not a priori privilege religious discourses and religious reasonings over others can serve as a more capacious approach both empirically (accounting for the plurality and contestation across discourses) as well as in terms of the normative possibilities for democratisation and the re-working of religion–state relations.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> These interviews were conducted as part of a larger Q methodological for my PhD thesis completed in 2018. The analysis and interpretations of the interviews therefore draw from this Q study, which can be available upon request.

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# Singapore's Secularism and Its Pragmatic Approach to Religion

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**Abstract:** Singapore embraces a form of secularism that provides the state with the authority to unilaterally decide on where to draw the lines between religion, politics, and state. This paper presents examples that dominate Singapore's approach to religion and governance. Given the centrality of religion in the lives of Singaporeans, this article highlights how the state does not cast aside the social significance of religion but remains engaged with it. The model of secularism in Singapore affords the state the flexibility to easily switch between two broad types of secularism, namely a 'soft secularism', a religion-friendly variety, and a 'hard secularism', which the state employs as a tool for political control and management of society as it wrestles with existential challenges to ensure its continued survival.

**Keywords:** secularism; Singapore; religion

## 1. Singapore and Religious Diversity

Situated at the southernmost tip of mainland Asia, Singapore is the twentieth smallest country in the world, with an area of 728 km<sup>2</sup>. Singapore is without adequate water catchment, lacks the land area for self-sufficiency and thus imports 90% of its food. Furthermore, it has no hinterland for its economic activities and for these reasons, the country has always seen itself as existentially challenged. Moreover, given its strategic crossroad location as a maritime link between East and West, almost all of the world's major and many minor religions were established early on in Singapore's history, including the full spectrum of conservative, modernist and reform-minded orientations. This gave rise not only to a thriving religious life but also to religious diversity.

The arrival of immigrants from many parts of the world after Singapore gained independence further increased its religious diversity. Today, with a population of 5.7 million people, it is the second most densely populated sovereign state in the world. Its religious makeup is 31.1% Buddhist, 18.9% Christian, 15.6% Muslim, 8.8% Taoist, 5% Hindu, 0.6% other minority religions and 20% unaffiliated with any religion. In short, active religious life continues today, as evidenced ([Singapore Department of Statistics 2020](#)) by the high rate of religious affiliation amongst the local population (80% of Singaporeans embrace religion). The remaining 20% of the population practices alternative forms of spiritual practices, which includes those who embrace what may be termed "internal/private" religion, that is a belief in a Supreme God or Creator without professing any specific religious faith or formal ties to a specific religion ([Taylor 2007](#), pp. 5, 8). This population draws on the teachings of the established world religions to provide them with a moral and ethical compass as well as meaning, purpose and direction in life (A. E. [Lai 2010](#), p. 22). In this regard, I consider many of those who are not affiliated with any religion to be 'religious' in the broadest sense of the term. The Pew Research Centre named Singapore the most religiously diverse country in the world ([Pew Research Centre 2014](#)). Religious diversity has been part of Singapore's identity throughout its history, and this has posed many significant challenges for governance ([Tong 2002](#), pp. 370–401; [Hassan 1981](#), pp. 154–218).

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## 2. Founding Fathers and Their Fears about Religion

Singapore gained independence in 1965 after being colonised by the British for nearly 140 years (1819–1959) and after a failed merger with Malaysia that lasted a mere two years (1963–1965) due to fundamental differences in race- and religion-based politics. The political elite who brought forth Singapore’s nationhood in 1965 manifested aspects of Enlightenment era thinking as a result of their many years spent in Europe. These were realists and they understood how bloodshed, conflict and division had historically rampaged through Europe owing to the fusion of political and religious authority. They therefore deliberately chose a path guided by rationalism and humanism. It was clear in the minds of the nation’s founders that religion-based politics and the philosophy of multiculturalism cannot work in multi-racial and multi-religious Singapore, even if majoritarian politics was an attractive option given that the population consisted of 75% people of Chinese ancestry and culture. This was affirmed by then Law Minister E. W. Barker ([Parliament of Singapore 1965](#)) who introduced the Constitutional Reform Commission in Parliament in December 1965 as follows:

Whilst a multi-racial, secular society is an ideal espoused by many, it is a dire necessity for our survival in the midst of turmoil and the pressures of big power conflict in an area where new [forms of] nationalisms are seeking to assert themselves in the place of the old European empires in Asia. In such a setting a nation based on one race, one language and one religion, when its peoples are multi-racial, is doomed to destruction.

This statement reflects the concerns of founding leaders of Singapore who had lived through and dealt with three traumatic events related to religion in the 1950s and 1960s. The first event was the Maria Hertogh crisis in 1950, which involved a tussle for the custody of Maria Hertogh between her Dutch Catholic biological parents and her Malay-Muslim adoptive mother. This resulted in a series of riots that killed 18 and injured 173 people. This conflict was instigated by local communal factors and was set against a backdrop of anti-colonial politics ([Aljunied 2009](#), pp. 15–24). Religion was at the heart of the issue. The adoptive parent brought up the child as a Muslim but when the High Court ordered the child’s return to their biological parents, she was temporarily placed in a convent and there was allegation that she was Christianized. This angered local Muslims who took to the streets, with some resorting to violence. Second were the communal riots in July 1964, during the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. Twenty-two people were killed and 454 suffered injuries. Religion was a causal factor, given the nature of the celebrations ([Low 2001](#), pp. 431–55). The celebration traditionally took the form of a street procession. It was during this procession that Chinese youths threw stones at the participants who were Malays and Muslims. This triggered off an ethnic clash between segments of the Chinese and Malay communities which spread to other parts of the country. Malays, who were Muslims, also believed that the incident was an attack on the Prophet and Islam. Third, Singapore’s founding leaders in the People’s Action Party (PAP), which was the ruling party when it gained independence, had to wrestle with the leaders of Malaysia’s dominant race- and religion-based political party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Singapore’s experimental political project of being part of a federation with Malaysia from 1963 to 1965 failed due to a deep split in political beliefs. While the PAP’s aim was to govern society based on secularism and multi-racialism, the UMNO sought to govern society based on the dominance of Islam and the Malay ethnicity.

In 1965, Singapore was separated from Malaysia due to the failed merger and became an independent nation. Due to the aforementioned traumatic historical experiences with religion and race in politics, the PAP sought to exclude ethnicity and religion from its platform ([National Archives of Singapore 1965](#)). These experiences with the politics of race and religion shaped the two-pillared ideology upon which the new state was established: multiculturalism and secularism ([Bedlington 1974](#), pp. 72–73, 81–84). While multiculturalism provides space for communities to assert their cultural and religious identities, the secularism practised in Singapore prevents the encroachment of religion into politics and

its involvement in governing the state. Lee Kuan Yew, widely recognised as the founding father of modern Singapore, affirmed his belief in secularism by saying that ‘religion cannot be a force for national unity. Indeed, secularism is essential for inter-religious harmony for our multi-religious community’ (Amrine and Davis 2013, p. 90). Lee Hsien Loong, the current prime minister of Singapore, reaffirmed the state’s position as one aspiring to build a multi-racial and multi-religious society that provides equal opportunities to all ethnic and religious communities to practice their cultural and religious beliefs and to participate in the development of the nation (Mohd Sah 2014).

### 3. Understanding Singapore’s State Secularism

As a contribution to the existing literature on state secularism in Singapore, the author used his lens as an ‘insider’ (with 33 years of experience in government service) and as an ‘outsider’ (with concurrently 40 years of activism in civil society), to present a balanced perspective of the subject, rather than an overly and politically critical view. Tapping on his decades of experience in the community–religious sector, the author’s contribution lies in his close proximity to the state’s employment of a state secularism that is both friendly to religion (non-hostile or ‘soft’ secularism) and uncongenial to religion (‘hard’ secularism) in which the state has employed secularism for political control and the management of society to the advantage of the ruling party (People’s Action Party) and to the interests of the state.

Another contribution of this article is to fill the gap in discussing Singapore’s state secularism within the context of the broad ideas of secularism from major thinkers, such as George Jacob Holyoake, Charles Taylor, Syed Naquib Al-Attas, Rajeev Bhargava, Talal Asad and Rowan Williams, who espoused the traditional, classical, conservative, procedural and political ideas of secularism. The pragmatism of Singapore’s state secularism lies in it being understood as an eclectic rather than a specific model as its features are taken from different expressions of secularism mentioned above.

### 4. Some Key Features of Singapore’s Secularism

Due to its unique circumstances, Singapore, since its formative years, has taken a pragmatic rather than a dogmatic approach to governance. This has led Singapore to embrace an understanding of secularism that provides the organising principles and procedures that constitute the three scaffolds of Singapore’s nationhood—(i) national unity, (ii) mutual co-existence and (iii) social peace. This pragmatic approach aims to deal with three existential challenges that Singapore encounters: (i) to unify a highly religiously diverse society, (ii) to keep religion at bay so that it is not used for political contestation and (iii) to psychologically prepare citizens to cast aside their religious differences to defend the nation against security threats from religiously majoritarian (i.e., Muslim) neighbouring states (Lee 2020).

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, and scholar of religion, divides secularism into pragmatic (procedural) and rigid (programmatic) types. The model of secularism practised by Singapore is akin to Williams’ procedural secularism. It is not a rigid or programmatic type of secularism that is hardwired into the Constitution, and as such, it is adaptative and malleable. Procedural secularism is employed by the state in its role as overseer of a religiously diverse society, keeping peace amongst the communities, and it does so by not giving advantage or preference to any religion over others (Williams 2012, pp. 2–3). Religious minorities in Singapore are granted equal access to public goods, for example, in the allocation of land for the construction of places of worship, care and disposal of the dead. Even national leaders officiate at religious functions and become patrons in various religious festivals (A. E. Lai 2010, pp. 309–35).

The Singaporean state takes the view that the power of religion, if properly harnessed, significantly contributes to social cohesion and stability. It recognises that religions help develop social capital and are useful partners in supporting the building of state institutions and in achieving national integration. The state adopts a policy according to which religions,



by and large, instruct their followers to perform good deeds and care for their fellow human beings (Parliament of Singapore 1991). Faith-based NGOs play a prominent role in the provision of welfare and social services to people regardless of their creed or ethnicity (A. E. Lai 2010, pp. 321–23). The state also recognises the benefit of religions in providing values conducive to a productive economy and moral ballast for society to protect itself from the ills of Westernisation. In this sense, the government supports religion in an entirely self-interested way (Tamney 1996, p. 25). Singapore’s secularism can be inferred from the speech delivered by Singapore’s first president, Yusuf bin Ishak (1965), when he opened the inaugural session of Parliament in 1965, soon after the country gained independence:

So, we must never allow ourselves the luxury of forgetting that survival depends upon rallying and strengthening the forces in the area who are for a secular, rational and multi-racial approach to the problems of economic backwardness and the legacy of unbalanced development in the colonial era.

Indeed, Singapore did not use religious ideas from sacred texts to resolve the challenges of economic backwardness. Singapore has managed societal affairs through considerations that are purely human and has promoted welfare through material means without referring to religious teachings or principles. There was no need for debate about the truth or falsehood of religion or of philosophical beliefs to develop the country and achieve the greater good of society (Holyoake 1906, Chapter IV). To overcome its existential challenges and effectively manage the complex issues of a highly religiously plural society, Singapore asserts itself as a sovereign state that exercises strong authority in determining where the dividing lines are to be drawn between religion, politics and state.

According to Talal Asad, the modern secular democratic state is ‘jealous of its sovereignty; it defines and protects the subjective rights of its citizens (including their right to religious freedom); infuses them with nationalistic fervour; invokes bureaucratic rationality in governing them justly; it is fundamentally exclusive’ (Asad 2012, p. 36). Asad also argues that secularism can be easily thought of as requiring the separation of religion from secular institutions in government. But Asad qualified that secularism is not all about separation between religious and socio-political institutions because there are new concepts of religion, ethics and politics that have emerged in the non-western world. He added that secularism’s doctrine of separation does not detract from its global relevance because there are alternative ways in which nations have embraced the idea of secularism without departing from the principle of separation (Asad 2003, pp. 1–2). State secularism is not neutral; in reality, it is ideological as it is a political doctrine that is employed to answer the question of where to draw the line between religion and politics and where the proper place of religion should be. Secularism, to him, is a political doctrine, or what he identifies as “political secularism”—the idea which refers to the modern state’s sovereign power to reorganise the substantive features of religion, stipulate what religion is and what its place ought to be in society, assign its proper content and disseminate its ethical framework (Asad 2013). It then follows that the state has the right to ultimately decide where to draw the lines between religion, the state and politics.

Based on this approach, and where the line between religion, state and politics must be drawn, Singapore’s secularism aims to protect the state from the intervention of religion and to protect religion from state intervention. This is not only true in theory but also in practice; though the Singaporean state is not puritanical in its conduct, because it is a sovereign state, it is present in many aspects of the lives of its citizenry, including their religious life (A. E. Lai 2010, p. 327). It is not surprising, then, that within the secular framework, the state continues to be involved in religious matters (Tan 2008, p. 66). This means that the Singaporean state defines how and when religion can enter common spaces.

From a political perspective, Singapore’s secularism follows Rajeev Bhargava’s definition of political secularism, which imposes two requirements. First, religious communities are expected to forgo some of their rights in their religious practices, even if these are of utmost importance to them so that the rights of others in society are not impinged. For example, the Muslim right to ritual slaughter during *Eidul Adha* celebration (Day of

Sacrifice) is curtailed as such a ritual may impinge on rights which are more important to society (that is the preservation of public health and hygiene). The second requirement is that the state will act to prevent blind pursuits of ultimate ideals (beliefs) to protect public life as the strong religious emotions generated in times of interreligious conflicts may lead to bloody violence (Bhargava 1998, pp. 496–97).

### 5. Embracing Religious Pluralism to Deal with Social Fragmentation

Singapore took a cautious yet pre-emptive step to mitigate the possible threat of social fragmentation that could arise when debates about truth or falsehood involve self-claims of superiority, claims of self-righteousness and denigrating other religions. It did so by defining the ‘red lines’ that must not be crossed and providing an effective social framework that encourage citizens to respect the plurality of beliefs, reminding them that there could be more than one correct account of a given subject matter, from the perspectives of different religions (Baghrmian and Ingram 2000, p. 1). Singaporean leaders in the early years of the state’s formation put in place a structure consisting of non-religious organisations in civil society to ‘accommodate pluralism in a just social order that could avoid intolerance and conflict due to differences’ (Baghrmian and Ingram 2000, p. 3). Singapore’s positive attitude towards pluralism was inspired by the positive experience of co-existence living in post-colonial India and America in the 1960s—two major countries that had evolved into religiously plural societies (Calhoun et al. 2011, p. 16). Moreover, conflicts due to irreconcilable ways of life were settled by a ‘give and take’ attitude on the part of the people who co-exist in a religiously diverse society based on their common interests in leading a harmonious and prosperous life. The phraseology used for this is ‘achieving a *modus vivendi*’ as the baseline for social reconciliation (Baghrmian and Ingram 2000, p. 7).

Singapore’s *modus vivendi* was aptly defined by the current president of Singapore, Madam Halimah Yacob (2019), as consisting of three commonalities to bind society: (i) a shared sense of safeguarding national security, (ii) social stability linked to a shared experience of communal living and (iii) economic prosperity. These commonalities support the foundation of Singapore’s governance, which is an effective combination of secularism, rationalism and multiculturalism that can address both equality and cultural differences. This is akin to the egalitarian multiculturalism advocated by British sociologist John Rex (d. 2011), which is not about achieving uniformity but accepting cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance (Hutchinson and Smith 1996, p. 243).

### 6. Differentiation of Roles, Common Space and State Power

Prior to Singapore’s establishment of the secular state in 1965, religious institutions ran hospitals, clinics, schools and other public services. Following independence, the secular state completely revamped its public services and reclaimed functions that were mundane in nature, leaving religious functions and practices to religious institutions. In short, secularisation shifted medical, educational and other public functions from religious institutions to state-run and state-financed institutions (Calhoun et al. 2011, p. 13). This demarcation of functions in society as either mundane or sacred is the manifestation of secularism as described by philosopher Charles Taylor (Smith 2014, pp. 20–23). This demarcation has resulted in the diminished role of religion in Singapore’s public square. Taylor would call this the effect of the subtraction theory, and Singapore’s experience has validated this theory (Calhoun et al. 2011, pp. 6–9). This approach of differentiating roles to manage the mundane affairs of the Singaporean state has been consistently practiced since the country’s independence. Indeed, the public sphere in Singapore is regarded as a non-sectarian, neutral and areligious common space. Singapore staunchly enforces this conception of the common space as the key to operationalising state secularism and managing people’s diversity of beliefs. It is also through the idea of the common space that Singapore can ensure a social environment that is conducive to the co-existence of diverse religious communities.

Charles Taylor laid out two possible ways to establish a common space for co-existence: (i) the common ground strategy and (ii) the independent political ethic. He also mentioned a third way—the overlapping consensus strategy made famous by John Rawls. Singapore has adopted the third approach because, unlike the first two approaches, the overlapping consensus approach does not require the society to have a common religious foundation, which is ideal for a country in which religious diversity is a key feature. What is needed is for society to agree on certain political principles, for example the doctrine of human rights, of popular sovereignty, of freedom and equality. It is not imperative for these political principles to be based on consensus of religious principles of the different communities. Indeed, these political principles represent the agreed rules for living and working together, which are embraced by diverse religious communities to achieve interests that they share (Taylor 1998, pp. 32–38). The common space is an essential characteristic of modern secularism that, according to Charles Taylor, allows a plurality of views to emerge in the spirit of mutual respect for diverse cultures, equal recognition of all religions by the state and tolerance of different beliefs. Singapore relies heavily on the idea of the common space as a political tool to hold its diverse society together. Its commitment to secularism, growing the common space and preventing its diminution have contributed to religious harmony, which, according to Lee Hsien Loong (the current prime minister of Singapore), is one of Singapore’s most remarkable achievements since gaining independence in 1965 (Sim 2015). Singapore’s model of secularism enables a high degree of tolerance to be exercised in social relations. According to Singapore’s founding prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew (d. 2015), ‘every Singaporean knows the first ingredient, the first attribute, we must have to be a successful multi-racial, cosmopolitan society, is a high degree of tolerance. It is our way of life’ (Han et al. 2011, pp. 240–41).

## 7. Freedom of Religion, Religious Laws and State Neutrality

The common space (or public square) is a secular space with broad-minded institutions run by people who are not prejudiced against or in favour of any religion, meaning that freedom of religion is a key principle in the Singaporean Constitution (Smith 2014, pp. 20–21). Article 15 of the Constitution states that citizens have freedom with respect to professing, practicing and propagating their religion as long as they do not violate any laws relating to public order, public health and morality. The fourth president of Singapore, Wee Kim Wee (d. 2005), in his presidential address to Parliament on 9 January 1989, reiterated that ‘Singapore is a secular state, and the supreme source of political authority is the Constitution. The Constitution guarantees freedom of religion’ (Wee 1989). This was repeated by then Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng (Han et al. 2011, pp. 240–41): ‘Our laws and policies do not derive from religious authority but reflect the judgements and decisions of the secular government and Parliament to serve the national interest and collective good. These laws and public policies apply equally to all, regardless of one’s race, religion or social status’. The Singapore Police Force, for example, has been even-handed in handling religious incidents, and citizens overwhelmingly believe that the police treat them fairly, regardless of race or religion. This indicates that the state takes a neutral position vis-à-vis religious beliefs of its citizens (Tham 2015).

A relevant example demonstrating the state’s neutrality vis-à-vis religion is the State Court’s decision in 2013, wherein a lady went before the State Court claiming that she was wrongfully dismissed by her employer (the Faith Community Baptist Church) when she became pregnant following an adulterous relationship with a male co-worker. The Court’s ruling in favour of the woman reinforced the state’s position that civil laws must be applied instead of religious laws—in this case, those defined in Christianity (The Straits Times 2013). The tension seemed to be whether the Ministry of Manpower, which was involved in the adjudication, had the right to interfere in what the Church believed was a religious affair and whether a place of employment in a house of worship was regarded as a secular public space. Such state–religion tensions are not uncommon in secular Singapore, but the

way they are usually resolved reflects the amiable nature of the relationship between its religious and political leaders (Tham 2014).

### 8. Balancing Interests

It is worth noting that Singapore does not seek to eliminate religion from the common space even though the state works ardently to keep the common space neutral, areligious and non-sectarian. The state is sensitive to the need to fulfil specific requests from religious communities and to allow them to perform their rituals in public space. Each religious community has different needs and, therefore, the state judiciously caters to such needs in a way that is seen as neutral through its equitable provision of concessions. For example, the Hindus are the only religious group permitted to conduct processions along public streets because such a procession is a requirement in their celebration of *Thaipusam* (Shanmugam 2015). Other religious communities are also given concessions, though in different forms. Taoists are allowed to conduct their ritual burning of worship paraphernalia in public areas when they pray for the dead while Muslims are allowed to perform their prayers at designated public sites during the month of *Ramadhan* (fasting month). In short, the state balances its actions by making concessions in common space to each religious community, although in varied ways.

Notwithstanding the concessions given to religious communities to conduct their practices in common space and the constitutional right to freedom of worship, the state has not blindsided itself with the problems associated with religion. Notably, Singapore's founding prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, regarded religion as a deep fault line that would persist for decades (Han et al. 2011, p. 219).

In the 1980s, Singapore saw the rise of religious fundamentalism, transnational pulls of renewed religiosity and new forms of post-traditional and new age spirituality. In addition, as a response to the global revival of religions in the 1980s, particularly Islam (after the 1979 Iranian Revolution), Christianity (with the plan to increase its following through active proselytising) and Buddhism (with the attempt to preserve its numbers by modernising its teachings), there was a re-awakening of religions in Singapore. Open proselytising was on the rise, and the state had to step in to maintain cordial ethnic relations (Kuah-Pearce 2003, pp. 137–38).

The state is also mindful of the encroachment of a dominant religion upon the territory of a weaker religion that it considers a threat, the denigration of other faiths and insensitive attempts at conversion (Parliament of Singapore 1989, p. 4). This explains the tough actions undertaken by the state to confront those who intend to denigrate other religions as shown in cases where several foreign Christian and Muslim preachers were denied entry into Singapore. One of the Christian preachers described Allah as a false god, praying for those held captive in the darkness of Islam, and another Christian preacher referred to the evils of Islam and the malevolent nature of Islam and Muhammad (Lim 2017). The Muslim foreign preacher was also known for his hostile remarks towards Christians and Jews (Arshad 2017).

More issues have emerged since the year 2000, such as the opening of the first two casinos, the promotion of biomedical research involving stem cells as well as DNA and the latest decision by the state to accommodate gay rights by repealing the law (Section 377A) that criminalises sex between two men. The actions and decisions of the Singaporean state has led to some tension within the country's religions (A. E. Lai 2010, p. 312). The government reached out to faith communities as part of active citizenry and sought a better understanding to accommodate their unique interests. For example, in the case of the opening of the first two casinos in Singapore, religious groups accepted the state's decision to proceed with them as a *fait accompli*, but the government addressed the concern expressed about the social impact of gambling by working with these groups to minimise it (A. E. Lai 2010, p. 70). The state is acutely aware of the power of religion to mobilise, motivate and enforce behaviour, values and norms among the faithful (A. E. Lai 2010, p. 66; Tham 2008, p. 18). The state, therefore, pre-empts problematic situations with religions

with regard to its political interventions by making expectations clear about how faith communities can play their roles in Singapore's development and pursue their interests in a secular state.

### 9. Management of Religion and Religious Leaders

The aforementioned challenges that Singapore has encountered with religion, as well as the tough and decisive manner in which it has dealt with them, demonstrate that it does not allow the involvement of religion in the management of affairs of the state. Similarly, the state does not allow religious leaders to encroach on political affairs. Indeed, religious leaders are prohibited by law from encroaching on political affairs and religious credentials are not required for people to assume political leadership (Al-Attas 2001, pp. 196–97). In the words of former Minister for Home Affairs S. Jayakumar (1990):

It is important that religion and politics be kept separate because religious leaders are seen to have a special status and their pronouncements will have an emotional effect on their flock. If one religious group enters the political arena, so will others. Inevitably, there must be collision between different religious groups, or between religious groups and Government to the detriment of our nation.

To avoid this, the state has not hesitated to use its power to respond strongly when it is deemed that religious actors have threatened national security and/or social stability, in line with its hegemonic role in social control and management (A. E. Lai 2010, p. 327). The management of religious matters in Singapore is undertaken by several pieces of legislation, the most important being the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA)—the legislation that keeps religion out of politics and seeks to legislate moderation and tolerance (Tan 2007, p. 446). Based on this legislation, the state imposes limits on the freedom of religious leaders to enter the political domain by challenging ministers or agitating people against government policies. Essentially, the MRHA curtails the freedom of religious leaders to politicise religion (Tamney 1996, p. 35). It also prohibits religious leaders and groups from using religion to cause feelings of enmity, hatred or of hostility between the different religious groups and from carrying out subversive activities under the guise of practicing any religious belief.

The state has also created institutional frameworks for the management of religion, which, other than the Constitution, include the Presidential Council for Minority Rights (to safeguard the interests of minorities, including their religious interests, when new laws are enacted) and the Presidential Council of Religious Harmony (to advise on actions to be taken to preserve the harmonious relations amongst religions) (A. E. Lai 2010, pp. 311–12).

Despite these state controls, religious communities are free to express their views on policies and laws. The law does not preclude religious leaders from exercising their civil and political rights. They can even become members of political parties (Shanmugam 2019). However, they must not mobilise congregations to be confrontational in their engagement with the state. They must not undermine the government's authority, its legitimacy or the democratic process (Tan 2008, p. 70). The state asserts that religious organisations must neither stray into radical social action nor be involved in political processes nor exploit religious issues. It does not tolerate the use of religious freedom accorded in the Constitution for any individual or group to undermine racial or religious harmony. As an example, the state disallowed the screening of the movie *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the circulation of the book *The Satanic Verses* and the staging of the play *Talaq*, as they would have created backlashes from the religious communities (A. E. Lai 2010, p. 67).

### 10. Engagement and Cooperation with Religious Groups

Singapore's political leadership did not assume that society would simply accept that religion and politics are distinct spheres of influence and experience. In dealing with issues of concern, religious leaders have also developed an ethos of engaging the state in a constructive manner (Mohd Sah et al. 2014). For example, in the early years of Singapore's history, religious leaders were consulted to determine the number of public holidays to cel-

celebrate religious festivals in Singapore. The then law minister, E. W. Barker, told Parliament that Hindu leaders were given the choice of having Deepavali or Thaipusam as a public holiday, and both Easter and the Prophet Muhammad's birthday were dropped as public holidays after consultation with Christian and Muslim leaders (Lim 2015, p. A8). Another example of religion–state engagement is the public issue of whether Muslim women employed in uniformed services (for example, nurses) should be allowed to wear headscarves (*hijab*). In this debate, Muslim leaders aligned their actions to the state's expectations that they remained committed not to diminishing the secular public sphere or disrupting social cohesion and religious harmony (Chan 2014). Another example is the successful engagement between the government and Hindu leaders to resolve a demand from the Hindu community to have live music during the annual Thaipusam street procession. Despite public safety concerns, the state finally agreed to allow the playing of musical instruments at designated locations but that this agreement be based on trust that Hindu participants would observe the terms of the agreement (Zaccheus 2016).

In responding to criticism that politics was mixed with religion when government officials intermingled with religious leaders (especially during electioneering for parliamentary elections), Minister of Home Affairs K. Shanmugam (2019) put forth the state's position: 'good, deep friendships between government leaders and religious leaders are extremely important because it allows issues to be dealt with in an atmosphere of trust.'

### 11. Religion, State and Secularisation: What form of Secularisation?

The Singaporean state does not view secularity and religion as mutually exclusive. In the White Paper presented to Parliament to introduce the MRHA in 1989, it was noted that it was 'neither possible nor desirable' for people to separate their secular and religious identity (Parliament of Singapore 1989, p. 4). Therefore, secularism in Singapore does not seek to marginalize religion but, as an adaptable model of secularism, it intends to accommodate religion—a secularism that is 'friendly' to religion.

As already noted, religion continues to occupy an important position in Singaporean society. Though the Singaporean state embarked on a rapid path of modernisation, its society has generally remained religious. Almost 80 percent of the Singaporean population are affiliated to a religion, and the rate of participation in religious celebrations and worship services is high. There has been no 'displacement of religion from the centre of human life' (Bruce 2011, p. 1). There has been no decrease in the importance of religion to society, contrary to what sociologist Bryan Wilson argued, namely that secularisation ought to result in the decline in the social significance of religion (Bruce 2011, p. 2).

Therefore, Singaporean society is religious, but the state is secular. This explains the imperative for Singapore to embrace an 'adaptable' model of secularism, because the act of protecting the secular public sphere from the influence of religion within a religious society and a religiously diverse context can be undertaken more by goodwill and a 'give-and-take' attitude (Sim 2014). This adaptable form of secularism exists due to the state's acceptance of the fact that religions have utilitarian benefits. Lee Kuan Yew affirmed this point when, in 1987, he said that 'we must match our economic progress with advances in the moral, ethical and aesthetic dimensions of our life. The established religions have an important role to play in our moral and spiritual development' (Amrine and Davis 2013, p. 90).

Social practices, habits and public rituals that are associated with a belief in a transcendent being still exist and are entrenched in peoples' lives. Williams (2012, p. 2) described a society with such characteristics as one that has not been secularised. Singapore's ability to preserve the importance of religion is also a negation of the secularisation theory that was put forward in the 1960s and 1970s, a theory which states that, as countries develop through modernisation and rationalisation, religion loses its influence and relevance in society. It also validates Charles Taylor's belief that modern civilisation cannot bring about the 'death of God' and that 'not only has religion not declined, but it is also impossible to remove something like religion which is a central dimension of culture' (Calhoun et al.



2011, pp. 8–9). This is evidenced by the words of Member of Parliament Dr. Chit Chung Ong (1991), who said the following:

We should, I believe, therefore remain a strictly secular nation in this regard. That does not mean that the State should be against religions, or it is unmindful of the religious needs or spiritual needs of the people. At Singapore Armed Forces commissioning ceremonies, for example, the leaders of the major religions are invited to say prayers and meet the spiritual needs of the officers.

Clearly, Singapore has modernised differently when compared with many countries in Europe that turned secular upon embarking on a pathway of modernisation and development. Singapore has allowed religion to thrive, and religiosity has retained importance in society. Singapore’s model of secularism therefore supports the notion of ‘multiple modernity’ espoused by sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt. Eisenstadt argues that there are many regional and national paths to secularity (Bellah 2013, p. 35; Taylor 2007, p. 21). That is, secularism does not have a fixed legal and cultural framework (Gole 2013, p. 250). Therefore, given the profound presence of religion in its society, Singapore uniquely builds its adaptability in its embrace of secularism to make it ‘religion-friendly’.

## 12. Assertiveness of the State in Drawing the Line between Religion and the State

To further explore state–religion relations in Singapore and demonstrate how the state may impose restrictions on certain religious activities, in this final section I present three examples of the dominance of the state in deciding on issues that are deemed religious in nature. The first is the case of Muslim women serving in uniformed public services (for example, police constables) who feel religiously obliged to don the head scarf (*hijab*) but are not allowed by the state to do so to protect what is ‘generally valuable’ (that is, the religiously neutral common space) despite ‘the preparedness of society to tolerate diversity that different members of a population bring’ (Lim and Ong 2013).

Second, the state took steps to curb foreign influence on religious organisations by mandating a law (amendments to the MRHA) that states that key religious leadership roles be filled by Singaporean citizens, donations to religious organisations of \$10,000 or more be reported and affiliations with foreign religious bodies and individuals be declared. These new laws require that religious communities curtail their rights and freedoms to protect Singapore from foreign actors who might exploit religious fault lines or impose values that could undermine religious harmony (L. Lai 2019). The state further stipulated that its interventions to limit religious freedom are needed to ensure social peace and the continued co-existence of religions within a harmonious setting.

Third, according to Eugene Tan (constitutional law expert at Singapore Management University), the state exerts influence on the administration of Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism, evidenced by the state’s appointment of their religious office-bearers. The Inter-Religious Organisation (a major interfaith NGO comprising leaders from 10 religions) has also been co-opted by the government to promote greater religious understanding (Tan 2007, p. 446). The state can positively influence the administration of these faiths through the Islamic Religious Council, the Hindu Advisory Board, the Hindu Endowment and the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board (Tan 2008, p. 67). Nevertheless, the Minister in charge of Muslim Affairs promised that the government would not exert any political influence on the proceedings of the Islamic Religious Council even though it is not meant to be totally free from government control and supervision (Bedlington 1974, p. 178).

The state’s power is vested in legal authority and the rule of law. The MRHA’s important function is to clearly delineate the boundaries of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour (L. Lai 2019, p. 1). One relevant example is the state’s decision to regulate the use of loudspeakers in mosques in Singapore for the Muslim call to prayer and the subsequent contestation by Muslims of that claim of authority (Kong 2016). Where conflicting positions exist, uneasy compromises between the state and religions remain the only viable option. This was clearly evident in another case: the controversial debate to repeal Section 377A, which criminalises sex between men. While religious groups vehemently objected to the

repeal, the state adopted the uneasy compromise of retaining the law (to appease religious groups) but not enforcing it (to placate LGBTQ advocates) (Toh 2018). Importantly, the state makes it clear that such sensitive issues must be discussed using a secular framework, though it realistically acknowledges that arguments will be informed by people's religious convictions (Shanmugam 2013). (Note: The latest accommodation by the state is that it has agreed to repeal Section 377A and at the same time hardwire the definition of marriage as between man and woman, in the Singapore Constitution.)

While the state recognises that religion can be mobilised for the strengthening of a spirit of unity within society, it ensures that the secular framework always takes precedence over religious principles or teachings in political discourse, public policy and governance (Tan 2008, p. 67). Religious identities, according to Lai Ah Eng (a sociologist at the National University of Singapore), would have to therefore sit comfortably with larger interests of social cohesion, national unity and the common good of society (A. E. Lai 2010, p. 326). While the government provides an environment for religious diversity, it also ensures that religious practices do not prevent the nation-building process. As explained above, the balance is managed in a broad and informal way through conversation and dialogue to reach amicable solutions to contentious issues or reconciliation in situations of conflict (Lee 2014). Nevertheless, religions that have doctrinal positions contrary to important tenets of nation-building or that are disruptive to public order may be banned (Yuen 2019). An example is the Jehovah's Witness group.

### 13. Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the way that Singapore has adopted a pragmatic approach to secularism. This is unsurprising, given the pragmatism of the state, as it mediates between a liberal and an illiberal style of governance. This paper has argued that, depending on the needs and circumstances of the time, the model of secularism in Singapore provides the state with the flexibility to easily switch between a softer version of secularism, which is religion-friendly, and a harder variety which the state employs as a tool for political control and management of society. Finally, this paper has emphasised that the usefulness of Singapore's eclectic model of secularism has been sustained over the past 57 years because it has acknowledged the centrality of religion in society, which has remained an important feature throughout the history of Singapore.

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Article

# Church Building as a Secular Endeavour: Three Cases from Eastern Germany

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**Abstract:** Political secularism can be defined as a kind of political philosophy that sees the secular state as setting the terms of encounter between the secular and the religious. However, religion and religious organisations are not necessarily seen as oppositional to the secular state; there can be myriad forms of coexistence between secular and religious authorities. The argument forwarded in this article is based on ethnographic research focussing on the presence and social significance of religious materiality in the region considered to be one of the most secularised worldwide—the north-eastern part of contemporary Germany. I investigate the strategies of actors socially recognised as either religious or secular towards each other, looking at how secular actors assign a place to religious symbols, materiality, theological concepts, organisations, and communities; on the other hand I investigate strategies that religious actors adopt in a context of political secularism. Even if political secularism presupposes supremacy of the secular state over religious actors and the right of the former to make legally binding decisions concerning the latter, those religious actors are not passive—they react to secular initiatives and they try to carve for themselves a space in a public sphere, while at the same time the secular or rather nonreligious actors mobilize religious elements for a variety of reasons.

**Keywords:** political secularism; eastern Germany; church buildings; reconciliation; secular/religious divide

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## 1. Introduction

Secularism as a political project and as an ideology can appear in many guises, but most often, it encompasses a vision of religion as a problem. Elisabeth Shakman Hurd (2009) started the introduction to her book on the politics of secularism and international relations precisely with this statement, in capital letters: religion is a problem. In this formulation, secularism is about the struggle to either keep mobilising forces of religion at bay and under control or to assign certain rights to religion so it does not become a problem (again). However, Verkaaik and Arab (2016) pointed out that although the theories concerning both secularisation as a process and secularism as an ideology, principles of governance and political project provide immensely important and useful tools for researchers, they are constructed abstractions that do not and cannot be expected to account for the diversity of actual practices. Therefore, those authors encourage the use of ethnographic case studies to provide new insights into existing secularisms. Is religion a problem for secularism as a political project in practice? Is it maybe a partner in the discussion or, rather, a potentially useful addition to the political toolbox?

This paper takes up the invitation to look at and reflect on political secularism by means of ethnographic case studies conducted in Brandenburg, the region of Germany where both secularism as a statecraft principle (Casanova 2009) and secularisation as a process, especially in terms of a decline in belief and belonging to religious organisations (Casanova 1994), seem to be obvious and advanced. The case studies presented here show that the differentiation and separation of secular from religious in the public sphere is a complex issue, inviting ethnography-based analysis.



My argument takes as a starting point an assertion expressed most prominently in Talal Asad's works (Asad 1993, 2003), that the history of relations between the secular and the religious is also the history of their mutual definition. It is not possible to form a universal definition of religion, just as it is not possible to form such a definition of the secular (Asad 1993, 2003). Therefore, I look at ethnography as a way of presenting particular situations that take place under the conditions of what I call "confident political secularism". After Berlinerblau (2017, p. 94), I take political secularism to be a kind of political philosophy and practice in which the secular state grants itself the right to unilaterally define the rules of the relationship between secular and religious; there is, therefore, still a changing and historically specific definition of both, as in Talal Asad's formulation, but the defining process is not mutual.

I use the term "confident political secularism" to describe the ideological background of those situations where the main principle of subjugating the religious to the secular in the defining process goes virtually unquestioned by all public actors—religious, secular, or nonreligious. In this particular article, I focus on situations in which the main actors consider themselves and are considered by all participants of the given social conversations as native, majoritarian, or historically dominant. Those who are considered as minorities or newcomers, or are socially classed as alien, are on the fringes of the discussed negotiations. This makes the described cases different from most of the available ethnographic studies of secularism in Europe, which mainly concern religious groups, organisations, or citizens who, being in a minoritarian position, negotiate their needs in the public sphere (e.g., Modood 2019). The presence of Islam, Judaism, and other religious denominations is also an important factor in the cases that I ethnographically describe, though they are also on the fringes of discussions. In the present analysis, I focus on the practices and discourses of the dominant actors.

In confident political secularism, religion occupies a clearly subjugated but fairly neutral position; it is a subject of decisions and discussions taking place in the public sphere, where religious actors can also participate, but where the dominance of secular governance is accepted and goes virtually unquestioned. Religion and religious organisations are not seen as being in competition or in opposition to the secular state; instead, they can be seen as useful for secular actors, state and nonstate alike, as they provide a set of tools that can advance various agendas, not necessarily directly related to religion or even in line with goals of religious organisations and groups.

Most importantly for this article, at any historical moment when the secular and the religious are differentiated in a particular way, we see the production of material objects socially recognised as religious. In the case of Christian religions in Europe, these are, most importantly, church buildings and chapels, but also such elements of the public space as bells (including their sound), crosses, paintings, and sculptures presenting themes with religious connotation. These material objects stay in the public space and often also retain their significance when relations between the religious and the secular change. Their often powerful and even dominant presence is recognised as a value and resource by a multitude of actors.

The ethnographic analysis presented in this this article is aimed at showing how elements socially recognised as religious are mobilised for secular goals and how religious actors find a place for themselves in a confidently secular public sphere. Political secularism presupposes that the state can also define the scope of its own jurisdiction with regard to religious organisations in a way that transfers certain spheres of life and certain tasks outside its own control and in the hands of religious organisations. Religion can be a welcome contributor to the public sphere, but on terms decided by the secular authorities. Such an understanding of relations between religious and secular can be found where religious actors are invited to participate in public discussions, but the terms of the discussions are delineated by secular authorities, as described in the later works of Juergen Habermas (2006). Although the concept of political secularism is mainly used to refer to the relationship between secular state power and religious power, it can be assumed that the

results of this political philosophy are visible in the public sphere in general with regard to the relationships between all kinds of social actors considered and recognised as secular, religious, or nonreligious.

A notion of the nonreligious is important for my analysis and is defined here in a particular way, proposed by Johannes Quack (2014). According to him, as nonreligious, we can describe those social actors who see themselves as situated outside the religious field but are at the same time very much interested in the religious one. Nonreligious actors are part of the secular, understood as differentiated from the religious (Casanova 2009) in terms of self-definition. However, they mobilise religion either by assigning it a positive symbolic, practical, or social role, or by making it into the enemy, as an opponent and challenge to the secular. Religion for them is a tool to achieve goals in the secular public sphere. Such actors are the main protagonists in my analysis.

Another notion that is crucial for my argument is one of materiality. The so-called material turn has been one of the most important and fruitful avenues in the anthropology of religion in recent decades (Houtman and Meyer 2012). The main topic of those works is the role of bodies, infrastructures, and other forms of materiality in making religious experience possible and in maintaining forms of religious practice, learning, and belonging (e.g., Meyer 2009; Engelke and Tomlinson 2006). In my analysis I take a different angle: I start from an observation that materiality socially recognised as religious is important for many actors who situate themselves on the secular side of the religious/secular divide, but through their interest in religious materiality become nonreligious in Quack's understanding. Church buildings in contemporary Europe are socially recognised as religious places even though the relations between religious and secular are now different than at the time they were built. Such buildings can be appreciated and identified as important for a variety of reasons that transcend religious convictions and devotional practices. However, it seems that although the religious function of such places might have faded into the background, the fact that those places are socially recognised as religious has consequences for public debate (see also Halemba 2022).

## 2. Fieldwork

The particular argument advanced in this article is based on ethnographic research that started in 2020.<sup>1</sup> It is focused on the presence and social significance of religious materiality in the region considered to be one of the most secularised in Europe, the north-eastern part of contemporary Germany, formerly a part of the German Democratic Republic. The project is composed of three case studies. Firstly, I work with people involved in renovating and sustaining Protestant village churches in the central and northern parts of Brandenburg country. This includes interviews with members of NGOs, people living in villages where the churches are located, and local pastors, as well as representatives of the central and regional church administration, especially those working for the building department.

The second case study concerns the initiative of rebuilding the Garrison Church in Potsdam, the capital city of Brandenburg. Here the focus is on an analysis of public debates as presented in the local press, leaflets, documents, books, and official public hearings and during events organised by various involved actors. This is supplemented by interviews with the main protagonists and (passive) participation in many public events and debates concerning this endeavour.

The third case study is only briefly introduced. The research work has been conducted by Piotr Winiarczyk, a student at the University of Warsaw who is working with me on this project. It concerns the activities of the Reconciliation parish, which has as its basis a chapel that is part of the Berlin Wall Memorial at Bernauerstraße. This research in progress involves participating in activities organised by the Reconciliation parish and conducting interviews with parishioners, other people involved in these activities, and staff at the Berlin Wall Memorial.

All of those locations are in a region of Germany that is widely regarded as one of the most secularised in Europe. They are connected by a powerful presence in the public space

of materiality, which is socially recognised as religious. The church buildings influence and even shape the cityscapes, despite the fact that religious worship is fading, and some locations do not have a Christian religious community of any considerable size at all that uses the buildings on a regular basis. Still, the buildings themselves make religion quite present in public space; moreover, through this presence, religion is evoked, and religious actors participate in the public sphere in a more general sense: their presence is one of the factors ensuring the important place of religion in public discussions.

The aim of this research project is to investigate the strategies that actors socially recognised as either religious or secular use towards each other. I am interested, on the one hand, in looking at how secular actors assign a place to religious symbols, materiality, theological concepts, organisations, and communities; on the other hand, I look at strategies that religious actors adopt in the context of confident political secularism. The dominance of political secularism as a political philosophy does not always mean a reduction in the role of religion in the public sphere. On the contrary, it sometimes occurs that religious elements are invited, as it were, to participate in public life by actors who see themselves as not involved in the religious field.

### 3. Religion and the State in Former GDR

Eastern Germany is considered one of the most secularised regions of Europe in terms of religious membership, but also declaration of belief and individual religious practice (Pollack 2002; Pollack and Pickel 2000). In recent years, the number of believers has diminished, especially in the Catholic and Protestant Churches,<sup>2</sup> the two organisations which were still called *Volkskirchen* in the first half of the 20th century. This term literally means “people’s churches” and denotes ecclesiastical organisations with particularly strong links to and a significant role in and for society, which goes beyond religious rituals and other devotional practices. During my research in Brandenburg, I often heard from pastors and believers that the Evangelical Church in Germany (*Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*, EKD) lost its role as a *Volkskirche*, as at present it does not have broad popular resonance and recognition. Instead, the ecclesiastical organisations are recognised not only legally but also by those who live in small towns and villages as *Landeskirchen*, literally “state churches”; that is, formal organisations that have a defined administrative area, largely (though not always) coinciding with the borders of the federal states and linked to the state through multiple administrative channels. Hence, while *Volkskirche* refers to Church that is part of the daily lives of the majority of inhabitants of a region and an important factor in their self-identification, *Landeskirche* is primarily used to refer to administrative unit and indicates the existence of organisation that has as its main partners not the people but the state and its apparatus.

This transition from *Volkskirche* to *Landeskirche* provides a good description of the situation in eastern Germany. In Potsdam, the capital of Brandenburg, in 2019 82% of inhabitants did not belong to any religious community.<sup>3</sup> In the state of Brandenburg at the end of 2020, only 17.5% of the population belonged to either the Catholic or the Evangelical Church,<sup>4</sup> with many people leaving both churches every year. Usually, this situation is understood as a legacy of the German Democratic Republic’s atheistic position and successful propaganda. However, some authors point out that secularising tendencies were already evident in this region of Germany earlier and are linked to 19th-century industrialisation and socialist movements (Froese and Pfaff 2005). In eastern Germany today, there are many people who, according to Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, “are often stubbornly secular”,<sup>5</sup> claiming that religion is simply a non-issue for them. “People have forgotten that they have forgotten God”<sup>6</sup> is a sentence attributed to the former head of the Evangelical Church of the Church Province of Saxony, Bishop Axel Noack. It has been repeated many times in speeches, articles, and popular books as an adequate description of the relative insignificance of religion in the private lives of many people in eastern Germany.<sup>7</sup>

It does not mean, however, that religion does not play any part in social life. There might be a crisis of the EKD as *Volkskirche*, but the EKD as *Landeskirche* is still very strong.

The two main Churches in Germany, Evangelical and Catholic, together with Jewish religious communities, receive contributions from their members through the state tax system and are also partly supported by state money in various forms, most importantly the so-called *Staatsleistungen* (state benefits), which originated in agreements between the German states and the Churches dating back as far as the beginning of the 19th century, adding up to hundreds of millions of euros every year.<sup>8</sup> There are also subventions paid by the state and linked to church-run services in the form of schools, kindergartens, counselling centres, retirement homes, and hospitals. The Churches are also important land and estate owners, with considerable assets and leasing strategies that influence local politics. Despite the shrinking numbers of believers, the Evangelical and Catholic Churches are also powerful and influential organisations in eastern German states. Moreover, as [Peperkamp and Rajtar \(2010\)](#) observed, communities of believers may be numerically small, but they are very active, influencing social life in many ways.

There is also the visible part of religion, especially significant for the present argument. Church towers define the skylines and landscapes not only of east German cities but also the countryside. Brandenburg is the German country with the greatest density of Evangelical Church buildings in relation to the number of church members.<sup>9</sup> There is a growing number of research projects that address the issue of the post-religious life of church buildings ([Halbfas 2019](#); [Keller 2016](#); [Siegl 2018](#)).<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, many civic initiatives concerned with the renovation or maintenance of church buildings where services are rarely held due to lack of both believers and pastors are situated in eastern Germany, especially in Brandenburg and Mecklenburg–Vorpommern.

#### 4. What Is a Church in a Small Village?

*Alte Kirchen Berlin Brandenburg eV.* is an association established in Berlin in the early 1990s by a group of people who, in one capacity or another, professionally or out of personal fascination, were interested in restoring church buildings. There were about 35 initial members from both East and West Germany. Today, the association has approximately 650 members<sup>11</sup> and, over the last 30 years, has been involved in dozens, if not hundreds, of projects.<sup>12</sup> The attitudes of the members to religion and their relationships with religious organisations vary. They are also not a decisive factor when it comes to membership. In this sense, it is a nonreligious association focused on materiality, which is socially recognised as religious, for which the Church, in this case, most prominently the *Evangelische Kirche Berlin–Brandenburg–schlesische Oberlausitz* (EKBO), is one of many partners in negotiations over the fate of church buildings in Brandenburg's villages.

The objective of the association is to support local initiatives aimed at preserving and/or restoring church buildings that survived the times of the GDR in rather dismal conditions. During the GDR era, church buildings were sometimes renovated ([Dohmann et al. 1964](#)); still, many of them were in a rather dire state at the end of the 1980s. At the beginning, the association focused on helping local initiators to get their restoration projects off the ground, or in some cases actively initiated projects, trying to mobilise local communities to act. More recently, the association has supported the development of the so-called “concepts of use” for renovated churches; while one aim is to retain the religious function of those buildings as much as possible, everyone seems to agree that religious use does not exhaust the potential of those places and, moreover, cannot be the only use in terms of economic sustainability because of the dwindling numbers of believers and pastors. Therefore, there is a need to think about possibilities for additional use. Most prominent are suggestions to use the buildings as concert or exhibition halls, but there are many other creative solutions.

In many villages, it is primarily not the parish councils but secular associations that carry out such projects. In a considerable number of cases, parish councils have been explicitly uninterested in restoring and maintaining certain churches. Nowadays, the borders of a parish extend beyond the borders of one village and can encompass several settlements. Therefore, within the territory of one parish with a few hundred members and

fewer than a hundred practicing believers, there can be several church buildings that are the responsibility of the relevant parish council. Moreover, in such regions as Uckermark in Brandenburg, many of those buildings have an official status as architectural monuments (*Denkmal*), having been built as early as the 12th century, which means that renovation has to be carried out under the supervision of state conservators, and the scope of changes and adaptations that can be made to the interior and exterior of buildings based on local needs is limited. Being responsible for several buildings that demand specialised attention is often too great an economic challenge for a parish with a small number of members who, furthermore, do not need those buildings for religious worship.

In this situation, many parishes, often with support of EKBO as an organisation, have considered privatising their church buildings or closing and abandoning some of them altogether and waiting for the forces of nature to do their work. The building department of the EKBO even decided to divide their buildings into four categories. Category A encompasses those that are considered indispensable to religious activities. In such cases, the local parish can count on the support of the Church administration to maintain them. Category B buildings are still in use and can also be supported. Category C and D buildings are of no interest to the Church, and in practice, the parish community cannot count on any support for their maintenance and restoration.

Many people in small towns and villages who are not church members are keen to get involved in efforts to preserve church buildings. Moreover, I have repeatedly encountered people who do not see themselves as religious asserting that churches should be preserved as recognisable religious buildings not only in their form but also in their function, by providing religious services at least a few times a year. In general, such people are also against privatisation of church buildings, a practice that is quite present in the western part of Germany and in other countries of western Europe. For the nonreligious inhabitants of eastern Germany, those buildings should remain in the public domain and any use beyond religious worship should be treated as an extension or addition only.

According to Protestant theology, unwanted buildings can be, under certain conditions, privatised, as there are no ritual consecrations of buildings in the Evangelical Church. Still, in practice, churches are not treated as ordinary buildings. Since 2005, the EKBO has published guidelines for the use and reuse of churches, in which it is stipulated that privatisation can be an option under certain conditions.<sup>13</sup> However, in practice, privatisation is very rarely seen as a solution by people who live next to or are interested in a particular church. One of the members of the association, himself a religious person, expressed this in the following way:

We have always been against churches being privatised, and we want them to be used for public benefit. And the best thing, in my opinion, is if services continue to take place even if there is only a small congregation and religious services take place maybe only three, four times a year. But that's the thing, that the purpose is maintained and that there is an extension of it, like concerts or something similar. I know that churches cannot be used profitably in a market economy. No matter how much effort you put in. And this should not be seen as a disadvantage, but as an opportunity. These are the last remaining public spaces [in a village]. And if three services a year and two or three concerts take place there, that's enough. These buildings have a justification in themselves, through their history, through their religious history, through their cultural history, the history of the village. And they are, as I said, the last public spaces we have. They are the oldest buildings in the village. And that is also the reason why people keep coming together, also those ones who no longer want to have anything to do with the Church as an institution. But they say it is important that the church is repaired, that it is open. That is important to us. So there are over 300 associations in Brandenburg that look after churches. And I guess at least two-thirds of the members are not church-affiliated.

There are several important aspects in this quotation. My interlocutor was against the privatisation of churches, a sentiment expressed very often during my research. However, interestingly, he also insisted that churches should not be totally turned into cultural or concert halls and the religious function should be retained. Over the course of my research, it became clear to me that many people see religious services as a way of ensuring that the church stays accessible to all, believers or not. Religious practice is seen as insurance for public access.

One has to remember that in the years after the unification of Germany, many institutions with not only economic but also social functions disappeared from eastern German villages and smaller towns: shops, bars, restaurants, community houses, schools, and kindergartens were closed or moved to bigger settlements. The remaining buildings were abandoned or sold for symbolic money to private owners. For many people, church buildings are seen as the last public places in their villages, and religious services are seen as a weapon against privatisation. If a place is seen as having, among others, a religious function, there is the hope that it will not be privatised. It therefore happens quite often that in renovated buildings, those few remaining religious services a year also attract people who are not believers and not members of the church, especially if a particular church is seen as being directly threatened with privatisation.

Churches are also seen as places that can bind people together. The head of a local association, himself a declared nonbeliever, told me about the church building in his village:

The church was quite overgrown, there were trees as tall as a man. It was like a Sleeping Beauty's castle, and someone wrote in the newspaper that the church had been awakened from its slumber, and the whole village was on its feet, working on the roof, atheists and Catholics as well. None of that mattered at all and this village itself came together again. Afterwards, we held a village festival, where the village was really complete and where we realised how long it has been since we sat together as a village community and celebrated, and how nice it is that we can talk to each other again.

Although the church as an organisation is not a *Volkskirche* anymore and the numbers of believers are falling, religion is still present in public spaces, as religious buildings still have an important social function. Church buildings can be mobilised for a variety of purposes, and it is their religious function that enables such mobilisation also for nonreligious actors. There is also a minority among people involved in the care of village churches who see them not only as protection against privatisation and the difficult or unjust effects of post-socialist transformation, but as defenders of the Christian identity of Europe, and in this way as a tool of exclusion. Still, in either case, religious materiality is mobilised by secular actors to address issues that go beyond the religious field.

##### 5. Is a Garrison Church a Religious Place?

Despite the fact that there are many church buildings in villages and towns of Brandenburg that are in obvious need of repair and maintenance, and that hardly any of them are full of believers on a regular basis, in the city centre of Potsdam, there is a growing church tower. This tower, the building of which started in 2016 and should be finished in 2024, if not earlier, is a part of a project for a reconstruction of the Garrison Church, originally built between 1730 and 1735 by an order of Friedrich Wilhelm I, the "Soldiers' King" in Prussia,<sup>14</sup> and partly destroyed at the end of the II World War and blown up in 1968 on the order of GDR authorities (see also [Halemba 2023](#)).

This church has a complex history. For the present argument, it is enough to say that it was used for celebrating Prussian statehood and also played a role during the Nazi time in Germany ([Grünzig 2017](#)). Most importantly, some events of the so-called Day of Potsdam, 21 March 1933, took place partly in or in front of this church. On this day, the new German parliament, with Adolf Hitler as the new chancellor, was formally opened there; the *Reichstag* in Berlin had already burnt down, and Potsdam was selected as the place for



the formal ceremony. There is a famous photograph showing Hitler, dressed in civilian clothes, bowing his head while shaking hands with Paul von Hindenburg, dressed in full military uniform with medals and insignia. The new chancellor, the leader of the National Socialists, and the old president, representing the Prussian military elite, are standing in front of the Garrison Church in Potsdam. This photo is very important for discussions around the rebuilding of this place and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways. This is one of the most hotly debated issues in the city, and the construction has both staunch supporters and acrimonious opponents.

Importantly for the present argument, the idea to rebuild this church did not come from the EKBO as an organisation; the initiator of the reconstruction was Lieutenant Colonel Max Klaar, the head of the *Traditionsgemeinschaft Potsdamer Glockenspiel* (TPG; Traditional Association of the Potsdam Carillon), a society formed by a group of professional soldiers devoted to the protection of Prussian military traditions. Klaar managed to gather some initial, quite considerable funds as seed money, and approached the EKBO with his plan for rebuilding. He wanted the church to be a place of military tradition and national identification (Oswalt 2020), and he saw an important role for religious rituals and spiritual guidance in this process. Klaar expected not only that the church building would be returned to Potsdam but also that a religious work with military personnel, understood in very conservative terms, would be reinstated. The TPG expected from the Church a legally binding renunciation of practices such as church asylum and a ban on the blessing of homosexual couples and feminist theology, and to refrain from counselling conscientious objectors to military service (Chronologie des Wiederaufbaus 2021).

For the Church as an organisation, this was a tricky situation. For many people in Potsdam, the restoration of this church building was seen as part of a larger endeavour to restore the baroque (and Prussian) character of the city in general.<sup>15</sup> The Garrison Church was perceived as an important architectural landmark. Those people, including some important players in the local and national political arenas, saw this rebuilding as a necessary step towards the restoration of the city in general. There was a strong pro-rebuilding lobby in the city, who did not share Klaar's and the TPG's militaristic ideals, but nevertheless wanted the church to be rebuilt and used. In this situation, the EKBO decided to take part in the rebuilding process, despite repeated declarations that the building itself was not needed for religious worship. The EKBO rejected Max Klaar and his money and committed itself to supporting the rebuilding of the church as a place of reconciliation open to all.

This involvement by the EKBO was also welcomed by secular actors. The rebuilding of this church, or even only its tower, is an expensive endeavour; at the time of writing, the cost was already at EUR 44 million counting for the tower only. Because of the difficult history of this church, and because of the high cost, it is difficult to argue for rebuilding it only in terms of its architectural beauty. There was therefore a need to find a purpose for this edifice that would go beyond religious services, and at the same time be compatible with the general image of the EKBO as a religious organisation and acceptable as a legitimate use by the general public. It also seems that nonreligious supporters of the project viewed the EKBO's involvement as a way to ensure or publicly show that the difficult history of the Garrison Church would not cast a shadow on its future. It was the Church's task to make sure that this building would not be associated with the dark side of German history but would rather be seen as an important landmark and tourist magnet. This was especially important, as the opponents of rebuilding repeatedly stated, and state to this day, that this church has the potential to gather right-wing and revanchist groups, glorifying the Prussian past or even relativizing the period of national socialism. Religion has been mobilised by those who support rebuilding this church to weaken such accusations.

With respect to this task, the EKBO undertook at least two actions to make sure that a religious dimension will remain present at the site, that the Church as an organisation will retain at least some control over the significance of this church, and that the image of the Church presented at the site will be broadly accepted by secular society and provide

an adequate representation of religion and the Church. The first action was to prepare a conceptual framework for the use of the building, including some concepts that, while having roots in Christian theology, are also important for secular audiences; the second action was to organise a special nonterritorial parish, whose pastor and council would be responsible for the practical application of the concept of use. These two tasks guided much of the EKBO's involvement in the project between 2001 and 2020.

The most important notion that has been advanced as a guiding principle of the new conceptual framework for the rebuilt Garrison Church is one of reconciliation (for a detailed discussion, see [Halemba 2023](#)). This is a notion that is present in both theology and in the political arena. In Protestant theology, reconciliation refers to resolving the disruption between God and people through faith ([Klein 1999](#)). Whereas in Catholicism it is related to the sacrament of penance, in various Protestant denominations, reconciliation refers primarily to a personal relationship with God and to finding oneself through this relationship. Reconciliation is a fundamental aspect of Christian soteriology; it can be interpreted as a private matter for a given believer, a matter of “inwardness”, something to be achieved in one's relationship with God.

Still, particularly since the Second World War, reconciliation has become a term that is commonly used in international diplomacy; it has emerged as a widely acclaimed goal of international politics, although there are, of course, many different and contradictory ways in which the notion is understood and implemented in practice ([Malley-Morrison et al. 2013](#); [Ash 1999](#)). Reconciliation has been approached both as a goal and as a process and has generated an abundant body of literature in political science, focused mainly on analyses of particular reconciliation processes and the conditions necessary for achieving the peaceful coexistence the term implies ([Malley-Morrison et al. 2013](#); [Murphy 2010](#); [Prager and Govier 2003](#); [Quinn 2009](#)). It is, therefore, a politically salient concept upon which religious authorities can claim to have special expertise, because of its theological roots, but at the same time a very salient concept for secular actors.

It is especially important in Germany, where the concept of reconciliation has been potent in the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, defined by the *Duden*, a German dictionary, as “a nation's confrontation with a problematic period of its recent history, in Germany especially with National Socialism.”<sup>16</sup> There is an enormous amount of literature on reconciliation, as both a concept and a process, including works that analyse particular cases (with German–French reconciliation often serving as a master example of the process; see [Defrance 2019](#)), as well as more general theoretical and political works. As Timothy Garton Ash has argued, in Germany, it is almost impossible to question the widely accepted claim that those who forget cannot reconcile and are condemned to repeat past crimes. Remembrance is seen as a moral obligation of both individuals and states ([Ash 1999](#), p. 296).

This focus on reconciliation was presented in three subsequent “concepts of use” (*Nutzungskonzept*) prepared first by Church-organised committees and later by the Garrison Church Foundation (*Stiftung Garrisonkirche*), established by the EKBO in 2008 to take care of all matters related to the rebuilding. As a prime executor of this conceptual framework, a small nonterritorial parish of the Cross of Nails was established in 2011 in a provisional chapel behind the building site. For the next nine years, this community organised all kinds of events, both religious and nonreligious, many of which had reconciliation as a theme. It is important to note that the community is officially a member of the international Community of the Cross of Nails, established in Coventry after the Second World War as a network devoted to reconciliation. This link to the internationally recognised network contributes to the positive image of the place and the rebuilding initiative in general. Since the end of 2020, however, when the pastor of the Cross of Nails community retired, several disputes and events occurred that significantly changed the power relations within the supporting organisations. As of January 2023, the main organiser of events in the chapel behind the building site is the Supporting Society for the Rebuilding of the Garrison Church (*Fördergesellschaft für den Wiederaufbau der Garrisonkirche e.V.*), which is an association of

people who support the rebuilding for any “religious, spiritual and cultural-historical or urban planning reasons”.<sup>17</sup>

The building site of the Garrison Church is a place where nonreligious actors, who are the most active ones, set the tone for what is happening. On many occasions, I witnessed members of the Cross of Nails parish community expressing their concern and determination that the needs of the group as a religious community are taken into consideration in the planning process. They understand that for many supporters of this endeavour, including the local representatives of the state, this church building is important for reasons that go far beyond religious use. It should become a tourist attraction as an architectonic gem, an aesthetically pleasing part of the urban space or a site of memory politics. The religious community is present there because of the very materiality of this building, as its shape is recognised as being characteristic of a church, and because religion makes possible certain avenues that enable justification and social acceptance for this project.

## 6. How to Be Important Yet Invisible

The use and shape of the Chapel of Reconciliation, located on the grounds of the Berlin Wall Memorial on Bernauerstraße, present a stark contrast to the cases introduced in previous sections. Although the Berlin Wall Memorial is dotted with religious symbolism, was erected partly on church grounds, and has historical and present links to active religious communities located nearby or onsite, those religious dimensions do not dominate the perceptions of visitors and tourists, who are interested primarily in the history of the Berlin Wall (see [Harrison 2019](#)). The Berlin Wall Memorial is perceived as a site of secular memorialization, with focus on a divided city and victims of Communist violence.<sup>18</sup> Still, the religious communities had and still have an important role in establishing and maintaining what appears to be a secular and state-run site of remembrance.

When the Berlin Wall was built in 1961, the neo-Gothic Church of Reconciliation was trapped in the middle of a guarded border strip. Subsequently, it was closed to the faithful for more than 20 years and its tower was used for observation by border guards. In 1985, the church was blown up and the remains were removed. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the land upon which the church had stood was returned to the Church of Reconciliation, located at that time in the western part of the city. Its pastor, Manfred Fischer, was instrumental in establishing this site not only as a religious place, but more importantly as a memorial site ([Harrison 2019](#)). At the time, there was limited readiness to commemorate the Berlin Wall, especially among the population of East Berlin, as many people wanted the Wall to disappear without a trace from the city landscape as swiftly as possible. Still, owing to the efforts of Pastor Fischer and several other people, the Berlin Wall Memorial was established. In 1999, a Documentation Centre was opened in the Reconciliation parish house and a year later the Chapel of Reconciliation was consecrated.

The Chapel of Reconciliation is a very interesting architectural structure. Few people perceive its external shape as unambiguously ecclesiastical; above all, the chapel has no tower, and the cross is only visible on the façade in a way that makes it appear as a mere play of shadows. The original cross that was on the tower of the former church lies on the ground near the chapel. As a result of the fall during the detonation, it is bent and damaged; it was decided to leave it on the ground in this condition. The oval building is made of clay mixed with debris from a church that was blown up and is enclosed by an openwork wooden structure. It gives the impression of a structure that is lightweight and blends in rather than dominating the surroundings. The church bells are hung in a frame outside the chapel. The chapel is placed where the Reconciliation Church had been, but its dimensions are much smaller; the ground plan of the old church is marked around the chapel and serves as a church square. Inside the chapel, on the wall, hangs a woodcut with the scene of the Last Supper, which bears many traces of damage—Jesus’ face is cut off, for example. It was brought out of the old church before the detonation. According to the current pastor, this woodcut was destroyed by soldiers using the church as an observation post. It was decided to leave the damage as it is, without repairing it.

The difference with the rebuilding process of the Garrison Church is glaring. In Potsdam, the tower will decisively change and mark the skyline of the city, but also, the way in which the religious community operates is very different. At Bernauerstraße in Berlin, the pastor and the parish community have very important roles: the pastor doubles as a guide at the site, and the parish members are responsible for commemorative events that take place regularly. Moreover, many parish activities are focused on places and issues that are not straightforwardly recognised as religious activities, and some active members of the parish and many of those who take part in parish-organised activities are declared nonbelievers. For example, behind the parish is a community garden. To receive a plot, one does not have to be a member of the church or the parish; it is open to everyone based on the availability of plots. Still, the pastor and parish members explicitly say that this is the place where, for them, the most important form of religious activity takes place: bringing people together. The pastor even uses the term “church” while talking about the garden. It seems that in their view, religious activity is not clearly separated from secular activity.

Even more significantly, this is also the position of the secular administration of the Berlin Wall Memorial, who explicitly accept religious actors and invite them not only to participate in but also to have a decisive voice on many activities at the site. Moreover, some employees of the memorial centre are members of the parish, despite the fact that they are declared nonbelievers. In interviews, they said that they wanted to be part of this particular parish because of the many kinds of inclusive activities that take place there, which makes explicit the one important message of the memorial in general: religious and secular life are intertwined and religious materiality melts into the dominant secular space. The Reconciliation parish is a member of the Cross of Nails international community as well, as is the small parish behind the Garrison Church building site in Potsdam. However, this membership is not prominently displayed. The Cross of Nails hangs at the entrance to the chapel, yet the role of the international association was neither raised in interviews nor is it mentioned on the parish website<sup>19</sup>. The parish was probably invited to join the Cross of Nails network because of its special location; however, its activities have a deeply rooted local character.

## 7. Conclusions

As cases of “confident political secularism”, we can describe situations where the religious sphere is subjugated to the secular state but also fully accepted as an agent in the public sphere and public space. Religious materiality can be visible or hidden, and religious actors can be invited to run and manage the day-to-day activities in a given area or be instrumentalised for specific secular political needs, but religion is not often seen as a problem. Religion, in this case, is understood primarily as a complex of social practices, organisational solutions, behavioural patterns, and material objects that can be mobilised and quite useful for secular actors.

Each of the cases presented above is determined by larger political issues and power relations. More precisely, in each case, religion is mobilised by secular actors (who become nonreligious in the process) in order to ease the tension and friction that occur in the political field. In the case of the Berlin Wall Memorial, the initial unwillingness of many actors to mark and memorialise the division of the city and the existence of two parts of Germany was countered by the actions of religious actors, who subsequently accepted a role for religion as an invisible manager and organiser that consistently stays in the background and makes space for secular memorialisation practices. In this case, religious materiality is decent and covered, merging with its surroundings. There is no church steeple, no conspicuous cross, and the meeting place of the religious community becomes the garden behind the chapel building, where diversity, including religious diversity, is accepted and accommodated.

In the other two cases, the initiators of the actions were actors motivated by objectives directly related to politics and ideology. In the case of the village churches, one aim was to at least symbolically counteract the long-term social and economic effects of German reunifi-

cation, which resulted in social and economic crises in certain regions. The church buildings become symbols of resistance to the processes of depopulation and impoverishment of the remaining local inhabitants.

In the case of the Garrison Church, many political objectives can be identified, and they vary among the different actors. Even if we assume that right-wing and exclusivist sentiments do not dominate the motivations of those supporting this project, a surely salient aspect of the situation is gentrification and elitist politics. Aesthetics is a political issue, and the rebuilding of the Garrison Church is part of a broader process of increasing the attractiveness of the city for wealthy inhabitants and investors. With regard to the Garrison Church, and in contrast to the situation with the Berlin Wall Memorial, the materiality of religion is not hidden but exposed. The first thing to be rebuilt is the church tower, which codetermines the skyline of the city. The tower of a village church is also often rebuilt first, because a church is not only a meeting place, but also a sign of the presence of the local community.

It is not my aim to provide a typology of the ways in which religious materiality can be present in one of the most secularised regions in Europe. Rather, my aim is to point out several issues that until now have attracted less attention in the study of religion and its relation to secularism as an ideology and secularisation as a process, especially in social anthropology. I also admit that my analysis focuses on religion, which used to be dominant in the region. Although the Evangelical Church is no longer considered a *Volkskirche*, it is still considered “native”. I am sure that the dynamics between secular governance and the religious communities that are considered newcomers in the land of Brandenburg look different than those presented in my article. Still, I also think that there is a relative scarcity of ethnographic work focusing on the relations between (previously) dominant religions and secularism in Europe, and this work is intended to contribute to this less studied field.

Firstly, discussions on the presence of religion in the public sphere usually concern the rights of religious communities and subjects to be treated as equal participants. In my article, we deal with a different but no less potent situation, which is that religion can be mobilised by nonreligious actors without much concern for the rights and wishes of religious communities. Moreover, religious communities can be invited to be present in the public sphere almost against their will and interests. They are seen as repositories of valuable resources that can be mobilised regardless of whether such mobilisation suits them, leaves them indifferent, or provokes their opposition.

Secondly, one of the main threads of the critique of secularisation theory was based on the thesis of the “deprivatisation of religion” (Casanova 1994). In this case, privatisation, considered to be one of the three main forms of secularisation according to Jose Casanova, is reversed: religion becomes a public matter again, and religious actors bring their religious conviction to the public sphere. In the cases described here, however, we deal with neither the privatisation nor deprivatisation of religion. Instead, in the context of confident political secularism, religious symbols, social practices, and materiality are brought out and used in the public sphere, despite the fact that religious convictions concerned with the idea of transcendence and relations with it do not enter this sphere; moreover, it is not even clear whether they are present in the private sphere to any significant extent. Religion is a factor in public debates because of its organisational and material aspects and despite the fact that religious beliefs have considerably diminished or ceased to be a factor for many people.

Within the context of confident political secularism in this particular part of Europe, religion is present in the public sphere because of at least two factors, organisational and material. We have religious organisations whose presence is historically, economically, and administratively well established and socially recognised. They have structures and resources, which afford them a certain stability. Still, their role for believers is diminishing, while their usefulness for secular actors, state and nonstate alike, is recognised. Religion, in this case, is a powerful set of tools that can be mobilised for various kinds of agendas. Religion is present most powerfully in the public sphere. Religious symbols, materiality, and, most importantly, organisations are mobilised to be part of discussions concerning

economic transformations, memorialisation politics, and social issues and relations. However, the decisive voice concerning the role of religion and how those tools are used belongs to secular actors. In the case of church buildings in Brandenburg's countryside, religious materiality and ritualization are mobilised in order to prevent privatisation and promote social binding. In the case of the Garrison Church, religion is used as the justification for a controversial and elitist project. At the Bernauerstraße, the religious community organises and runs day-to-day activities at the memorial site, at the same time remaining fairly invisible and in the background.

Religion, in this case, is not seen as a problem. For example, Verkaaik and Arab (2016) point out the unidirectionality of power relations between the secular and the religious, as shown in the works of such authors as Talal Asad (2003) and Wendy Brown (2006). Religion is, at best, tolerated, and in this sense, they say, secularism can be called inherently oppressive. Still, Veraaik and Arab also show ethnographically that in some cases, secular governing powers can discipline citizens to accept the law, which actually allows religious communities to discuss issues in public, introduce religious materiality into the public space, and be overtly religious in general.

The cases that I present here follow a similar logical argument concerning political secularism in Europe, but they point in another direction. While Veraaik and Arab focused on the rights of religious minorities and a version of secularism that makes the execution of those rights possible, I point out that religion can become a part of a secular toolkit. Confident political secularism mobilises religion, and while this can be seen as a case of instrumentalization, it also shows that the discursive separation of the secular and the religious can work both ways, making religion—which in the case of Brandenburg and Berlin is generally in a minority position vis-a-vis the secularised population—visible and potent.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The research for this article was funded by grant 2019/33/B/HS3/02136 from the National Science Centre in Poland under the project "Church Buildings in a Secularized Space".
- <sup>2</sup> For clarity, in this article I capitalise Church as an organisation and use lowercase church to refer to an edifice. The exception is Garrison Church, which is the name of the place.
- <sup>3</sup> [https://www.potsdam.de/sites/default/files/documents/statistischer\\_jahresbericht\\_2019\\_landeshauptstadt\\_potsdam.pdf\\_online\\_0.pdf](https://www.potsdam.de/sites/default/files/documents/statistischer_jahresbericht_2019_landeshauptstadt_potsdam.pdf_online_0.pdf), accessed 2 March 2021.
- <sup>4</sup> [https://www.ekd.de/ekd\\_de/ds\\_doc/Ber\\_Kirchenmitglieder\\_2020.pdf](https://www.ekd.de/ekd_de/ds_doc/Ber_Kirchenmitglieder_2020.pdf), accessed on 17 February 2023.
- <sup>5</sup> Stephen Brown, "Säkulare Realität" Ostdeutschlands ist neue Herausforderung für reformatorische Tradition', *Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen*, 30 May 2016. Available at: <https://www.oikoumene.org/de/news/east-germanys-secular-reality-a-new-challenge-to-reformation-tradition>, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- <sup>6</sup> Menschen haben vergessen, dass sie Gott vergessen haben.
- <sup>7</sup> Martin Kugler 'Menschen haben vergessen, dass sie Gott vergessen haben' *Die Presse* 18.11.2008. Available at <https://www.diepresse.com/431291/bdquomenschen-haben-vergessen-dass-sie-gott-vergessen-habenldquo>, accessed on 17 February 2023; Karin Vorländer 'Schon vergessen, dass sie Gott vergessen haben' *Public Forum* 23.06.2000. Available at: <https://www.publik-forum.de/Publik-Forum-12-2000/schon-vergessen-dass-sie-gott-vergessen-haben>, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- <sup>8</sup> <https://www.ekd.de/staatsleistungen-53875.htm>, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.ekd.de/faltblaetter-kirchen-und-kapellen-44500.htm>, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- <sup>10</sup> See e.g., <https://transara.de/>, accessed on 17 February 2022.



- 11 Bern Janowski, chair of the Association, personal communication 05.06.2020.
- 12 See <https://www.altekirchen.de/>, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- 13 [https://kirchenbau.ekbo.de/fileadmin/ekbo/mandant/kirchenbau.ekbo.de/netblast/Dokumente\\_KBA/Kirchen\\_-\\_H\\_auser\\_Gottes\\_f\\_ur\\_die\\_Menschen\\_download-datei.pdf](https://kirchenbau.ekbo.de/fileadmin/ekbo/mandant/kirchenbau.ekbo.de/netblast/Dokumente_KBA/Kirchen_-_H_auser_Gottes_f_ur_die_Menschen_download-datei.pdf), accessed on 17 February 2023.
- 14 In Prussia, King was used as the official title until 1772.
- 15 <https://www.potsdam.de/potsdamer-mitte>, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- 16 <https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Vergangenheitsbewaeltigung>, accessed 3 September 2021.
- 17 <https://garnisonkirche-potsdam.de/ueber-uns-1/foerdergesellschaft/>, accessed 8 January 2023.
- 18 <https://www.stiftung-berliner-mauer.de/de/gedenkstaette-berliner-mauer/historischer-ort/die-gedenkstaette>, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- 19 <https://gemeinde-versoehnung.de/>, accessed on 13 January 2023.

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Article

# Struggling with and against the Governance of Islam in Spain

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**Abstract:** The process of accommodation of Islam in Spain is based on the Constitution of 1978, which guarantees the freedom of religion. Regarding Islam, the Cooperation Agreement signed in 1992 between the State and the Islamic Commission of Spain brought with it a formal recognition of the practice of the Islamic faith. Thirty years later, the sole interlocutor appointed by the State seems to be ineffective in the pursuance of compliance with Islamic religious rights. In various regions other actors have engaged in claims-making for rights that include, among others, the access to cemetery space for Islamic burials and Islamic religious education and halal food in publicly funded schools. This paper explores the governance of Islam and Muslims in Spain by presenting a case in which a number of grassroots organizations in the northern region of La Rioja have combined their efforts to achieve compliance with the religious rights they were granted decades ago. Through claims-making outside the institutionalized structure of interlocution with the State, they are contesting the external and internal top-down governance of Islam in Spain. Based on empirical data, we analyzed the nature of their claims, the varied ways of responding to specific practices of governance, as well as the spaces in which this claims-making takes place.

**Keywords:** governance; Islam; Spain; claims-making; Islamic religious rights

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## 1. Introduction

The accommodation of Islam in contemporary Spain started with the 1978 Constitution. This legal act guarantees freedom of ideology, religion, and worship, as well as the equality of all individuals, while obliging public authorities to provide the means and measures required for this freedom and equality. Developed within the framework of a secular state in which Catholicism had possessed the “monopoly of souls”, the State’s mandate to cooperate with all religious confessions gave birth to a particular model of dialogue with the three largest—at that time and still to this day—minority religions in Spain: Judaism, Protestantism, and Islam. The manner in which these minority religions were accommodated was widely inspired by the State’s relationship with the Catholic Church. Regarding Islam, the process included: firstly, a symbolic recognition of Islam as a “deeply rooted” faith in the country; secondly, the creation of the Islamic Commission of Spain (CIE, in its Spanish initials) as the representative and sole interlocutor of Muslims in Spain; and, thirdly, the negotiations and signature in 1992 of the so-called Cooperation Agreement between the State and the CIE, i.e., a law with a broad set of provisions allowing Muslims to practice their faith. These provisions include the recognition for civil purposes of Islamic marriages; the establishment of places of worship; religious assistance in hospitals; halal food and Islamic religious education in publicly funded schools; cemetery spaces for Islamic burials. This negotiation process between the State and Muslims in Spain took place prior to the arrival of migrant workers and their families from North Africa. Further, the men who negotiated the contents of the Cooperation Agreement were former university students born in MENA countries, who had decided to stay in Spain after graduation, as

well as people born in Spain, who had embraced Islam at a later stage in their lives<sup>1</sup>, and who formed part of a Spanish Muslim elite at the time of the negotiations at the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s (Planet Contreras 2018). The creation of the CIE as an interlocutory body was the result of the union between the Spanish Federation of Islamic Religious Entities (FEERI, in its Spanish initials) and the Union of Islamic Communities of Spain (UCIDE, in its Spanish initials). It was then registered as a cofederative entity with the Spanish Registry of Religious Entities in February 1992, a requirement to be part of the Cooperation Agreement (Contreras Mazarío 2018). In addition to its representative function, the establishment of the Islamic Commission of Spain also had a religious or doctrinal objective focused on the practice of Islam in accordance with the precepts of the Quran and Sunna (Planet Contreras 2018). Until 2015, the Islamic Commission of Spain had two decision-making bodies, which did not facilitate its operational dynamics and performance. In 2015, its statutes and working structure were reformed, and since then, the ultimate responsibility lies with the position of president (Contreras Mazarío 2018).

Despite the symbolic and material advantages that may be derived from these institutional arrangements, nowadays, a large part of those Muslim citizens who are aware of the existence and function of the CIE, do not identify with the CIE as their representative and sole interlocutor with the State. In general, many people, whether Muslim or not, have plenty of other issues to worry about in their daily lives with respect to their socio-economic living conditions, such as access to employment, housing or healthcare and other concerns. Others, though identifying as religious, simply do not connect to communities and other types of organizations. However, among those identifying as Muslim in Spain, who are concerned with their religious rights and who are aware of the creation and continuation of the Islamic Commission of Spain and its relations with the State, the Cooperation Agreement is often considered to be a “dead paper”. Thirty years after entering into force, practically all provisions are still “in progress”. Notwithstanding the importance of the individually protected right—i.e., religious freedom—obstacles to its full exercise and political development remain in place and seem to depend on the diversity management dynamics of the administration (Astor and Griera 2016; Salguero and Siguero 2021). Furthermore, as the Spanish state is territorially distributed into municipalities, provinces, and autonomous communities, many of these rights are subject to legislative development at the regional (*Comunidad Autónoma*) or municipal level. For example, the regulation of cemeteries corresponds to the discretion of the local authorities (based on art. 26.I.a of Law 7/1985, regulating the rules of local government), while the development of legislation and the execution regarding education in its full extent fall under the competencies of the regional bodies (based on art. 19 of Law 9/1992, on the transfer of competencies to autonomous communities). The existence of multiple legal and organizational developments increases the administrative complexities, and consequently, putting these rights into practice occurs at an uneven pace throughout different territories of the Spanish State.

The Islamic Commission of Spain, appointed by the State as the sole interlocutor on behalf of all Muslims residents in Spain, does not always appear to be an effective actor in the pursuance of compliance with the legally granted religious rights. Due to this insufficiency of proactivity in claims-making, and—according to many of our interlocutors both in the region of La Rioja and in other territories within the Spanish state—even hindering the course of negotiations, various initiatives have been undertaken in response to this issue within different parts of the Spanish territory. These initiatives are often undertaken by Muslim converts and young Muslim women, who question and oppose the marginalizing practices they are subjected to and who fight for the proper execution of their civil and religious rights.

Most studies on religious minorities in Spain are related to the dynamics found in urban surroundings, such as those found in the cities of Madrid or Barcelona. This paper, however, focuses on a more rural region located in northern Spain, namely La Rioja (Figure 1) and its capital, Logroño, where a number of grassroots organizations, led by

various committed individuals, including new Muslims, have combined their efforts and undertaken action through claims-making activities organized without the involvement of the Islamic Commission of Spain. For this purpose, they have formed a civil platform named The Muslim Community of La Rioja (*Comunidad Musulmana de la Rioja*)—not registered with the State Registry of Religious Entities. The main hypothesis of this paper is that under the current model of top-down governance of Islam and Muslims in Spain, the institutionalized structure of representation and interlocution as appointed by the State is disputed in practice by a proportion of individual and group actors who demand and actively seek compliance with the—religious and civil—rights that were granted decades ago. In the following sections, we analyze the nature of their claims, the varied ways of responding to specific practices of governance, as well as the spaces in which this claims-making takes place. In addition to secondary data, our analysis is based on material produced with qualitative research techniques, such as participant observation (2018–2020) and semi-structured interviews (2019–2021). In order to understand which demands are among the most relevant to Muslims in Spain, we have interviewed actors who occupy positions of responsibility within religious or sociocultural Muslim organizations—pertaining or not to the CIE—established in different parts of the territory of the Spanish State—such as Madrid, Catalonia, Castille and Leon, Ceuta, etc.—including the founders of the civil platform Muslim Community of La Rioja.



**Figure 1.** Map of Spain detailing La Rioja. *Source:* Wikipedia. Author: Mutxamel, uploaded by Rastrojo, [https://es.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Localizaci%C3%B3n\\_de\\_La\\_Rioja.svg](https://es.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Localizaci%C3%B3n_de_La_Rioja.svg), accessed on 27 January 2023.

This article is organized into two sections and a conclusion. The first section addresses the concept of governance and its relation to religion and religious diversity. This part, furthermore, discusses the appointment by the State of a sole interlocutor as the representative of all Muslims in Spain. In the second section, which consists of two subsections, a case is presented that focuses on claims-making in the region of La Rioja in northern Spain by a variety of Muslim actors—i.e., both individuals and associations—aimed at the effective execution of their rights regarding Islamic religious education at publicly funded schools (subsection 1) and to have space for Islamic burials on municipal cemeteries (subsection 2). These struggles to obtain compliance with the provisions of the 1992 Cooperation Agreement demonstrate the enormous agency at work among actors at the local level.

## 2. Governance of Religion

In order to comprehend the dynamics of the institutionalization of religion in contemporary Spain and to understand the paradoxes of secularization (Griera et al. 2021), it is useful to adopt a historical perspective when analyzing the relations between the State and the Catholic Church, as well as the relations between the State and minority religions. Secularization can be defined as a process that affects both state–church relations and the conscience of citizens. In the Spanish context, this process has brought forward the “bankruptcy of religious homogeneity” (Pérez Agote 2022). However, far from removing



obstacles and promoting equality, these legal and institutional arrangements related to religious diversity have created different opportunities for different groups of believers, thereby affecting not only religious practices and beliefs, but also feelings of belonging and definitions of identity among all citizens.

The connections between the Catholic Church and the Spanish State have articulated political, cultural, and intellectual positions, which are embedded in the Spanish constitutional orders and have been since the 19th century. As explained by Pérez Agote (2022), various tides of secularization took place during the 20th century, which challenged the monopoly of the Catholic Church in Spain. During the 19th and 20th centuries and until the beginning of the Civil War in 1936, different political currents had developed ranging from democratic, republican, and socialist to forms of communism and anarchism. All these dynamics resulted in a growing anti-clericalism also present in other traditionally Catholic countries at that time. The increasing tensions between Catholics and non-Catholics in Spain became evident. The defeat of the forces loyal to the Second Republic in 1939—which included many non-Catholics—and the subsequent dictatorship under Francisco Franco led to a Catholic “re-homogenization” of the population. Franco’s dictatorship (1939–1975) and its associated National Catholicism have had an undeniable impact on the political development of the nation-state, far beyond a symbolic church–dictatorship joint venture (De la Cueva 2022). Based on the belief that the essence of Spanish citizenship is Catholicism, Spanish National Catholicism proposes a merger of political and ecclesiastic confessionalism, with the Church exercising social control on the whole of society. Church and State are confused, with the Church participating in the economic and political organization of the country (Díaz-Salazar 2007). The specific idea of public space and social practices promoted during these decades can still be perceived in the current Spanish public sphere (Planet Contreras 2008). Further, it has also deeply affected the institutional realm, as well as the fact that there is a daily experience of an assumed Christian value system associated within it. Perhaps the greatest success of Spanish Catholicism is that, in times of secularization, it is recognized as a tradition, as memory and as the country’s own cultural expression and identity (Moreras 2009). Catholicism’s political and moral monopoly in Spain is profoundly rooted and only a few modifications have come from the international arena—such as the II Vatican Council or the establishment of political relations with the United States—which has caused a timid recovery of (or at least part of) the freedom of religion and worship that was developed during the period of the Second Republic (1931–1939). The restoration of democracy and the 1978 Constitution maintained the manifold privileges of the Catholic church—including those related to education and the management of cemeteries—while advancing freedom of worship for, and opening dialogue with, certain other confessions.

As regards the recognition of Islam and the freedom of religion for Muslims, the mechanism adopted to define the legal status of Islam in Spain was, as indicated in the introduction, the creation of the Islamic Commission of Spain, representing all Muslims in Spain, which negotiated, signed, and monitored the Cooperation Agreement with the Spanish State. In this connection, as Loobuyck et al. (2013) indicate in their comparative analysis of the genealogy of church–state institutions representing Muslim organizations in France (*Conseil Français de Culte Musulman*), Germany (*Deutsche Islam Konferenz*), Belgium (*Executieve van Moslims in België*), and the United Kingdom (British Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board), many countries in Europe, including those that are not necessarily structured by any previously existing church–state relations and/or cooperation, have formally acknowledged Islam and created an official Muslim representative organization as the sole partner in respect of dialogue with the State<sup>2</sup>.

In our present analysis regarding the governance of Islam in the current Spanish context, we draw on the governance perspective as understood by Maussen and Bader (2011), according to whom “governance includes a variety of actors and modes of coordination in the perspective of regulation by ‘policies’ in a very broad sense” (Maussen and Bader 2011, p. 16). Maussen and Bader consider the concept of governance to encompass both the techniques of government and the definitions of populations and peoples, as well as

public policies that are not aimed solely at religion (Maussen and Bader 2011, p. 19). In addition to this broad understanding, Maussen and Bader point out that the notion of governance—and its functioning—can be explained by distinguishing two axes of regulation. On the one hand, a differentiation must be made between external and internal governance. External governance refers primarily to the intervention and steering by state institutions (or regional and local administration bodies) of all matters concerning religious minorities, while internal governance relates to the regulation and control activities among the private religious actors themselves. On the other hand, these scholars discern between top-down (hierarchical) order building and bottom-up (democratic) processes, while noting that top-down regulatory practices are not necessarily limited to situations of external governance but can also occur within the social and organizational infrastructures of religious communities themselves (Maussen and Bader 2011, p. 16).

Concerning Islam and Muslim minorities in European countries, Maussen and Bader provide specific examples of top-down governance measures. These include: (i) The regulation of religious education and religious authority; (ii) Institutional practices that aim to regulate property and facilities (e.g., Islamic endowments, regulations in burial, construction of mosques, etc.); (iii) Arrangements made by authorities regarding the relations between the Islamic religion, law, and social life; (iv) Attempts to create, recognize, and institutionalize organizational platforms in order to speak for Islam and Muslim populations (such as Muslim councils); and (v) Public policies that shape opportunities for religion in a narrower sense, including regulations related to the *hajj* pilgrimage or to religiously motivated dress and dietary codes, rituals, and religious feasts (Maussen and Bader 2011, p. 18). The attempts made by certain countries with Muslim minorities to regulate the Islamic religion and to decide which places Muslim citizens are allowed to occupy within the nation are also referred to as the “domestication of Islam” (Sunier 2014, p. 1140; Humphrey 2009, p. 138). Domestication here implies, in the words of Sunier (2014), that states try to mold Islam into a format that is acceptable for European governments (Sunier 2014, p. 1149). Topolski (2018) holds that this strategy of secular minority management by European states is, in fact, a longstanding practice that derives from Catholic theology: the top-down demand for one voice through a framework of ‘intercessions’ on behalf of Jewish communities to the king/ruler in medieval Europe (a process called *shtadlanut* in Yiddish, Topolski 2018, p. 2181). In contrast, bottom-up practices—such as those that will be reviewed in the next section—can also be understood as a type of governance or locality production (Sunier 2020, p. 3). These practices are aimed at building an infrastructure from which to demand the recognition of certain claims, which may involve networks of agency and collective activities undertaken by a diversity of local civil society participants.

As regards Spain, it was the government that took the initiative to accommodate Islam and propelled the establishment of a single Muslim representative body, i.e., the Islamic Commission of Spain (CIE). Based on Law 26/1992 of November 10, the CIE has both representative and administrative tasks, which include the granting of formal recognition of local faith communities, which is necessary to be entitled to the application of rights under the Cooperation Agreement, as well as the application and control of slaughter conditions with respect to halal food; in addition, the CIE has the right to appoint Islamic religious education teachers at publicly funded schools. To carry out its tasks and for “institutional strengthening”, the CIE receives state funding, which for the years 2018, 2019, and 2020 amounted to EUR 330,000 per year (Fundación Pluralismo y Convivencia (FPC) 2019, 2020, 2021).<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Religious Claims-Making in La Rioja

The region of La Rioja, generally known for its wine industry, has a relatively low population density (63 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> in 2020). Its population of approximately 316,000 inhabitants is equal to 0.7% of the total number of residents in Spain. Further, this population is distributed over a total of 173 municipalities (as of December 2021). Approximately 6% of the region’s population is (or is perceived as) Muslim, of whom 40% are Spanish citizens (Observatorio Andalusi 2022). The main nationalities among the foreigner Muslim

residents in La Rioja are Moroccan (64%), Pakistani (21%), and Algerian (7%). The largest number of migrants arrived in La Rioja during the 1990s. They arrived with the objective to work in the region's agrarian or construction sector. In the current context, Islam is the largest minority religion in this region, with Evangelicals representing the second largest. Out of the 26 currently existing Muslim entities in La Rioja (and those that are registered with the Spanish Registry of Religious Entities), six do not adhere to any federation. The other 20 are members of one of the four Muslim federations that exist in La Rioja, which can be broken down as follows: two of regional character (*Unión de Comunidades Islámicas de La Rioja*—the Union of Islamic Communities in La Rioja; and *Federación Islámica de Aragón, Navarra y La Rioja*—the Islamic Federation of Aragon, Navarra and La Rioja) and two are federations registered at the state level (*Federación de Comunidades Musulmanas Africanas de España*—the Federation of African Muslim Communities of Spain; and *Federación Islámica al Firdaus*—the Islamic Federation al-Firdaws (Urrutia Asua 2017)). Muslims in La Rioja are from a diverse range of backgrounds, including migrant families, young Spanish-born Muslim families, and new Muslims who are closely linked to an active associative network. In addition, the Muslim population is relatively young and many have undertaken university studies (Urrutia Asua 2017). One of the region's main concerns is the decrease in its total population. This is due to the fact that internal migration to other nearby territories, such as Catalonia or the Basque Country, in search of better employment takes place.

### 3.1. The Struggle for Islamic Religious Education

As indicated above, Muslims who live in Spain have certain individual and collective rights related to their religion, as well as to the preservation and promotion of Islamic historical and artistic heritage (residency is sufficient for having such rights and that Spanish citizenship is not required). One of these rights is the access to Islamic religious education at public and semi-private schools that receive state funding (based on Article 10 of the Cooperation Agreement). In Spain, all primary and secondary schools are obligated to offer Roman Catholic religious education, i.e., the teaching of the Catholic faith. However, this subject is optional for all students. Having said this, almost 60% of the school students in Spain opted to take this class in 2021 (Conferencia Episcopal 2022).

Based on the Cooperation Agreement—i.e., Law 26/1992—and on the Resolution of April 23, 1996 (which contains the agreement on the designation and financial terms of the educational personnel), Islamic religious education should be offered as part of the school curriculum in primary and secondary education, provided that at least 10 students per school (or their parents) at the beginning of each educational stage or level, express their interest in Islamic religious education for their children with the school's director. Regarding the contents of the subject of Islam at school, in 2006, the first learning guides were published entitled "Discovering Islam"<sup>4</sup>. This series of schoolbooks was edited by the UCIDE in cooperation with the Islamic Commission of Spain and financed by the *Fundación Pluralismo y Convivencia*<sup>5</sup>, a public legal entity, at that time, attached to the Spanish Ministry of Justice<sup>6</sup>.

Further, the 1996 Resolution includes provisions for the schools' management, wherein they will expressly select these requests at the beginning of each stage<sup>7</sup> and the regional educational authorities must inform the corresponding Islamic communities of the total requests received. In accordance with the third provision of the 1996 Resolution, before the start of each school year, the CIE shall communicate to the regional administration the names of the persons it considers suitable for the purposes of teaching Islamic religious education in the corresponding region.

In the case of La Rioja, recent estimates from the *Observatorio Andalusi* (2022) show that approximately 3800 students could be interested in applying for Islamic religious education at their educational center. From at least 2009, families in La Rioja have filed requests for their children to be taught Islam at school without receiving any reply from the schools' management. Though the abovementioned requirements were met in several educational centers in the region, these schools did not provide Islamic religious education

to their students, ignoring the petitions, as well as the claimants. In 2014, a group of Muslim families in Logroño had grown tired of being ostracized—both by the schools and also by the Islamic Commission of Spain, since the families did not perceive any support from the CIE as their representative and interlocutor with the authorities—and decided to start claiming their rights at another level. As the administration of education falls to the *Comunidades Autónomas*, they escalated their demands by addressing the regional Council of Education and managing to file more than 1500 requests for Islamic education at primary and secondary educational centers. The regional authorities responsible for education in La Rioja rejected the demands for the right to Islamic religious education claiming format errors—i.e., two instead of one request model forms were presented—and also for economic reasons. As a reaction against this treatment of invisibilization, a number of grassroots organizations, led by a group of active citizens, initiated a campaign to create awareness of their discrimination not only among the Muslim populations, but also among the broader public of La Rioja. A first step was the creation of a civil platform under the name of *Comunidad Musulmana de la Rioja* (Muslim Community of La Rioja). This platform was formed by five entities, a combination of migrant, worker, and women’s associations, as well as Muslim religious entities of La Rioja. Its members are mostly of migrant origin—i.e., from Muslim majority countries, such as Morocco and Pakistan—and also include a minority of very active members of Spanish origin, their main spokesperson being a new Muslim Spanish citizen. In addition to the country of origin, the platform also represents the existing diversity among Muslim communities and individuals in La Rioja, regarding culture, gender or the purpose of the entity’s incorporation. The platform’s purpose was to mobilize as many citizens of La Rioja as possible, whether Muslim or not, in their struggle for their civil and religious rights to be realized. They supported a number of parents who filed an appeal with the corresponding Court of Justice against the rejection of their requests by the regional authorities. They also wrote and circulated a manifesto, as well as organized a signature campaign for which they received support not only from Muslim families, but also from the broader civil society, including parents and families from their children’s schools, as well as other minority-religion actors in the local region.

In October and November 2017, two court decisions were issued by the La Rioja High Court of Justice, endorsing in both cases the right of the parents to Islamic religious education for their children at publicly financed schools. Consequently, as of schoolyear 2018/2019, five schools have started to implement this subject matter into their curriculum. However, according to the platform members, at that time, 16 schools complied with all formal requirements to offer religious education for Muslim students. During this period, the negotiations and exchange in information occurred between the platform and political actors at the municipal level, without any communication regarding the development of the situation between the Islamic Commission of Spain and those forming part of the platform.

In 2019, a group of ten families living in the same region of La Rioja filed a claim against the Department of Education and Culture of La Rioja (governed by the Socialist Workers’ Party and left wing *Unidas Podemos*) with the High Court of Justice of said region. They were assisted by the platform *Comunidad Musulmana de la Rioja* and received legal support from the Catalanian association *Musulmans contra la Islamofòbia* (Muslims against Islamophobia). The families considered the denial of Islamic religious education a violation of their fundamental rights of religious freedom. Their claim was, however, rejected by the Court. Muslims against Islamophobia published their opinion stating that the attitude of the Court was one of “institutional racist discrimination, since only and specifically directed to Muslim families, who are impeded to access their full citizenship rights.” ([MCI Musulmans contra la Islamofòbia 2020a](#)).

Recently, few advancements regarding the implementation of Islamic religious education in schools have taken place in other regions of the Spanish State. For example, in February 2022, the High Court of Justice of Murcia<sup>8</sup> in southern Spain, ruled in favor of a family that had filed a request for Islamic education with the corresponding school management and had not received any reply from the school or from the Murcia Council

of Education and Culture. Facing this administrative silence, the family appealed with the Regional High Court of Justice. In its ruling of 8 February 2022, the Court confirmed the family's right to Islamic religious education for their children and considered that the lack of action by the Regional Administration was not in accordance with the law. These legal proceedings were conducted without any type of support from the Islamic Commission of Spain. This was reason enough for the Islamic Federation of Murcia (*Federación Islámica de la Región de Murcia*) to formally ask for an explanation from the CIE regarding its lack of leadership and assistance throughout the whole procedure, especially considering that the CIE is responsible for these matters as the sole interlocutor and representative of Muslims in Spain.

### 3.2. Cemetery Space for Islamic Burials

Another claim of key importance for the entities and individuals forming part of the platform the Muslim Community of La Rioja (and which has encountered more success in this region to date) is related to the access to cemetery space for Islamic rite burials. The right to be buried according to one's own convictions forms part of the European Convention on Human Rights and is also included in the constitutions of all EU countries (Moreras Palenzuela and Tarrés 2013). As regards the Islamic religion, Article 2 of the Cooperation Agreement between the Spanish State and the CIE recognizes the right of Muslims in Spain to the concession of land parcels reserved for Islamic burials in municipal cemeteries or to—privately—own Islamic cemeteries. Despite the fact that public authorities are obligated to create the conditions to comply with this right throughout Spanish territory, around 95% of Muslim communities lack space in cemeteries for Islamic burials (Observatorio Andalusi 2022, p. 14). According to a report published by the Islamic Commission of Spain in April 2020, only 30 cemeteries in Spain offer (albeit limited) space for burials according to Islamic norms for a population of more than 2 million people (Ajana Elouafi 2020). Though the repatriation of deceased family members by Muslim families of foreign origin to their country of origin has been—and still fairly is—a common practice (Moreras and Arrarás 2019), the sudden increase in the number of the deceased among Muslims due to the COVID-19 pandemic accentuated this blatant lack of available space (Ajana Elouafi 2020, p. 2; Moreras Palenzuela 2021).

As indicated above, the administration of burials falls under the jurisdiction of the local authorities. Claims-making for space on cemeteries in the La Rioja region started in 1997 through local negotiations, i.e., without the involvement of the Islamic Commission of Spain. Finally, in 2008, public land was made available within the local cemetery of Logroño. In less than ten years, however, the need for an extension of this space became evident, yet was denied by the local right-wing government of the *Partido Popular*. Consequently, the entities and individuals forming the Muslim Community of La Rioja, in cooperation with the many families it represents, decided to commence action. During the period between 2017 and 2019, according to one of the platform's spokespersons, various campaigns were organized ranging from protest marches, press conferences, and a formal claim to be made at the City Hall to taking the floor in the plenary session of the City Hall of Logroño to insist on the need for cemetery space for Muslims. After many months of mobilizations, the Muslim Community of La Rioja managed to obtain the support for their demand from all four opposition parties. In 2019, elections took place giving rise to a change in the local government. The extension of municipal cemetery space was eventually formally agreed to in 2021.

More recently, certain advances have been made toward political acceptance of the need for and accessibility to Islamic burial space in other parts of the Spanish territory, such as the city of Vitoria (Basque Country), Molina de Segura (Murcia region) and Madrid, the capital city and home to approximately 300,000 Muslims. Another example of cooperation between Muslim communities and administrations at the local level, is the municipality of Mataró (Catalonia), where in April 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the left-wing municipal political formation ERC-MES<sup>9</sup> requested an urgent compliance with the right to



space for Islamic burials. This was conducted in addition to requesting a long-term solution, a task that had previously been promised to be completed by the local government since 1999. The fact that one of ERC-MES' councilwomen is (visibly) Muslim most likely increased the party's sensitivity toward this issue. In 2020, specifically motivated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the aforementioned Catalonian association, Muslims against Islamophobia, started a campaign entitled "Islamic cemeteries: Respect our cultural rights on mortuary matters!", asking all Muslims in Spain to complete and file with their municipality of residence a specific form—which can be downloaded from their webpage—in which they request their local authorities to respect and duly manage the right to cemetery space for their Muslim citizens (MCI *Musulmans contra la Islamofòbia* 2020b).

These alliances between various local organizations in La Rioja, the preparation of collective activities, and the performance of public protest and claims-making are clear indications of a bottom-up political and social space constructed by city dwellers (Sunier 2020). In this case, their common interest is in achieving compliance with their civil and religious rights. The top-down order building practices, or at least the attempts to them made by both the regional La Rioja administration and the Islamic Commission of Spain, are contested and have given rise to different power struggles. Throughout these years of organizing campaigns, offering legal support and the accompaniment of families in court cases—as well as their involvement in negotiations with local political actors—the activists and NGO workers who started the platform have earned a sufficient level of trust among the people and communities they have come to represent. Their local knowledge versus the distance and the lack of transparency as the main characteristics of the CIE, have provided them authority in claims-making and representation at the local level. In addition, their intellectual capacity, integrity, political independence and hard work during many years have turned them into key players in the process of locality-making in La Rioja. Some progress has been made with respect to certain rights, such as an extension of the cemetery space available to Muslims, or the provision of Islamic religious education in at least a number of schools in La Rioja, while other claims, such as those related to the availability of halal menus at schools and other (semi) public places, still need to be put in practice. However, so Sunier argues (Sunier 2020, p. 4), locality is precarious and requires continuous re-establishment. In addition, the case of La Rioja demonstrates the "lack of muscle" shown by the Islamic Commission of Spain, which, in turn, translates into a disparity in rights compliance between different regions and municipalities throughout the State's territory.

#### 4. Conclusions

The abovementioned cases of claims-making by local Muslim entities and individuals in La Rioja are examples that indicate that the representation model of the Islamic Commission of Spain, i.e., the *shtadlan* (Topolski 2018), designated by the Spanish State, is disputed in practice and has triggered dynamics of community building while animating the creation of a diverse and local social infrastructure. This infrastructure is aimed at the implementation of certain civil and religious rights beyond their mere formal recognition.

After decades of top-down order building, both externally—i.e., the State appointing the Islamic Commission of Spain (CIE) as its sole interlocutor—and internally—i.e., the CIE's actions (or lack thereof) toward Muslim entities—in several regions throughout the Spanish territory, local communities have started making demands on their own behalf and from outside the institutionalized structure. They are raising their voices and taking the floor in order to achieve the effective recognition of the rights they were legally granted decades ago.

The alliance between various grassroots organizations with the objective to join efforts and conduct collective activities without the involvement of the CIE, thereby resulting in the platform Muslim Community of La Rioja, is a clear indication of bottom-up locality production in La Rioja on the part of a diversity of local dwellers (Sunier 2020). These local entities, whose most active members include new Muslims of Spanish origin, challenge



the sole interlocutor position claimed by the Islamic Commission of Spain and which is often invoked by politicians in their attempts to avoid having to act on the demands they made. In fact, through its “top-down demand for one Muslim voice” (Topolski 2018), the State—including the regional and local administrations—often hides behind the structure of the sole interlocution with the CIE.

The resulting power struggles between the regional administration, the CIE, local authorities and the platform members have positioned a certain number of capable and reliable individuals into the roles of spokesperson on behalf of the local Muslim civil society in Logroño and its surroundings. The Islamic Commission of Spain’s lack of activity and transparency, as well as the perception of even hindering negotiations on purpose, have fostered cooperation between different associations in which Muslims participate, who have become key representatives in the claims-making process.

On the one hand, with their activities and support to the families who are in need of legal advice and emotional assistance, these key actors contribute to the formation of a local Muslim counter-public (Fraser 1990; Lems 2021; Zine and Bala 2019). From this safe space, they organize activities and mobilize part of the local population to issue claims in the hegemonic regional public sphere. On the other hand, they have also managed to obtain support from the broader local civil society in Logroño and its surroundings, with which they have connected as citizens with the right to equal treatment.

In their struggle for compliance with their civil and Islamic religious rights, these local Muslim actors in La Rioja make their claims *as citizens*—whether Muslim or not—who live in a country with freedom of religion and religious plurality. In the local public sphere, i.e., at the political municipal level, the demandants’ agency is increasingly being recognized. Furthermore, in recent years, progress has been made with respect to their demands. However, at the regional and state level, the claimants remain invisibilized and their claims are often ignored.

Drawing, again, on Sunier (2020), through the process of claims-making outside the top-down organizational structures, these actors challenge the domestication of their communities as second-rate citizens. By creating bonds and alliances with other social groups—such as parents at school, other minority religions (for example evangelicals), as well as local politicians—the platform’s La Rioja participants are actively contributing to the local social fabric. These dynamics clearly exceed the production of separate Muslim spaces and point to a broader, plural, and diverse homemaking, while at the same time affecting the feelings of belonging not only of the Muslim populations, but of all citizens involved.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Additionally, called new Muslims or Muslim converts.
- <sup>2</sup> E.g., the French *Conseil Français du Culte Musulman* (CFCM) or the British Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB).
- <sup>3</sup> These amounts do not include salaries of Islamic religion education teachers.
- <sup>4</sup> These guides were based on the Islamic religious education study programs published upon proposal from the Islamic Commission of Spain by the Ministry of Education Order of 11 January 1996.
- <sup>5</sup> Memoria 2006 de la Fundación Pluralismo y Convivencia, see (Fundación Pluralismo y Convivencia (FPC) 2007, p. 22).
- <sup>6</sup> As is the case from 2020, this Foundation depends on the Ministry of the Presidency.

- <sup>7</sup> Provision One of the Resolution of April 23, 1996. The original text in Spanish states: “[ . . . ] los centros educativos recabarán, expresamente, esta decisión en la primera inscripción del alumno en el centro o al principio de cada etapa.”
- <sup>8</sup> Decision 41/2022 of the High Court of Justice of Murcia, of 8 February 2022, on Fundamental Rights.
- <sup>9</sup> ERC-MES is a coalition formed in various Catalan municipalities by two political formations: ERC (*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*, or Republican Left for Catalonia) and MES (*Moviment d’Esquerrres*, or Movement of the Left).

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Article

# Understanding Social Phenomena Linked to Religion: In Search of an Alternative Approach That Combines Science with Religious Insights

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**Abstract:** Some contemporary social phenomena, despite secularization, are still linked to religion. However, this same secularization seems to have accompanied a progressive process of religious illiteracy. Therefore, the capacity to address religious inspired issues is lower than the magnitude of the problems at work, be violent right-wing movement and Islamist terrorism or ethical debates on the beginning and end of life, to name but a few. Hence, this paper aims to fulfil three goals: to revisit secularism and some liberal assumptions that might prevent a correct understanding of these phenomena, to assess some of the consequences of the critique of ideologies and to propose an alternative approach to address religious inspired social phenomena.

**Keywords:** liberalism; secularization; critique of ideologies; Islamist terrorism; violent right-wing movements; religion

## 1. Introduction

Secularization theory which tried to explain the move from traditional to modern societies forecasted the end of religion. The pattern observed in Europe seemed to be that as societies became more modern, religion appeared to be more absent from public life. However, religions and religiosity did not disappear, as has been shown. For example, some analysis based on the World Values Survey and the European Social Survey (Kaufman et al. 2012) highlight the need to consider rates of religion change and demographics (i.e., migration, fertility rates, etc.) showing that, in some considered high secularized countries, figures on secularization have reached floor showing a shift in trends in religiosity now and in the upcoming years. However, not only that; many pressing challenges affecting both modern and traditional societies throughout the world are connected to religion and so require religious sensitivity in order to address them effectively: some forms of terrorism, religious inspired political parties, the ban of *hijab* in French schools, the use of religious language in public debates and political campaigns, and some right-wing movements, to name a few.

Despite that, the capacity to deal with religion has not grown accordingly for two reasons. First, modernization predictions on religion were taken for granted. If religion is going to disappear, why keep paying attention to it? The second reason has to do with the triumph of liberalism as the only framework for public debate and analysis (García-Magariño 2018). Its success has been so compelling that it is difficult to adopt a critical standpoint toward the values inherent to liberalism. This intellectual tradition emphasizes individual freedom and autonomy and tends to overlook the collective dynamics of social life. Religion is more than individual beliefs; it is a social phenomenon with a strong collective dimension (Berger 1974). Thus, liberalism might not be the best framework to approach religion and religiously inspired phenomena in all their complexity.

Within the context described above, this paper tries to achieve three interrelated goals: (a) to offer a perspective on how secularism and liberalism limit our capability to

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address religious inspired phenomena which are prevalent nowadays, (b) to define possible boundaries of the “critique of ideologies” applied to understand religion and (c) to propose an alternative approach to tackle religion and social issues related to it.

## 2. The Limits of Secularism and Liberalism

This section will address the following sequence of ideas: (a) secularization is not a linear, universal and inexorable process; (b) the very notion of secularization needs to be revised; (c) religion or at least religion linked social phenomena emerge in modernity and the liberal and secular framework make it difficult to address them.

### 2.1. Secularisation and Secularism

Secularization theory is part of a great sociological trend that tried to explain the different social phenomena linked to the movement from traditional, rural societies to modern, urban ones. Max Weber proposed that, as societies moved along that path, a citizen’s loyalty towards traditional religious institutions would progressively weaken (Weber [1905] 2012; Estruch 2015). When the interdisciplinary field of Development Studies<sup>1</sup> emerged after the Second World War, this descriptive theory, however, became a prescription to “modernize” countries, as it was assumed that modernization would bring development and social progress automatically. Thus, secularization moved from being a social process that seemed to have occurred in several countries—especially European—to a desirable outcome to be fostered through political and civil action.

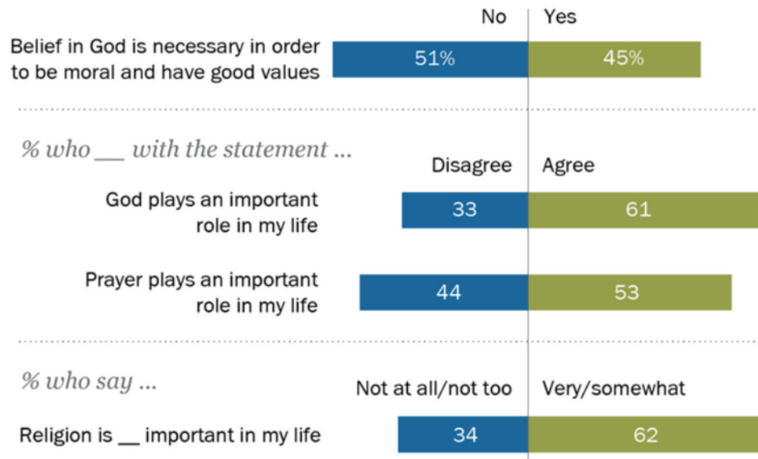
In the American case, though, was considered a special one within the Western world, as it was one of the first and most modern countries, but its religious life was still very vibrant (Riesebröt 2014). Further, religious symbols, practices, narratives, references and collective rituals were introduced into the life of secular institutions such as laws, tribunals and National feasts (Sánchez-Bayón 2016b). In order to explain the apparently exceptional phenomenon of American society in relation to its people’s religiosity, the concept of American civil religion was devised, being a kind of fusion among Jewish, Catholic and Protestant traditions into a non-sectarian spiritual tradition that generates social cohesion (Bellah 1967; Sánchez-Bayón 2016a).

It was mentioned that secularization theory changed into a normative ideology. Scholars such as Berger, Habermas or Casanova did not make such a big claim. However, all of them agreed upon the idea that other theorists took the secularization for granted (Berger and Luckmann 1995; Casanova 1994, 2009b; Habermas 2011). Thus, important transformations at the level of people’s religiosity went unperceived. In this line, the problem was not only one of theoretical neglect—as a result of taking secularization for granted—but also methodological and empirically untenable. In the last years of his life, Berger recognized the need to abandon the secularization paradigm and replace it with new theoretical developments connected to the idea of pluralism (Berger 1999, 2012, 2014). Casanova (2019), for example, followed his steps in affirming that “global humanity is becoming simultaneously more religious and more secular, but in different types of regimes, different religious traditions and in different civilizations” (p. 41). This statement is connected to variations in religiosity across regions (Duplessy [1955] 1959). For example, the “majority of people in Sub Saharan Africa, in South Asia, in the Middle East and in the United States consider themselves more religious than before” while in the rest of the regions the trend is softly decreasing (Deneulin and Rakodi 2011, p. 47).

The Pew Research Center offers a good glimpse of these trends too. Pew’s analysis shows that the vast majority of people believe in God. In addition, the total number of people who believe in God is constantly increasing, but probably as a result of the planet’s increase in the total population. These estimates, though, are not definitive as it seems that, depending on the question asked, the responses could suggest other trends. However, it can be confidently said that religion is still present and plays an important role in the life of the population, as it can be seen in the following figure (see Figure 1).

## Many say religion is important and God plays an important role in their lives, less consensus on belief in God and morality

% who say ...



Note: Percentages are medians based on 34 countries.

Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey. Q30, Q66a-b & Q85.

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**Figure 1.** Percentage on how religion and God plays an important role in the life of population. Source: Global Attitudes Survey (Pew Research Center 2019).

Nevertheless, how religiosity is experienced and manifested might not be exactly the same as in the past (Huntington 2002). There are new religious groups, there are new forms of spirituality and traditional religions which have evolved to incorporate new elements coming whether from spiritual or secular traditions (Díaz-Salazar et al. 1996).

Thus, secularization should not be taken for granted or, at least, naive notions of secularization should be overcome in order to open the path for more sophisticated theories. As Casanova (2009b), Joan Estruch (2015) and other scholars of the theory of secularization have posed, it should not be assumed that religion has turned into a private issue or a secularized set of sacred rituals: religion still has a collective imprint which aspires to contribute to facing the challenges of current global modern society.

The conceptualization of Western countries, especially the European ones, as “post-secular”—Habermas also includes Australia, Canada and New Zealand (Habermas 2009, p. 64)—, tries to capture the transformations taking place at the level of people’s religiosity (Berger 2012). However, the case of the United States, which was formerly considered the exception, seems to be the pattern: religion is not declining, indeed the global trend is that religion is growing—with the exception of European countries, where society is secularized but the persistence of religion in public life is still prevalent (Roldán Gómez 2017; Moghadam 2003; Pew Research Center 2017).

According to Berger (1999), the theory of secularization has two complementary dimensions. First: an institutional approach, as “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols” (Berger



1967, p. 107). Additionally, second, at an individual level, the increasing number of people living “without the benefits of religious interpretations (Berger 1967, p. 108).

In a similar sense, Casanova (1994) distinguishes three different aspects/meanings. in the process of secularization: (1) the “decline of religious practices and beliefs in modern societies”, (2) the “privatization of religion”, and (3) the “distinction of secular spheres or emancipation of religious norms and institutions from them (state, science, economy)”. These three processes do not necessarily go the same path. The differentiation of spheres and the retreat of religion to the private realm does not necessarily imply a decrease of people religious belief (Casanova 1994; Taylor 2007). Furthermore, from the logic of functional differentiation just the contrary is to be expected: The purification of the religious from other elements that are alien to it could lead to a greater commitment to religiosity itself.

From this point, the three criteria commonly used to consider a society as “secular” are (a) the progressive differentiation of social spheres and, in particular, the separation between the State and the Church; (b) the replacement of magical thinking by technoscientific rationality and the achievement of technical progress; and (c) the reduction in society’s theological beliefs (Roldán Gómez 2017).

European societies seem to be the only ones which meet previous criteria but, despite that, religions in Europe still have an impact on public sphere, whether because of Jihadist terrorism and its use of modern technology or the Catholic Church’s efforts to influence public morality (Habermas 2009) or the demands of Islam for a place in the public space, and that is why they (European societies) deserve the term “post-secular”.

The question here should be, why has religion persisted in spite of the social theory based on secularization? Here is a tentative response.

At the level of the elites—comprising policy makers, international donors, heads of development banks, development scholars—during the second half of the twentieth century, a materialist conception of existence has been consolidated. This philosophy found expression in at least four visible spheres: historical materialism, capitalism, the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of Development Studies and postmodern consumerist society. However, the promises of these four trends, as the century came to the end, appeared unfulfilled.

First, the fall of the Soviet Union, together with the cruelties that occurred during certain communist regimes which had been hidden for decades, reduced the appeal of Communism and the confidence in the transformative utopia that it contained (Gershman 2000, p. 170). Second, global liberal capitalism did not bring the prosperity and social justice that it was supposed to; on the contrary, it widened the gap between the wealthiest and the poorest. The unfulfilled forecast of Fukuyama in “The end of history” (Fukuyama 1989) symbolizes this point.

Third, the promising enterprise of development, whose explicit purpose was to eradicate poverty, but which departed from the same materialistic assumptions, did not fulfil its goals and was not even able to instill in those whom the projects had to serve the motivation to participate in them (World Bank Group 2016).

Finally, as a result of the loss of confidence both in the possibility to change the world and in the very rational capacity to make universal rational statements, postmodern thinking paved the path for the conclusion that the only feasible proposal was to forget those aspirations and to focus on trying to be happy by travelling, enjoying cultures and, ultimately, by consuming (Harvey [1989] 1998). Given the prevalence of depression, anxiety, general sense of dissatisfaction and mental problems within the most consumerist societies (González et al. 2010, p. 3), it could be said that an existential vacuum seems to have pervaded many countries in the world.

In sum, global integration (Albrow 2012) and the breaking of the “materialistic enterprise” have stimulated a new search and interest in religion or at least in transcendental and “spiritual issues”. Some indicators of this renewed interest are (a) the number of publications, undergraduate and graduate programs in “religious studies” that appeared

over the twenty-first century; (b) the upsurge of many conflicts connected to religion; (c) the concern with Islam and more particularly with political Islamism; (d) the proliferation of practices such as travels to India to visit certain “gurus”; the emergence of aboriginal rituals and group “experiences” in Western countries where ceremonies are held; (e) the use of drugs in search for “spiritual experiences”; (f) the renewal of the Interfaith international movement; (g) the connection between politics and religion in different countries; (h) the expansion of fundamentalisms of different kinds in different regions; (i) the appearance of new political movements in Europe which either have religious foundation or use slogans against specific religious groups; (j) the enhancement of awareness at the level of public institutions on the potential conflict of religious and cultural clashes when diversity is not correctly managed; to name a few (Díaz-Salazar et al. 1996, pp. 72–82).

In order to analyze the presence of the religious in our societies, it is useful to turn to Taylor’s characterization of the meaning of secularization (Taylor 2007). This means, along the same lines as Casanova and Berger, not only the emptying of the public sphere of any reference to transcendence (economy and politics have their own autonomous rationality), but also a decline in religious practices. However, Taylor adds and underlines a third, closely related, meaning: a secular society is one in which belief in God is not unquestioned but becomes one option among others. In other words, what is important is not belief or not, but the “conditions of belief”. In this sense, the return/remaining of religion is to be understood:

- (1) First, not as a moral imperative but as an individual choice, having given way therefore to a “pluralistic situation” (Berger 1967, p. 107). The return or permanence of religion is therefore necessarily plural.
- (2) Second, in a non-organisational way. Participation in traditional religious practices might have decreased, while maintaining relatively high levels of private individual belief. Consequently, we might talk of “unchurching of the European population and religious individualization, rather than secularization” (Casanova 2009b, p. 143). This non-institutional form of religion has been considered as a “believing without belonging” (Davie 1994).
- (3) At the same time, it is a “belonging without believing” (Hervieu-Lèger 2004). This is to say that religion remains in the collective memory, regardless of actual observance. Religion remains in the collective memory, regardless of actual observance and regardless of its original transcendent meaning. These religions endure “as significant cultural systems and as imagined communities in competition with other imagined national communities” (Casanova 2004, p. 30).
- (4) As a “deprivatization of religion” (Casanova 2009b, p. 141), aiming for public recognition, especially of non-European religions, more specifically Islam, practiced by immigrant population.

What is equally surprising, as it was mentioned, is that the traditional channels of these transcendental impulses—organizational religion—are not being used. Moreover, new narratives, apparently secular but containing features of the “sacred ones”, such as the one that is going to be analyzed in the following section are being multiplied. In other words, the new search for meaning and spirituality, the new interest in religion, is not being channeled by the institutions that traditionally have been the focal point of this impulse towards transcendence. Some authors, such as Juan José Tamayo, interpret this new trend as a sign of democratization: spirituality is not the monopoly or religion anymore (Tamayo 2011). Others consider that this is a distortion of the spirit of religion and the consequence of religions not considering the requirements of the modern world (Bahá’í World Center 2005).

In any case, it might be said that modern—or highly industrialized—societies contain a sort of existential vacuum that was filled by religion in the past and that propels the constant production of sacred narratives (Philpott et al. 2011). This vacuum is related to Weber’s “disenchantment”, to Hartmut Rosa’s theory of resonance (Rosa 2019), to Joas’ explanation of why we need religion to strengthen values commitments (Joas 2008), and Madsen’s forecast of a potential new Axial Age (Madsen 2012). The upsurge of so-called

Silicon Valley's messianism will be interpreted under this lens. Some institutions discovered the use of religious claims to justify hidden agendas, eliminated all the positive effects of religion. For instance, its power to collectively identify "false idols" and to avoid the development of "transcendent" attachment to material objects such as money, race, nation, fame or power seems to have disappeared from society. Hence, it is extremely difficult to unmask secular movements with particular agendas but disguised with apparent pure motives (Grames 2011).

## 2.2. Liberalism

Another reason why social problems linked to religion are difficult to be fully understood is the assumption of the liberal framework as a neutral value framework.

For a characterization of liberalism as it relates to the topic proposed here, it is useful to draw on Gray's (2000) distinction between the two faces of liberalism. (1) That which seeks an ideal way of life; (2) that which seeks a peaceful compromise between different ways of life. For the former, liberal institutions would be the application of universal principles (individual autonomy, secularism), for the latter, the means to achieve peaceful coexistence. For the former, liberalism prescribes a project of social organization around the individual rights of the citizen and aspires to a rational consensus in relation to liberal rights and values. For the second, liberalism is a project of coexistence that can be developed in different regimes. The first is the liberalism proposed by Locke, Kant and, more recently, by Rawls and Hayek. The second is that of Hobbes, Hume, Berlin and Oakeshott.

From the first form of liberalism, the diversity of ways of life, the pluralism of convictions about the good life is tolerated because it is destined to disappear. Or, at any rate, to be relegated to the private sphere. It is the predominance of this understanding of liberalism that makes it difficult to deal with religion. An example of this is embodied in French republicanism and its idea of secularism. France understands itself as a political project based on individual rights, which aspires to the emancipation of the individual from the dictates of any particular identity, such as religious identity, to assimilate republican universal values. This is the "tyranny of the secular, liberal majority" (Casanova 2009a, p. 147) based in the secularist teleological assumption built into theories of modernization that one set of norms is reactionary, fundamentalist and anti-modern, while the other set is progressive, liberal and modern" (Casanova 2009a, p. 147).

The republican project therefore demands the expulsion of religion from the public space (Portier 2018), that space of equality and universal rational consensus. Thus, the pressure for the privatization of religion, seen, not only as an institutional arrangement to achieve equality, but as an essential feature of Western self-understanding as a modern, secular society, makes it difficult to recognize any kind of role for religion in social life (Innerarity 2022).

This is the reason why the demands of Islam are perceived, not only as claims of a religion alien to Europe, but, above all, it is religiosity itself that is perceived as the otherness with respect to the secularity that defines us: the *other* of western liberal, secular modernity. This leads to an "Illiberal secularism": the use of secularism as an argument to justify restrictions in religious freedom, such as the banning of the veil (Innerarity 2018).

MacIntyre, in the chapter of competing rationalities of *Whose Justice? Whose rationality?* (1988), posits that, since the Enlightenment, a tradition of inquiry has established its logic in public debate without making explicit its assumptions. Any kind of actor that enters the debate unconsciously assumes these logics (Garcés 2017). MacIntyre does not go against liberalism but tries to show that modern public debate seems to lack the capacity to establish rational dialogues about the assumptions underpinning different traditions and different notions of the common good.

One of the most striking facts about modern political orders is that they lack institutionalized forums within which these fundamental disagreements can be systematically explored and charted, let alone there being any attempt to made to resolve them. The facts of disagreement themselves frequently go unacknowledged.

edged, disguised by a rhetoric of consensus. And when on some single, if complex issue, as in the struggles over Vietnam war or in the debates over abortion, the illusion of consensus on questions of justice and practical rationality are for the moment fractured, the expression of radical disagreement is institutionalized in such a way as to abstract that single issue from those background contexts of different and incompatible beliefs from which such disagreements arise. This serves to prevent, so far as it is possible, debate extending to the fundamental principles which inform those background beliefs. (MacIntyre 1988, pp. 2–3)

MacIntyre finds the roots of this problem in the Enlightenment, as “the Enlightenment made us for the most part blind” (MacIntyre 1988, p. 4) to traditions and, so, proposes to recover the capacity to accept different traditions from which a rational debate on justice and other topics, that includes assumptions on what the common good is, may take place. Thus, liberalism was one the most important traditions that after that period became prevalent and established the logics, limits, language and possibilities of public debate (García-Magariño 2016d). Some of the premises that have been naturalized under the liberal approach, and that are addressed by both Gill (1992) and Martín-Lanas (2021)<sup>2</sup>, are the following:

- Liberal partisan democracy is the best system of government.
- The individual is the main entity of social life and political and civil individual rights are the key for progress.
- The separation between the public and the private.
- The relevance of the individual over the community and individual identity over collective identities, which are sometimes considered oppressive.
- There has to be tension between institutions and citizens.
- The notion of power as domination.
- Economy as the axis of social life.
- Competition as the articulation principle for social organization and as the key for excellence.
- The split between religion and politics, faith and reason, mind and heart, rational and emotional.

In addition, there are other assumptions that, to be precise, are not part of liberalism but tend to go accompanying liberal democracies. Here are some examples:

- Instrumental rationality as the highest form of rationality.
- Economic growth as the key for social progress.
- Nature as a resource to be exploited.
- National interest as the main principle for international relationships.

A short clarification may be necessary before continuing with the strand. Previous set of notions linked to liberalism does not pay honor to such a rich, important and nuanced intellectual, political and economic trend coined under the category of liberalism. However, given that the purpose of this paper is not to elaborate on liberalism, but to underline certain contemporary trends associated with liberalism and secularism that might be preventing scholars and policy makers, first, to understand social phenomena linked to religion and, second, to approach those religious inspired issues effectively.

Once said that, nonetheless, it is recognized that different ideologies and religious groups come from other traditions of inquiry and depart from different assumptions. The case of the political dimension of Islam is paradigmatic in showing these tensions. The liberal interpretation of what should be done to integrate Islam in Europe, for instance, is related to the idea that Islam must experience a modernization process and renounce the political dimensions of its traditional theology. In this regard, the religious practice is seen to be deployed in the private sphere rather than in the public. Therefore, we have witnessed tensions and conflicts in recent decades on whether religious practices, rituals and symbols should be kept out of the public domain (García-Magariño 2016c) and what the role of the State is in the governance of religious diversity (Modood and Sealy 2022).

One significant case, for example, is the French law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols in schools approved in 2004 banning the hijab as well as symbols from other religious communities. Another case in the opposite direction is Erdogan's proposal to have a referendum for changing the Turkish Constitution on the right to wear the hijab in 2022. The point proposed here is that, as Peter L. Berger (2014) elucidated beyond the more personal question "how can I be a Muslim and a modern person" there is also the political question "how should and could Islamic modernity be". The answers to these questions depend on many factors but, probably, they should come, in first instance, from Muslim communities and, in second, as from Social Sciences. Thus, what can be done?

### 3. The Boundaries of the Critique of Ideologies

As it was pointed out above, secularism even influenced approaches and methods of social sciences. A popular trend that emerged from Marxist studies and that has been amply used to understand religion is the so-called critique of ideologies or unmasking rhetoric. The assumption informing this approach is that behind any religion or political view, there are hidden motives, particular agendas disguised by them. In addition, religion and ideology were considered legitimizing mechanisms to justify social order, oppression and the *status quo*.

The critique of ideologies has been extremely effective to reveal diverse social phenomena linked to religion; however, it has also contributed to an atmosphere where the benefits brought by religion in the past were left aside (MacIntyre 1985). For instance, the connection between some religious institutions and power, the use of certain religious interpretations to maintain dominant relations amongst social groups were unveiled. Nonetheless, along this process to unmask hidden oppressive dynamics, the manifold vitalizing dimensions of religion were forgotten: its capacity to generate collective identity, social cohesion, a sense of mission, a transcendent perspective to afford difficulties, moral codes, altruistic action for future generations, sacred attitudes towards fundamental aspects of social and natural life that need to be preserved, a language to describe ethical, moral and spiritual issues, a complex form of rationality and others.

One of the relevant capabilities associated with religion that has been weakened has to do with the notion of "false idols", as it was pointed out above. This concept is prevalent in many religious traditions although stronger in Judeo-Christian ones (Linford and Megill 2020, pp. 498–502). The collective capability to identify false idols protected communities from people who used religious symbols and narratives to promote hidden agendas (Dawes 1996, p. 90). It can be said that this function was replaced by the secular critique of ideologies; however, the critique of ideologies approach has not been effective enough to deal with secular narratives that resemble religious worldviews and that are being harnessed to justify the expansion of economic enterprises such as the Silicon Valley's economic model based on technology, algorithms, artificial intelligence and the reduction of human will to make decisions (Borroughs [1970] 2009).

The situation becomes more serious when it is recognized both that religion has not disappeared from the public sphere and that many of the main issues affecting societies, as it was said before, are linked to religion.

Concerning the disappearance of religion, some indicators show the opposite. First and foremost, the global demographic data presented above are telling. In addition, the connection of religion and political conflicts, revolts and revolutions within the last four decades is quite clear: Iran's Islamic revolution, Global Jihadism, some extreme right-wing movements, the upsurge of Christian fundamentalism and its influence on politics, whether in the United States, Bolivia and Brazil are just a few examples. Moreover, public debate on issues such as abortion, identity or surrogate motherhood are religiously and morally charged. Migration and the movement of populations are also definitively linked to religion in many different ways: some minorities abandon their countries as a result of persecution, big groups of migrants come from countries where religion has a great imprint in the popular culture so cannot be neglected by integration policies. On another

note, research has shown that some religions contributed to modernize and to democratize certain countries (Conversi 2015) and helped to introduce modern medicine (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2019; Van der Veer 2015). In addition, issues revolving around collective identity in Europe have brought explicitly religion as a source of values (Innerarity 2015). The role of religions in the development field, in the efforts to alleviate poverty and in the provision of social services has been recently underlined too. Finally, Western countries have experienced the birth of new religions, a renewed search for spirituality manifested in the growing trips to India or an important increase of practices such as yoga and meditation, and so, the religious diversity is much higher than decades before (Philpott et al. 2011).

In brief, it might be said that the persistence of religion in both modern (high industrialized) and traditional societies does not match the capacity to deal with it in most Western countries. This capacity has meaningfully declined over the last decades as a result of taking for granted the inexorable advance of secularization as well as of assuming the liberal framework as a value free framework. Therefore, in order to successfully address the myriad of social problems linked to religion and to design innovative approaches for policy, this capacity needs to grow. The next and last section of this paper contains a draft of a proposal on how to respond to this necessity.

The critique of ideologies can discover relations of power and interests between religions and other organizations and agendas. However, its lack of sensitivity towards religion prevents it from playing the important role of distinguishing valid religious claims from other narratives that try to legitimize, by using religious features, illegitimate motives. The case of the philosophy of progress revolving around the expansionist economic model of Silicon Valley—called into question by Eric Sadin in *Siliconization of the world*—is one of these examples (Sadin 2018).

#### 4. Towards an Alternative Approach

The questions, then, are the following. If the capacity to tackle religiously inspired social phenomena is weak, how are we going to deal in Europe with migration and integration policies, of collective identities and intersubjective agreements, with the prevalence of Islam, with religious inspired terrorism, with issues related to contested notions of common good, justice, fairness and progress, with the connection between religion and politics, with the extreme individualism threatening social cohesion, if all of them are, to certain extend, connected to religion?

At the core of the approach proposed here to address these kinds of problems lies a premise. Religiously linked phenomena need to be explored from two different angles:

(a) *Understanding the logic and sensitivity of religion.* First, the optics and keynotes of religion need to be deployed in order to properly interpret the meaning of the dynamics of such a phenomenon. This goes beyond the anthropological or interpretative approaches in social sciences that advocate for revealing the meaning with which actors endow their actions. It is not just an *emic*, an immersion into the reality of those involved in the problem; neither a sociological analysis of religion. It requires understanding the language, sensitivity and logic of religion to make sure that the interpretation as well as the policies designed to respond to the phenomenon at issue brings positive outcomes and not unexpected consequences. For instance, although security issues are highly sensitive, measures cannot overlook their potential harm and feelings of grievance that might serve a justification for terrorist recruiters or radicalization agents (García-Magariño 2016a). What do the veil, the body, and inter-gender relation mean from the point of view of the religion held by the population which will be affected by a specific policy?

(b) *Connecting religion to other social dimensions.* The second feature of the premise underpinning the approach being described is that, after religious logics are assumed, scientific categories, such as identity, social class, nationality, ethnicity, gender, exclusion, reification, values changes or ideology are needed to capture the multiple dimensions of the issue at play (García-Magariño 2016b). Social



phenomena cannot be detached from their social, political and economic nature, although religion is involved.

Jihadist terrorism could be taken as an example. Firstly, it has to be understood from a religious perspective. Terrorists claim to be following the commands of their interpretation of Islam. Hence, this interpretation, motives and religious organization cannot be excluded both from the analysis and the policy design to respond to it. However, it would be a mistake to stop there and to address the phenomenon just from the religious point of view: radicalization processes do not affect everyone; there are certain profiles more susceptible to be radicalized; there are certain economic, political and social conditions associated with the emergence of groups and individual terrorists; there are features in common with other sorts of crime; etc. (García-Magariño and Talavero Cabrera 2019).

In addition to what has been said, it has to be recognized that the sort of phenomena we are naming as “social problems linked to religion” are not just technical, scientific issues. Their nature is political, ethical, practical, so debate and dialogue about the problem, the different assumptions entailed, and the possible solutions and consequences of each solution are required. As Habermas states, practical problems require practical solutions and practical solutions demand ethical and political debate through communicative action, and not only scientific and technical inquiry (Habermas [1981] 2004). In some cases, the solution even requires making new intersubjective agreements, a kind of a new social contract.

Apart from the direct approach and particular measures to understand and address specific problems, it seems that certain cultural conditions need to be fostered in order to create deep social foundations to respond more effectively to general problems linked to religion.

Promoting religious literacy as well as scientific training appear paramount. Religious literacy prevents the expansion of prejudices, stereotypes and false images that hinder a good management of each issue. A sound scientific culture, on the other hand, permits a rigorous approach and acts as a protective bell to avoid conflicts grounded into misunderstandings. However, fostering a scientific and religious sound culture entails transcending positivist and reductionist conceptions of science as well as purifying religion from dogmas and superstitions.

Once the previous is achieved, new local structures for deliberation, dialogue and exchange of knowledge are needed to create the capacity, at the grassroots level, to address this kind of social issues progressively and effectively. In these structures, expert knowledge, traditional and religious insides and experiences coming from practices need to interact within consultative enclaves. Furthermore, the methods to facilitate these interactions, participation and deliberation need to be refined and improved over and over.

Finally, the most appropriate social space to articulate this learning process on how to deal with these phenomena effectively might be the local community. Hence, efforts to strengthen and empower this sort of dialogical, deliberative, learning local communities might be crucial, especially in the Western world, where the traditional geographically located communities were diluted and replaced by non-oppressive virtual communities and communities of adscription such as clubs and associations. Experience has shown, though, that these modern communities are not enough to enable collective-transformative action. Moreover, the coronavirus crisis has revealed that the stronger and more autonomous the local community, the better the response to face the sanitary, social and economic challenges associated with it. However, these communities need to harmonize three apparently opposing trends: the individual desire of freedom, the communitarian need to channel individual action towards the common good and the necessity for institutional direction. The notion of interdependence, cooperation and reciprocity might be the guiding principle to establish the sort of relations among these three actors conducive to the learning process described before.

## 5. Conclusions

In order to effectively address social issues linked to religion we need to revisit both the secularization theory, testing it against data, and the liberal framework within which current debates take place. In the case of the liberal framework, the values and premises on which it is grounded need to be made explicit and to be discussed.

An approach to address religious issues that emerged from secularization was the critique of ideologies. This approach has been very fruitful to unmask the connection between religion and power, and religion narratives and hidden particular agendas. However, along this process, vitalizing aspects of religion were abandoned from the analysis.

Given that religions and social phenomena linked to religion are still prevalent in the world but the capacity to deal with them has declined, innovative approaches are required in order to address them effectively. The approach proposed here departs from the perspective that social issues inspired or connected to religion need to be addressed, firstly, from the logics and perspectives of religion and, secondly, by using heuristic, scientific categories.

Finally, in order to achieve the above goal, certain cultural features need to be fostered. From among the manifold features, the need to advance towards an expanded rationality, to increase the collective capability to debate on assumptions and premises in search of intersubjective agreements and to forge sound religious and scientific capacities throughout social sectors stand out. Religious literacy together with new structures for learning in the context of local, geographical, deliberative local communities seem to be the appropriate social space and the best arena to generate knowledge on how to deal effectively with these pressing issues and to systematize the insights gained in the process.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Development studies emerged as a new scientific discipline that combined different fields, such as economics, education, agriculture, engineering and social work. Its main focus was how to assist a population to overcome poverty and to generate prosperity. In addition, the interdisciplinary field included both practitioners and scholars as the area of research was linked to the generation of new practices and knowledge.
- <sup>2</sup> One of the authors (Sergio García-Magariño) has approached these same assumptions in other works, such as: “Un cuestionamiento de las bases conflictuales del debate contemporáneo” (García-Magariño 2016d); and “Secularisation, liberalism and the problematic role of religion in modern societies” (García-Magariño 2018).

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## Article

# Secularism and Ethnic Minorities: Comparative Case Studies on Ethnic, Religious, and Political Cognitions in Pakistani-Controlled Kashmir, Central Russia, Romania, and Northern Scandinavia

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**Abstract:** According to my study, “political secularism” means the separation of political power from religious institutions, while “social secularism” is a theory and endeavor to eliminate religiosity from not only public but also private life, considering it an obsolete way of thinking. I examine four case studies based on my ethnological fieldwork in Hunza (in the Pakistani-controlled Kashmir), the Middle Ural (Russia), Transylvania (Romania), and Sápmi (northern Scandinavia). I outline and compare ethnic minorities (Hunzakuts, Tatars, Szeklers, Samis) according to their historical background, contemporary social environment, relation to the majority, their political endeavors, and the role of religion(s) among them. Based on my fieldwork notes, interviews, and sociological data, I analyze the similarities and differences of ethnic complexity, terminological confusions, problems of “lived religion,” and the impact of social and political secularism. Since their religiosity differs from the majorities’ ones, I found that secularism has a complex role and reception. Political secularism is essential for defending these minorities from assimilation, but most of these minorities reject social secularism since religion is part of their multifunctional ethnic discourse space. Religiosity is part of their survival strategy. Notwithstanding, ethnic minorities’ religious institutions participate in political activity and propagate their claims for self-governance.

**Keywords:** minorities’ religiosity; ethnic minority; social secularism; political secularism; survival strategy; religious discourse; Hunza; Tatar; Szekler; Sami

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## 1. Introduction

Despite the numerous definitions and the debates on the meaning of “secularism,” it has gradually become a core principle—while often disputed—of modern democracies since the Age of Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding, the fundamental statement of “a wall of separation between church and state”—how Thomas Jefferson summarized it (Fraser 1999, p. 19)—only had a political objective, so we can consider this particular manifestation as an illustration of *political secularism*. During the years of the war of independence, it was a primary imperative to eliminate the Anglican Church—with the British king at the head—from the new American states’ political power and place it within the palette of competitive Christian churches. Citizens remained predominantly religious, and many state constitutions expressed that only those who believe in God (regardless of the church or congregation) could serve as a public officer (Jacoby 2004). Everyone became theoretically equal in the eyes of the law (except slaves, indigenous people, prisoners of war, etc.). Religious institutions lost their direct political authority in more and more countries in the following century. Thus, later, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the meaning of secularism extended to another matter after George Jacob Holyoake introduced secularism as a new social-scientific term in 1846, meaning the supposedly inevitable reduction of religiosity in both the private and public spheres (the secularization thesis). The meaning



of secularism became contested (Kettel 2019, p. 1). James George Frazer and Sigmund Freud, in addition to dozens of other leading scientists, envisioned that rational (meaning “scientific”) thinking built on casualty gradually confines and dismisses religious thinking. This par excellence atheist attitude (in opposition to political secularism) can be considered as *social secularism*.

Social secularism integrated into the then-predominant social evolution theory that supposed a linear development of cultures and societies—with secular (meaning “atheist”) societies and their predominantly scientific reasoning placing them at the peak. A common factor of these deductive social evolutionist opinions was that they were built from an “armchair perspective” of the reality and cultural diversity in the world; none of these theorists had long-term face-to-face perceptions of the then-called “primitives” nor of the “natives”; they never performed anthropological fieldwork.<sup>2</sup> Those exceptions—like Franz Boas or Bronislaw Malinowski—who did so started to criticize these evolutionary models and never argued on behalf of secularism; they accepted religiosity as a cultural fact, one of the phenomena that represents humankind.<sup>3</sup> Ruth Benedict, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Julian Steward, Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, and most of the later anthropologists tried to keep their religious identity hidden in their scholarly works, and they never supported the theory of social secularism. Lévi-Strauss (1952) stressed that cultural diversity (including religious plurality) is a key element for social adaptation as a basic value of humanity.

Another wave of social anthropologists—the neo-evolutionist Leslie White, Eric Wolf, and Marshall Sahlins, for example, with a direct reference to Marxism—insisted that churches require monopoly over a sector of social and economic lifeworlds, while atheism could solve many problems of social inequality. After Max Weber’s contribution to the sociological analysis of secularism, the so-called secularization thesis was criticized, refined, extended, specified, and disputed. The secularization thesis—according to Charles Taylor’s (2007) interpretation—supposes that modernity is inevitably attended by the decline of religions, parallel to industrialization, individualization, the idea of authenticity, etc.

During the last decades of the twentieth century, the strengthening of religions in public life (affecting the political power) could be witnessed from Iran to Russia, from India to Egypt, etc. (Kettel 2019, pp. 2, 12). Post-secular social scientists rejected the supposition of an ideal development towards a nonreligious attitude (Smith 2012). Pierre Bourdieu (1971)—referring to both Karl Marx and Weber—explained that religious institutions (churches) need the monopoly over supernatural communication and over marketing the goods of salvation as a tool for keeping their power in social, cultural, and economic fields. However, the relations among political power, ethnic identity, and minorities’ religious institutions did not receive much attention from neither the neo-evolutionists nor the post-secular theorists.<sup>4</sup>

Peter L. Berger (1969, p. 106) argues that the term *secularization* (or *secularism*) is loaded with contradictory ideological evaluations that are an embarrassment to the empirical research on the social roles and perspectives of religions. Bryan Wilson (1998, pp. 48, 64; Wilson [1966] 2016) stresses that each country or region has different social processes and trends of secularization, so the Western world cannot be regarded as going through a universal process; argumentation should rely more on empirical evidence. Linking to this argumentation, Davie Grace (2000, pp. 1, 4) argues that social reality itself disaffirms the secularization thesis since, in the last decades of the twentieth century, a revival of both institutional churches and individual spiritualism can be witnessed in some parts of post-Soviet Europe, and the Western world cannot consider itself as the prototype of a global process of religiosity and secularism since it is rather only “one strand among many.” There are different, often contradictory, processes parallelly existing in a secular society; religion, individual spirituality, and scientific rationalism cannot be strictly contradistinguished from each other (Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2014, p. 13). Frans Jaspers (2014, pp. 197, 208) accepts the arguments that religiosity and spirituality have many modes of transmission, so he set up a matrix of the different kinds of spirituality and religiosity that can be understood as

sacralization in a secular society. The role of case studies has increased in the last decades. There are more and more contributions in the form of comparative studies searching for complex answers of how political secularism prevails in different regions (Hayness and Wilson 2019). As an example of the difference between the religious minority and majority, Jacques Berlinerblau (2021, pp. 5–6) explains the different roles of and attitudes towards political secularism that can help minority religions survive. I would like to join this discourse on secularization with my paper, adding some notes on ethnic minorities' religiosity and its various social functions.

During the last decades, my fieldwork connected me to several areas of Eurasia, where I focused on the discourses<sup>5</sup> of local, ethnic, and religious identities. As a social and cultural anthropologist, I am attracted to the diversity of cultures and religions. A variety of scholarly perspectives provides the opportunity for multidimensional approaches, so I avoid judging religiosity as the (neo-)evolutionists did. If the social secularist attitude prevailed in scientific works, it would reduce our tolerance and openness to the "other." Building our conclusions on our field experiences (fieldnotes of participant observations and interviews) and reflecting on scholarly literature certainly does not withhold us from the recognition that we cannot peel away the religious, contemporary spiritual, or atheist worldviews during our scientific activities. Notwithstanding, I argue that our religious/atheist/spiritual identity should not dominate our scholarly discourse (except in theology or in social-secularist activism). We should keep ourselves both terminologically and academically credible, compatible, and tolerant to religious, individual spiritualist, and atheist colleagues. We can call this attitude *scholarly secularism* to distinguish it from the theory and activism of social secularism. Nevertheless, postmodern anthropology entitled scholars to write freely about their own personal paths, like Christopher Partridge (2004) did in the introduction to his excellent book about the re-enchantment of the West. This demonstrates that scholarly secularism does not intend to hide our ideas at all. The "from-below" perspective of social anthropology often reveals the weakness of grand theories. My research question in this paper is "What kind of social functions can we recognize within ethnic minorities' religious life?" I reflect on the theories of social and political secularism in light of ethnic minorities' religiosity. I build my analysis and comparison on my fieldwork—experiences, interviews, and participant observations. I outline and analyze four case studies, according to fieldwork that I conducted between 2001 and 2020 in (1) Hunza (North Pakistan),<sup>6</sup> (2) the Middle Ural Mountains (Russia),<sup>7</sup> (3) Transylvania (Romania),<sup>8</sup> and (4) northern Scandinavia (Norway, Finland, and Sweden).<sup>9</sup> The three territories are shown in Figure 1. These local societies that I studied are not only geographically distant from each other, but their historical and cultural backgrounds differ too. I examine how ethnic minorities (re)construct their religious identity for the sake of their social (ethnic) survival strategies. My aim is to analyze and compare the current situation in certain localities, how the religious leaders and lived, vernacular religiosity relates to ethnic identity, and their political endeavors (participating in the political power). After briefly introducing the four communities, I will compare my results in an analytic discussion regarding how they relate to and interpret political and social secularism.



**Figure 1.** The three places of my case studies: (1) Hunza, (2) the Middle Ural, (3) Transylvania, and (4) Sápmi.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Results

### 2.1. Case Study 1: *The Ethnic and Religious Complexity of Hunza (Gilgit District, Pakistani-Controlled Kashmir)*

Hunza River is the only one that crosses the Karakoram mountains and joins the river Gilgit, which is a tributary of the upper Indus. Hunza is also the name of a former kingdom (princely state) that is rooted in the medieval ages (Dani 2001) and—based on the historical borders—a territory in the Gilgit District of northern areas of Pakistan with approximately 100,000 inhabitants. With an elevation between 2400 and 2500 m, surrounded by dozens of peaks rising over 7000 m, the Hunza Valley has a Central Asian flora and atmosphere. The first paved road reached Hunza only in 1978, continuing to the Chinese border in 1982 as the Karakoram Highway (open to the foreigners in 1986; Sidky 1994, p. 94). Therefore, one could only reach the region with days of walking through bare, rocky, mountainous paths until reaching this beautiful and gentle oasis—an oasis due to the very old agricultural irrigation system that drives the melting glaciers' water to the otherwise semidesert bench terraces of the hillsides (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** A view of Hunza River's canyon in 2001.

During the Great Game<sup>11</sup>—after heavy fights against the conquering maharaja of Kashmir and later on the British Empire—it became a semi-independent princely state in 1892, with a loose link to the central administration, but they continued paying yearly tribute to China as well (Flowerday 2018, p. 126; Sökefeld 2014, p. 11). When Pakistan and India gained their independence in 1947, Hunza found itself in a disputed territory of Pakistani-controlled Kashmir.<sup>12</sup> After the ceasefire line was set with the assistance of the UN on 1 January 1949, the so-called Karachi Agreement treated the population of the Gilgit-Baltistan region as semi-citizens, excluding the locals from fundamental rights (election, participation in international sport competitions, etc.). The Karachi Agreement was concluded between the government of Pakistan, the Muslim Conference of All Jammu and Kashmir, and the representatives of Azad (free) Jammu and Kashmir in 1949 (representatives of the Gilgit-Baltistan territory were omitted), but it was kept in secret until the 1990s (Karim and Hayat 2021, p. 3). Pakistan abolished the semi-independent princely state status of Hunza in 1974 and dethroned the Ayasho dynasty that had ruled there for many centuries (Holden 2018, p. 7). This was the last step in deconstructing Hunza's independence.

In the twenty-first century, residents of the Gilgit-Baltistan District (including Hunza) initiated persistent political and legal efforts to integrate this area into the state, to gain citizen rights for the oppressed people, and to eliminate political marginalization. High officials of the administration are still mostly Pakistani citizens from the south (mostly from Punjab)—those with full rights (Sökefeld 2014, p. 15). This causes ethnic tensions between the ruling nation and the local ethnic and religious minorities. In 2009, a new act of self-governance was accepted by the Pakistani state, giving rights to Gilgit-Baltistan to elect their own assembly, but the state continued governing the area through a separate ministry (Rashid 2010, p. 2).

Both ethnicity and religiosity appear as a very complex phenomenon in Hunza. There are many native languages spoken in the former kingdom, and—during the Pakistani period—newcomers brought Urdu, English, etc., as well. Persian was the lingua franca in the region until 1974. It is not obvious what we can call “ethnic groups” in Hunza: the language-based emic terminology (Burushaski, Shina, Wakhi, Dom, etc.) or the traditional emic terms that parallel them prevails,<sup>13</sup> which is based on their geographical and historical community—the Hunzakuts.<sup>14</sup> This community links the native languages together via their historical roots and divides them from those of the former kingdom (from Burushaski speakers in Nagar and Yasin, from Wakhi speakers in Afghanistan, from Shina speakers in Gilgit, etc.). According to the situation of who speaks to whom and whom an individual

wants to refer to, I unfolded very complex ethnic terminology during my fieldwork, shown in Table 1.<sup>15</sup>

**Table 1.** Situation-dependent ethnic terminology in Hunza (according to the language groups). The bold highlights the self-referential ethnic terminology.

Who Calls Whom?	Burusho	Shenaá	Guitsó (Wakhi)	Béricho	Pakistani	Nagarkuts
Burushaski	<b>Burushó, Húnzó, Húnzukuts</b>	Shenaá Húnzukuts	Waqhí, Guitsó Húnzukuts Vircsikvor	Béri, Béricho Húnzukuts	Pakistani, Paki	Nagérkuts Burusho
Shina (of Hunza and Nagar)	Buru, Bru, Burusho, Hunzakuts	<b>Shiná Hunzakuts</b>	Wakhí Hunzakuts	Béricho Hunzakuts Ustatey	Pakistani, Paki	Nagérkuts
Wakhi (in Hunza)	Burusho, Hunzakuts	Shinaí, -á Hunzakuts	<b>Xik zik, Xikwor Wakhí Hunzakuts</b>	Béri, Bérichí/-á Hunzakuts	Pakistani Urdu, Paki	Nagari
Bericho	Buru, Bru, Burusho, Hunzúkuts	Shenaá Shiná Hunzúkuts	Waqhí, Hunzúkuts	Béri, <b>Dom Hunzúkuts</b>	Pakistani	Nagérkuts
Pakistani	Burusho, Hunzakuts	Shina Dard	Wakhi Gujali	Bericho Dom Domba	<b>Pakistani etc.</b>	Nágar(kut) Nagari Burushaski
Nagarkuts	Húnzukuts Burushaski	Shina	Wakhi	Bericho	Pakistani	<b>Nagarkuts Burushó</b>

Vernacular religiosity is not less complex in Hunza. Ismaili Islam—followers of the Aga Khan<sup>16</sup>—can be considered the primary faith of the Wakhis and Burushaskis, but other Hunzakuts—mainly the Shina speakers but also the Burusho in the town of Ganish ([Rashid 2010](#), p. 1)—are Shia Muslims.<sup>17</sup> Punjabi officers and workers belong to the Sunni way of Islam and practice their religion out of the Shia or Ismaili mosques. This means that at least three kinds of Islam can be observed in Hunza. Shia believers often refer to the majority Islam believers with degrading phrases and vice versa. One of the most common pieces of gossip I heard from followers of Shia Islam and Sunnis is about the Aga Khan, mentioning him as a beau-type guy who lives in extreme luxury in Europe but visits Hunza seeking free sex with local girls. Contradicting this, Ismaili believers refer to him as the main supporter of Hunza’s culture, schools, and economy.

One may be confused by the fact that there is a parallel religious system in Hunza: the native faith that has many kinds of specialists and a complex—while unwritten—cosmology as well. Most Muslims in Hunza believe in the native faith as well, which is built on nature spirits (such as the *parí*) and creatures of the worlds below us. There are specialists who can communicate with and influence the transcendent creatures. The most widely known of them are the *bitans*, who we can easily fit into the category of shaman from the shamanistic worldview of Eurasia ([Csáji 2011](#), pp. 165–66). The *dashmán* or *bitan dashmán* is a *bitan* who does not perform ecstatic trance dance to communicate with the spirits. *Jaadugar*, or sorcerer ([Willson 1999](#), p. 165), can be compared with the etic term “black shaman” in the study of shamanism, while the *sire gús* is a divining, miraculous woman, who acts mostly in secret. The *aqhón* is a vernacular Ismaili religious specialist, who prepares amulets, drives away bad spirits, prevents from evil eyes, etc.<sup>18</sup> These native faith specialists do not form an institutionalized religious system now, even though the *bitans* led official religious events before 1974. Nowadays, they act mostly in private. Islam and the native faith complement each other, and we cannot speak about Hunza’s vernacular religious system without paying attention to both.



## 2.2. Case Study 2: Araslanovo and Kunashak (Turkic-Speaking Ethnic Minorities in Chelyabinsk Oblast, Russia)

Chelyabinsk Oblast is situated from the Middle Ural Mountain range to the Kazakhstan border. The southern part of the region belongs to the vast grassland of the Eurasian steppe, while the middle part is covered by forest steppe, swamps, and agricultural areas. The western part is hilly and mostly covered by pine forests. In addition to being an area of agriculture, this was a copper- and iron-mining and metallurgic territory from the Bronze and Iron Age that continued into modern times, and the conquering Russian Empire exploited its strategic resources beginning in the late seventeenth century (Atnagulov 2020, pp. 230, 237). I visited many parts of this wonderful area several times between 2008 and 2013, and I have continued to keep an online connection to my native friends.

The territory of Chelyabinsk Oblast is 88,900 km<sup>2</sup>. According to the 2010 census, 2,829,899 people are Russian (83.8%), 180,913 are Tatars (5.4%), 162,513 are Bashkirs (4.8%), 50,081 are Ukrainians (1.5%), and 35,297 are Kazakhs (1.05%), in addition to Germans, Belarusians, Mordvins, Armenians, etc.; 29% of the population declared themselves “spiritual but not religious” and 14% “atheist” (Russian Federal State Statistic 2010). I focused on the Turkic-speaking ethnic groups, Tatars, Bashkirs, Mishars (Meshcheryaks), etc. They predominantly belong to Sunni Islam, which unifies them as a religious minority amongst the Orthodox Christian majority (Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, etc.) in Chelyabinsk Oblast, but they come from the autonomous regions (Tatarstan, Bashkortostan) where Turkic-speaking Sunni Islam believers form the majority of the society. Mishars do not have their own autonomous region in the Russian Federation or outside of it, although even Finland has a slight Mishar minority. The number of atheists in Turkic Muslim groups in Chelyabinsk Oblast is much lower than in the rest of the population.

Araslanovo (Арыслан in Tatarian language) is a village in the Ural Mountains in Chelyabinsk Oblast, Nyazepetrovsky Rayon (district), with a predominantly (94%) Tatar population, and additionally 5% Bashkirs and 1% Russians. According to the 2010 census, 711 people live in the settlement (ibid.). They document the lineages (*shezhere*)<sup>19</sup> annually at the Sabantuj festival, where traditional folk music is played, the *baraba* wrestling games are performed, and people extend the rewritten *shezhere* of the village (with death, birth, and marriage data). The locals explained to me in 2008 that the old scripts were tragically destroyed during Soviet times, but a teacher of the village reconstructed the lineage, so—since the collapse of the Soviet Union—they use large, new posters for this purpose (see Figure 3).

There are three main lineages in the village. The prestige of them demonstrates that only those can consider themselves “native” who can deduce their descent from the founding families. Araslanovo has one mosque with an imam, who rescued the very old texts of the Koran during the Soviet times (see and Figure 4).

Some fifty kilometers east from Araslanovo, also in the northern part of Chelyabinsk Oblast, rests Kunashak, a district (which has a central town with the same name) of 3199 square kilometers and 32,225 residents, according to the 2010 census, of which 47% were Bashkirs and 36% Tatars, together forming a local majority (Kunashak District Statistics 2017). It has belonged to several administrative regions from Sverdlovsk to Perm, Tyumen, etc., and later to the Bashkir Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic until 1934, when it was integrated into Chelyabinsk Oblast (Yemelianova 1999). This fact becomes important when we try to analyze the diversity of their current Turkic-speaking community since the ethnic categorization is far from obvious in the region (Atnagulov 2017, p. 267). The actual administrative policy’s ethnic categories of ethnic groups affected the modifications of the emic ethnic terminology as well (Atnagulov 2016, p. 144). Emic terms of the pre-colonized Turkic ethnic groups were very complex. Kinship (such as lineages) and social formations (such as clans and tribes) build on each other and sometimes construct new entities using the elementary structures of lineages and clans. Reconstruction of ethnic terms in historical sources is very problematic because different levels of ethnic categories (groupings) can be called forth depending on the actual political situation and the perspective of the speakers



(besides their social circumstances; Samigulov 2016, p. 140). Ethnicity is not a one-level identity marker, but places individuals in the linguistic, religious, and economic social environment (Gilroy 1997, p. 304). This can be demonstrated—as the key issue for my actual case study—with the term “Mishars” (also called Misher/Meshcheryak/Mesher Tatars) during the seventeenth to twentieth century.



Figure 3. Lineage posters in public at the Sabantuj of Araslanovo, 2008.



**Figure 4.** The interior of the Araslanovo mosque, with parts of the old scripts in 2008.

The Mishars of Kunashak appear in the first relatively accurate ethnic map of the Russian Empire issued in 1951, made by Pjotr Köppen, as Meshcheryaks (Mishars) formed the dominant group of the Kunashak region in the first half of the nineteenth century. They spoke a Turkic language similar to Bashkirs, Kazakhs, and Tatars, also with many dialects. Nevertheless, Mishars—linguistically—were declared by the positivist linguistic mainstream at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century as a “subgroup” of Tatars (speaking “only” a “dialect” of Tatar language). This declaration cannot be separated from Tatar nationalism. After this conscious nation construction of Tatars (Zenkovsky 1953), most Mishars started to declare themselves Tatar, while some of them joined the identity of Bashkirs—if they lived in a Bashkir social environment. This division was a result of the evolving Bashkir and Tatar nationalisms in the nineteenth to twentieth centuries (Faller 2011, p. 12), which resulted in the current situation of which the Tatars are the second- and Bashkirs are the third-largest ethnic groups in Russia (Maslyuzhenko and Samigulov 2017). Only the Mishars who lived at a distance from Tatarstan and Bashkiria (e.g., those in Finland) could keep their ethnic identity. Nowadays—officially—there are no “Mishars” in Kunashak, according to the 2010 census (there was no such choice in the census). I must add that there are Russian, Komi, Chechen, Chuvash, and Bashkir people around them in the region, so it is a multicultural environment, with the Mishar majority predominantly having Sunni Islam as their faith.

Forced Christianization by the Russian Empire during the eighteenth century and then the organization process of Cossack military troops and the Tatar and Bashkir nationalisms in the nineteenth century all had an impact on the ethnic map of the current Ural region (Atnagulov 2016, pp. 137–38). Sunni Islam connects these people in the Chelyabinsk region more than their ethnic roots and supposed origins. According to my experience, they try to reduce the generations-long Tatar and Bashkir nationalist influence by focusing on the locality and the religion to keep their identity.

### 2.3. Case Study 3: Szeklers in Transylvania (Romania)

As part of the Transylvanian Hungarian minority, there is a subethnic group, the Szekler (*székely*), who often call themselves members of “Szekler nation” (*székely nemzet*) or

“Szekler-Hungarian” (*székely-magyar*). There is a long-lasting dispute on their origins, but most of them have a very strong Hungarian ethnic identity. They distinguish themselves from the other Hungarians in Transylvania, with a proud Szekler self-consciousness. Szeklers were a legal entity from the late medieval ages and had a frontier-guard function in the Hungarian Kingdom. A collective regularization kept them out of the feudal system of nobles and serfs; however, they also had a hierarchical social stratification. The highest status was the *Főszékely*, or *primor* in Latin (Prime Szekler); then, the richer Szeklers formed the high status *lófő* (horseman) and the lower *közszékely* (common Szekler) groups. There are many subdivisions of Szeklers by the former administrative divisions of the Kingdom of Hungary, the so-called *Székely székek* (meaning Szekler seats), such as Kézdiszék, Udvarhelyszék, Marosszék, Háromszék, etc. Smaller localities also had quasi-ethnic subdivisions according to the valleys or other localities they lived in (Csík, Kis-Homoród mente, Vargyas mente, Küküllő mente, etc.). There is a traditional rivalry between these subdivisions, and there are significant differences as well according to the dominant religions there. The territory of Csík, for example, is predominantly Roman Catholic, and Háromszék is predominantly Calvinist. Sometimes we can see such religious division in a valley, where each village has different religious distribution (the majority in Prophet Dénes’s village is, for example, Unitarian). Szeklers in Romania live in a compact region that covers an area of at least three districts in east Transylvania. According to the regional statistics, they form the ethnic majority in that territory with 581,406 (76.3%) people from the total population (762,000) (Elekes and Sziágyi 2020, p. 128.). Nevertheless, the demand for creating an autonomous region is continuously refused by the Romanian governments, even if there was a period between 1952 and 1960 when the Szekler Autonomous Region was declared constitutionally (Bottoni 2018). These communal rights for ethnic minorities would not be without parallels in Europe; they stress the North Tirolo case in Italy, the Catalonians in Spain, and the Sami in Norway, Finland, and Sweden. These, in addition to the many other examples, might be a useful tool for how to obtain an autonomous, self-determination status in this region. Their petition has been delivered by the European Union as well.

Despite the oppression of the churches and of religiosity during the Communist regime (until 1989), Romania remained a highly religious country. According to the 2011 census, 86.45% of the total population of Romania (20,121,641 people) is Orthodox Christian, 4.62% is Roman Catholic, and 3.41% is Calvinist, and only 0.31% belong to the Unitarian Church; less than 1% of the population declared themselves atheists or “without religion” (Negruți 2014, pp. 45–46). However, territorial diversity shows significant differences. Hungarians have supposedly lived in Transylvania since the tenth century CE.<sup>20</sup> Hungarians predominantly belong to the Roman Catholic, Calvinist, and Unitarian religions, but there are some Lutherans and Greek-Catholics<sup>21</sup> as well. Romanians belong predominantly to the Romanian Orthodox Church, and some of them to the Greek-Catholics<sup>22</sup>. The correlation between ethnicity and the actual religion is easily recognizable from the statistics. Transylvania was a contact zone of Orthodoxy and Catholicism (and later also Protestantism) from the late medieval ages. Hardly any of the ethnic Hungarians belonged to the Orthodox Church and vice versa, and only some Romanians belong to the Catholic Church (that is, the Greek-Catholic subgroup of the Catholics).

The post-Soviet (democratic) Romanian state guarantees individual rights for the members of any ethnic or religious minorities. Notwithstanding, the Catholic Church has a special territorial policy in Romania. They allow their priests to celebrate Mass in the Hungarian language in Transylvania but refuse to allow it in north-eastern Romania (Moldavia) despite the continuous demands of the huge Hungarian-speaking minority there<sup>23</sup>, who are nearly all Catholics in that part of the country (Szilágyi N. 2012, p. 197). Catholicism as an identity marker is mixing the ethnic identity and the native language (mother tongue) in Moldavia. There are many Romanian-speaking Catholics who refer to their Hungarian ethnic identity, and there are some Hungarian speakers who identify themselves as “Catholic” despite declaring themselves “Hungarian.” In addition to the Hungarian-speaking Catholics with Hungarian identity—as the most typical combined



identity there—there are also some Catholics with Romanian identity (Laihonen et al. 2020). They—the Catholics—form a slight minority there among the Romanians with the Orthodox faith (Bodó 2012, p. 31).

I performed multi-sited ethnography in Transylvania (Romania), Vojvodina (Serbia), and Hungary among an ecumenic (charismatic Christian) new religious movement between 2010 and 2018. I call them the Lights because this is the emic term for those members of the group who “received” the Holy Spirit (Csáji 2018b). The movement was established by a Unitarian Szekler man, a folk prophet (Prophet Dénes) in 2008, when he started his evangelic journeys, first in Romania, then in Serbia and Hungary.<sup>24</sup> He had many visions of heaven and hell, and—referring to prophecies he received from the Holy Spirit—he asks everyone not only to read but also actually act according to the Bible (Csáji 2020b). The movement’s members remain in their former congregations in addition to participating in the Lights’ religious events and discourse. Two-thirds of the members are Catholic, most of the rest are Protestant (Calvinist and some Unitarian). Since most members live far from the others, the role of online communication increases continuously. Prophet Dénes belongs to the Hungarian ethnic minority in Transylvania,<sup>25</sup> as do all the members since the language of the group is Hungarian. In addition to those in Romania, there are many followers of the Lights in Vojvodina (Serbia) and in Hungary too. I had the opportunity with this research to gain insight into the Hungarian ethnic and religious minority’s life in Romania.

Prophet Dénes and the members of his movement often join the most important Hungarian Catholic ritual, the Pentecostal pilgrimage to Csíksomlyó (Șumuleu Ciuc in Romanian) (Csáji 2020a; see Figure 5). Many Hungarians from Moldavia have traditionally visited this religious event in the last centuries. However, as in case of the Lights, not only Catholics come, but Protestants as well, since this event has a strong atmosphere of national cohesion, as it is inseparable from national identity construction (and strengthening). This pilgrimage is also an important touristic and political representation of the Szeklers in Romania that sometimes sees over a million participants.<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 5.** Open-air Pentecostal Catholic Mass in Șumuleu Ciuc (east Transylvania, Romania), the most important religious ensemble of the Hungarian ethnic minority in Romania in 2011.

#### 2.4. Case Study 4: Sami People in Northern Scandinavia

The northernmost point of Europe (Nordkapp) was “discovered” later than America (by Richard Chancellor in 1554). Sami are the indigenous people of this vast area in

northern Scandinavia, who migrated there during the Ice Age and lived from nomadic reindeer herding and fishing. They rapidly decreased in terms of both territory and number in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because all four of the countries that occupied Sápmi<sup>27</sup> (Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia) oppressed them with linguistic, economic, and other restrictions. Sami children were taken to boarding schools in the twentieth century (until the 1960s), where Sami language was prohibited, claiming to “adequately socialize” (assimilate) them into the majority’s society (Lehtola 2010, pp. 10–11). Sami revitalization began in the 1970s, when some local Sami intellectuals (inspired by Nils-Aslak Valkeappää and other intellectuals) proudly confessed their ethnic identity, requested minority rights, claimed self-determination, and insisted on stopping the stigmatization surrounding their singing of their traditional songs (the *yoiks*) publicly (Tamás 2018, p. 32). It soon became a movement for the Sami, applying for ethnic, indigenous, and political (autonomy) acceptance by the governments, and *yoiks* were recognized widely as the most ancient singing tradition (folk heritage) in Europe (Tamás 2013, p. 63). This became a core symbol of Sami identity discourse that received worldwide recognition (Hilder 2014). Samis in Norway, Sweden, and Finland belong to some of the countries with the highest GDP per capita, and they use high-tech tools (satellite mobile, GPS coordinates to follow the herds, 5G internet, etc.), but a significant portion of them kept their reindeer-herding occupation.

When we try to discover the exact number of Sami people in northern Scandinavia, we encounter a lack of official statistics. In Sweden, for example, since the 1970s, ethnicity is not consciously unregistered in the national census (Axelsson 2011, p. 117). In the mid-1970s, they were counted as 17,000, but it was based on a survey, not a census. The Sami parliament was established for local semi-self-governance in 1993, who registered 42,000 Sami for electoral reasons: those of the reindeer-herder occupation (that is a Sami monopoly in Sweden) and those who have at least one “declared” Sami parent (Axelsson 2011, p. 130). Nevertheless, they also encountered the problem that it is far from obvious who can be considered Sami. The problem is similar in Finland and Norway (Todal 2018, p. 11), where Sami parliaments also exist for governing some local issues. The estimations vary very much from 60,000 to 100,000 people in four countries. The largest Sami population lives in Norway (about half of the total) with 40,000–45,000 people, in Sweden with 17,000–20,000 people, followed by Finland with 5000–6500 people, and Russia with around 2000 (Josefsen 2010, p. 5).

Sami people have had traumatic historical experiences, as the majority’s society occupied them during the modern ages and oppressed them culturally, economically, and politically. Forced Christianization was one line of this process, but later it was extended with nationalist assimilation and genocide endeavors. As an example, there were race biological studies from the late nineteenth century in Sweden until the 1970s that aimed to justify seeing the Sami as an inferior species, with measuring skulls and brains, comparing them with the civilized Swedish ones, and generally applying social Darwinism in physical anthropology (Cramer 1986, p. 59). Until the last decades of the twentieth century, even sterilization processes were active to depress the Sami population in Sweden—a practice for which the Swedish king and the government publicly begged for forgiveness in the twenty-first century (Tamás 2018). Sami people were also ethnically stigmatized in Norway and Finland with repression of their language usage (Eidheim 1969). Their shamanic drums were collected and burnt and the traditional Sami folk songs, the *yoiks*, were prohibited (Tamás 2020, p. 301). This oppression caused a very interesting phenomenon in the last decades of the twentieth century. During the decades of strict oppression, the Sami were seemingly assimilated into their Norwegian neighbors, speaking their language and using their customs, including Lutheran religiosity; but when the strict legal rules were tightened, many Sami appeared “from the shadows” and declared the existence of their ethnic minority in northern Norway, even in those territories where Norwegians thought they had disappeared (Eidheim 1992).

There is a dispute about whether Sami people have one language with different dialects or whether there are Sami languages, since territorial distance resulted in significant

linguistic differences, such as among *Lule*, *Inari*, and—for example, besides other dialects—*Skolt*.<sup>28</sup> Sami do not understand each other, and there is no “literary” or common Sami language used as lingua franca (Josefsen 2010). They lived in a vast area; cyclic migration with their reindeers on a strictly customized route resulted in linguistic divergence.

The forced Christianization period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was kept in Sami collective memory for a long time. Lars Levi Laestadius (1800–1860), the founder of Laestadian way of Lutherans, who had Sami parentage, brought a different style of evangelization to the Sami. As an example, he used Sami language for sermons. He fought against alcoholism—then a serious problem in Sápmi, when Scandinavian tradesmen used alcohol for “bargaining purposes,” that affected most Sami communities as a “social drug”—in his puritan and tolerant way. He often followed the reindeer herdsmen to preach, and he married a Sami woman. He respected the Sami indigenous native faith and built some of its elements into his sermons. Notwithstanding, he also prohibited singing the *yoiks*, “the voice of the devil” (as it was commonly called then) (Tamás 2020). Christianity has become an immanent part of Sami life since then.<sup>29</sup> Sami ethnic revitalization since the 1970s has continued to rely on religiosity although—in addition to the Laestadian and other local Christian congregations—contemporary spirituality has also arisen with ethnic and political connotations. This development can be easily placed in the re-enchantment process of the West (Partridge 2004) and the modern “art culture system,” as James Clifford (1988, p. 248) calls it. More and more Sami become singers, writers, poets, and filmmakers have a more-or-less religious attitude.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes they refer to the pre-Christian, pagan past, sometimes to a syncretic way combining Christianity and the native faith, and some of them have a clear anti-clerical attitude. Sami art has often mixed with religiosity and ethnic issues, fighting against the majority society’s supposed colonialization endeavor and oppression (Nyyssönen 2013, p. 101).

At the end of the twentieth century and in the first decades of the twenty-first, religious syncretism emerged among the Sami. As an example, I refer to Lars Levi Sunna’s works that apply pre-Christian ornaments (e.g., from the shamanic drums) and symbols of deities in Christian church architecture, paintings, and sculpture (see Figure 6). It is disputed whether or not pre-Christian symbols should be used in Christian sacred spaces (Dubois 2012, p. 142).



**Figure 6.** Altar in a Lutheran (Laestadian) church of Jukkasjärvi with pre-Christian symbols (the sun from a shamanic drum) made by Lars Levi Sunna (photo: Tamás 2018, p. 38).



Forced Christianization and ethnic oppression on the part of the majority has resulted in a strong counteraction in the last decades, which has appeared in many videoclips, poems, articles, posters, and other forms of cultural artifact. Shamanistic revival—as an element of ethnic identity construction—appears in many urban (neo-)shamanistic and syncretic forms (Tamás 2018, 2020). The present ethnocentric, self-respecting attitude along with the political claims can be called a form of “minority nationalism.” Sami discourse space has a very frequently occurring ethnicity discourse. It creates new narratives of the past under the umbrella of Sami national memory, an obligation towards their ancestors and a tool for transmitting their Sami identity to their descendants. Political and artistic activism—or artivism, as the group of Suohpanterror calls it—resulted in Sami political, economic, and cultural claims appearing worldwide, placing this small ethnic unit in the cognitive world map of peoples (see Figure 7). Sami people are among one of the leading members of the Arctic Council.<sup>31</sup> They provide exemplary social patterns to Siberian and North American indigenous peoples on how to represent ecological consciousness and indigenous sovereignty (Hilder 2014, p. 19; Josefsen 2010, p. 10; Sillenpää 2008).



Figure 7. A Suohpanterror poster.<sup>32</sup>

### 3. Discussion

It is an instinctual need to place ourselves in the world with religious, ethnic, class, or other cognitions of differences and similarities. These orientations create the feeling of being in a community and also provide a basis for simplifications that result in stereotypes. Self-identification helps us navigate the ever-changing social environment and create solidarity and social security. My aim with this paper is to analyze the relation between ethnic minorities' religious life and their social (and political) existence. I demonstrated with the case studies that—in opposition to the nationalist idea of peoples—emic terminology is confusingly complex, multilevel, and often antinomic. Different ethnic terms are called forth in different situations referring to actually dissimilar groups of a society.

Ethnic units overlap each other, as in the case of Hunza in which language, locality, or even religious reference (relevance) of different layers activates different social networks in a complex society. In Russia, the word “Tatar” has different meanings to the inhabitants of Kunashak and the nearby Araslanovo. Araslanovo has historical descendant groups (lineages) to trace back their ethnic roots to the Volga Tatar origin; Kunashak's previous Mesher identity disappeared, giving place to their present, much weaker Bashkir and Tatar ethnic identity. A man from the local government said, “Are we Tatars or Bashkirs? Tatars and Bashkirs. It is unimportant. The important thing is our Muslim faith. We are first Muslims than Russian Tatars or Russian Bashkirs here. And we are proud Russians as well, if it is needed.”<sup>33</sup> Hardly anyone would similarly self-identify in Araslanovo, in Bashkiria, or in Tatarstan; self-identification based on national ideology is much stronger there than in Kunashak.

We can see a wide variety of ethnic layers and cultural and sociohistorical contexts in my four case studies, but there are significant similarities as well. All four of the ethnic minorities had significant historical roots and refer to their historical community and supposed cultural continuity. All four case studies refer to their common territorial unit, and all of them had traumatic experiences in the past as part of the common narrative memory. They have many similarities and differences. There are incomputable kinds of ethnicities and grounds for ethnic units, markers, and forms (Eriksen 2003), and there are several kinds of perceptions that we can call “ethnic perspectives” in the world (Brubaker 2004). Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2003) stresses that both minority and majority ethnicity and nationalism can result in peaceful and violent events as well, just as any other social opposition between “us” and “them” can. Thus, we should not make a value judgement, since they are parallel phenomena with mutual influences on each other.

Nationalism rejects multilayered ethnicity and claims self-determination to a supposedly (culturally or politically) homogeneous group of people. Ethnicity is penetrated by and mixed with nationalism at very different levels in the four case studies. In the case of the Transylvanian Szeklers, they have a mother country (Hungary), and the significance of the multilayered ethnic categories, such as Hungarian, Szekler, Csángó, etc., is usually much smaller than the national identity's (Hungarian). The Romanian majority has not only a different language but also a different religion as well. There are hardly any Orthodox Hungarians, while Orthodoxy is the predominant religion of Romanians. In northern Scandinavia, Samis have no common country, so their pan-Sami nationalistic claims are a survival strategy for them, as they are divided by languages (having dialects that keep them from understanding each other). Although they share a Lutheran identity (and Orthodoxy in Russia) with the majority (Swedish, Norwegian, Finish), the revival of Sami shamanism or, more often, the reference to elements of this shamanic past distinguish the Sami religious worldview from the majorities' ones.<sup>34</sup> Sami religiosity is interweaved with political endeavor for the purposes of ethnic autonomy and indigenous rights. The ethnic group that is least penetrated by nationalist ideology is the society of Hunza, in which Pakistani nationality is far less a part of their identity than being Shina, Hunzakuts, or Wakhi. They practice Shia and Ismaili religions that are also minorities in the predominantly Sunni country.

Nevertheless, a common element of the case studies is that religiosity plays an important role for most members of the four minorities. In the case of the Sami, I must add that contemporary spirituality and the revival (reconstruction) of shamanism exist in parallel to the Christian identity, sometimes both the Lutheran faith and neo-pagan ideas and practices can be parts of the very same person's religious identity. In addition to Lutheranism and Lutheran and neo-shamanistic syncretism, anti-Christian neo-paganism is an increasing phenomenon.<sup>35</sup> They refer to the crimes of Christianity regarding the forced conversion and the destruction of the shamanic drums, traditions, and heritage of the formal ethnic culture. There are no statistics for this, but—as far as I observed—anti-Christian groups and neo-shaman quasi-religious theorists (writers, singers, politicians) are still much fewer in number than Lutheran ones.

There is a syncretism of shamanism and institutional religion (Islam) among Hunzakuts too.<sup>36</sup> A *bitan* told me: "We [*bitans*] are proper Muslims. I want to be a good Muslim, and just after that, I can be a good *bitan*. I was chosen by the fairies to be a *bitan*. But all the people are chosen by God to be a good person. *Bitanship* is not opposite to our faith." Until the late medieval and early modern age, the Baltistan and Gilgit regions were predominantly Buddhist. Hunzakuts' shamanism is very different from the Bon that also existed beside Tibetan Buddhism. It is not a revival or reconstruction, so it is very far from the phenomenon of urban or neo-shamanism.

I do not want to homogenize the religiosity of the studied societies. Meredith B. McGuire (2008) uses the term "lived religion" for the several kinds of religiosity, stressing the importance of personal perceptions, practices, experiences, and emotions, while Lenard N. Primiano (1995) introduces the term "vernacular religion" for the individual forms. Although this theoretical approach seems much more relevant regarding my European examples,<sup>37</sup> I observed far more similarities than differences among the individuals' personal religiosities in Hunza and the Uralian Tatar cases. One reason for this is the different sociohistorical routes and circumstances. The four ethnic minorities have faced different traumas in the last centuries and have different political and religious obstacles and claims, so their historical experiences and current endeavors are different. The other reason the notion of lived religion is less relevant in Hunza and the Urals that I found is that there are different kinds of discursive systems.

Mische and White (1998) recognized that discourses construct social networks and frames, with these networks allocating and more or less determining the discourses themselves. This dialectical relation of social networks and discourses can be applied to religious and ethnic discourses as well. A religious community's inner discourse can be considered not only as an *interpretive community* (Fish 1980), but also a frame for communicative contents and interactions. A local community, a school class, a workplace, a family, or several other frequent discursive frames form *discourse spaces*<sup>38</sup>. Discourse spaces are relatively separate from each other and together form the social discursive environment (discourse field). They construct, transform, and reconstruct common semantic meanings and value preferences. Discourse spaces overlap each other. The process of meaning and value construction, that is, the construction of social patterns, lays "within these network-like relatively insular communication structures. Personal discourse horizons (discursive access) also have importance, since they reach other discourses as well. Discourse spaces can be imagined similar to Harrison White's notion of *network domains* (see Mische and White 1998), but there are important non-network-like elements as well: status, locality, emotions, personal lifeworlds etc. all have impact on the process" (Csáji 2020b, p. 359). Among the studied local societies, the systems of discourse spaces differ very much. Hunza's, Kunashak's, and Araslanovo's religious and ethnic discourse spaces are much more overlapped than the Transylvanian one. Sami religious and ethnic discourses did not overlap enough until the 1970s, and this divergence resulted in the separation of language dialects. The decentralized structure of the Lutheran Church also had an impact on the disintegration of the Sami language groups (Lule, Pite, North, Inari, Skolt, etc.). Sami minorities started to seek community with each other from the early twentieth century on, and the first all-Sami congress assembled in Åre

in 1917. Nevertheless, the fear of Sami national progress resulted in strong assimilation endeavors in the majorities' societies over the next fifty years. During the period of oppression, Samis recognized that it is substantial how much ethnic, local, political, occupational, religious, kinship, and other discourses overlap each other. According to my experience, if they overlap a lot, they are more likely to strengthen each other's cognitive engravements (memorial imprints) and community construction, while in cases in which they diverge, social entropy (Galtung 1967) more likely increases. To avoid disintegration and disorder, religion can be an elementary tool.

Multifunctional social networks in the case studies' ethnic minorities contain religious bonds and discourses as well. A local priest told me in Transylvania that "Our [Szekler/Hungarian minority's] chance for survival lays in two elements: do not let the churches and the schools fall!"<sup>39</sup> I encountered similar statements amongst Uralian Tatars (both in Kunashak and Araslanovo) and in Hunza too. The Sami case was quite different. There were some who stressed the importance of the Lutheran Church, but there was a contradictory relation towards the Laestadian ways, and there is contemporary dispute about the neo-shamanistic groups and endeavors among Christian Samis. But religion as an "ethnic marker" is not obvious. There was a case, in 2016, when someone (a Lutheran man) asked me, "What do you want from those extreme Sami nationalist Laestadians?"<sup>40</sup> On another occasion, I was talking with a Sami woman who did not understand how a Sami could be Christian after all the crimes against Samis committed on the part of Christians. At the same time, most of the Sami Lutheran congregation do not allow the singing of traditional Sami *yoiks* in their churches; they suppose that "yoiking" is not reconcilable with Christianity. These debates—and my previous examples—show the wide range of religious perspectives and emotions among the Sami. They live in secular countries where Christian faith is rapidly losing its importance (except in Russia). Parallel to this, New Age and contemporary spirituality, that is, neo-pagan movements, are becoming more significant.<sup>41</sup> This is why the "lived religion" concept can be most adequately applied to the Samis and, next, to the Hungarians in Transylvania.

There are new neo-pagan (mostly ethno-pagan) religious movements in Transylvania too, but their number is dwarfed by the Christians (Bakó and Hubbes 2011). Atheists are in the minority, but in growing number. In 2016, a Szekler teacher told me: "Atheism is a religion too. It is strictly dogmatic. The refusal of God's existence and the acceptance of the soul as something separate from the material body, that humankind is considered as one of the animal species, and death as a total and irreversible perishing. These are strict dogmas of atheism." Nevertheless, I found numerous Transylvanian atheists who applied contemporary spirituality's practices, such as Reiki, energy healing, positive resonance of gems, etc. Religious syncretism—with invented neo-pagan and traditionalist revival—also exists there (just as in all the Central and Eastern European countries), but its importance lags behind the Sami society, where the contrast and the disputes are more apparent.

Social secularist theory is widely rejected by most of the minorities I studied, except by the Sami society, where many more people declare themselves to be "atheist," "deist," "unreligious but believer," "non-practicing Christian," or simply "neutral" than in any of the other three examples. In Transylvania, more in the Urals, and most in the northern Pakistan region, religion is at the core of self-identification narratives and coexists with their ethnicity. When I asked about secularism, people of the Kunashak and Hunza often replied with harsh phrases. A *bitan* from Hunza told me: "Without our faith, we lose our common morality. Without common morality, we quickly break-up."<sup>42</sup> This also shows that emotional involvement cannot be neglected when we think about ethnic minorities' religiosity. In the case of Samis, this role of religion pertains to a much smaller part of the ethnic group.

I show the varieties of religious fields<sup>43</sup> in Table 2 and the similarities in the claims of self-determination (except in the Uralian Tatars' case). These claims are proclaimed not only by the political and/or ethnic institutions (like the Szekler Council in Transylvania or the Sami parliaments in northern Scandinavia), but by the religious leaders and congregations

as well. Despite the different importance levels of religiosity in the four cases, this is a common phenomenon in all of them. Social and political secularism are opposites to the studied societies. Political secularism is a key issue for their survival, so they insist on keeping a secular political environment. Contrary to this, social secularism is a toll for assimilation by the majority society, so all the minorities in my case studies strictly refuse social secularism, except the Sami, who only have subgroups with this opinion (e.g., the Laestadian religious communities). Influence of national ideology shows a much wider palette in the four cases.

**Table 2.** Comparative matrix of the four case studies (importance of religiosity, diversity of religions, political claims of religious institutions, role of nationalisms).

	<b>Importance of Religiosity (versus Atheism)</b>	<b>Religious Diversity amongst the Ethnic Minority</b>	<b>Political Claims by Religious Leaders and Religious Institutions</b>	<b>Role of Nationalism (Homogenization of the Ethnic Layers into One National Level That Claims Self-Determination)</b>
Hunzakuts (Pakistani-controlled Kashmir/Northern Areas of Pakistan)	all-essential	two main ways: Shia and Ismaili (both are within Islam)	political secularism, right for voting in the Pakistani elections, human rights, self-determination	weak (there is a territorial claim for self-governance but with keeping the ethnic complexity)
Bashkirs and Tatars in Kunashak (Middle Ural, Russia)	important	one dominant religion (Sunni Islam) besides some non-religious people	political secularism, keep the existing human rights and religious Freedom	weak
Araslanovo Tatars (Middle Ural, Russia)	quite important	(same as in Kunashak)	(same as in Kunashak)	strong Tatar national identity
Szeklers in Transylvania (central Romania)	very important	three dominant Christian churches: Roman Catholic, Calvinist, and Unitarian; there are some Lutherans, and very few Greek Catholics; there are sporadic neo-pagans, esoteric, and non-religious ones	political secularism, political autonomy, and self-determination	strong
Samis (northern Scandinavia)	not so important	Lutherans and neo-pagans, many syncretic forms, nature-based esoterism, and contemporary Spirituality	political secularism, self-determination, political autonomy, and indigenous rights for the Sami people	strong

Josip Llobera refers to nationalism as a “secular religion” (Llobera 1994, p. 221). Without a doubt, there is a historical parallel between the emergence of nationalism and secularism (both political and social). Nevertheless, my case studies show us that nationalism and religiosity can also be in a symbiotic relationship. In the case of the Hungarians in Transylvania, lived religion and national identity strengthen each other, and religious institutions often play important roles in election campaigns, local economic and workplace organization, etc. The Sami case is slightly different, but the Sami national endeavor cannot be called “secular” either. They refer to the Sami past—traditional Sami shamanism in

a syncretic or in an anti-Christian way—but their religiosity is linked to their national endeavors. Hunzakuts' self-determination and human rights claims cannot be called nationalist, since they do not aim to integrate the plural society into a supposed nation; their objective is rather territorial autonomy for the former kingdom of Hunza (parallel to the neighboring Nagar's claims), keeping the plural society with its complex ethnic matrix. In the case of Uralian Tatar religiosity, it also links with ethnic and national identity, and—in the case of Kunashak—it prevails over nationalism. Anyway, Llobera is right when he argues on behalf of the quasi-religious *feature* of nationalism. Notwithstanding, the relation to secularism is much more complex in the minorities that I studied.

The stronger the religion (as in Hunza or in Kunashak), the weaker the nationalism and vice versa. This would be an easy conclusion of the Llobera theory, but it would not be an adequate statement according to my case studies. As I demonstrated with the Transylvanian case, nationalism can be engaged with religiosity, even with its syncretic and vernacular forms. And Tatar nationalism in the Araslanovo village shows a significant relationship with their local religiosity. Lived religion—as individual forms of religiosity—is also a confusing term for describing these minorities, since it focuses more on differences than on similarities. In certain cases, this might be the right way to distinguish and recognize the complexity and multicolor of religiosity, but in other cases, it hides the importance of the social patterns and the role of communal (and common) ways of religiosity. The most important conclusion of Table 2 is that religiosity plays a key role in the ethnic minority survival strategy for most of the studied societies (all but the Sami), and it contains political (meaning “nonsecular”) claims for autonomy and self-determination. Even in the exceptional (the Sami society) case, in which the self-determination claim is the strongest political issue from all the four cases, religiosity sometimes plays a role (such as in the case of Laestadian Sami communities or in neo-pagan Sami artists).

#### 4. Conclusions

Cultural differences are essential for humankind's ability of adaptation to our ever-changing social and natural environment (Lévi-Strauss 1952). As a result of the recognition of cultural differences, ethnicity is an instinctual distinguishing of “us and them” based on certain aspects, interests, and discourses. Categories and actual layers of ethnicity are called forth in communicative situations. Ethnicity is a kind of cognition: how we place ourselves in the world among cultural, historical, economical, etc., similarities and differences. Emic categories and cognitions of ethnicity show confusing complexity and variety (Eriksen 2003, p. 54). In the case of Hunza (Pakistan), I demonstrated in Table 1 how many terms refer to different groups of the society depending on the given situation. The Middle Urals' Tatar minority, Transylvanian Szeklers, and the Sami of northern Scandinavia also have very complex ethnic terminology rooted in their historical experiences and social memories.<sup>44</sup>

Being a minority often causes a perception of ethnicity. The majority's social environment activates the ethnic sensitivity of the minorities and experiencing “ethnic boundaries” is part of their everyday life (comp. Barth 1969). Without maintenance, ethnic minorities quickly destruct or assimilate. According to the four case studies I outlined, I found that there is a significant correlation between minorities' ethnic identity and religiosity, as religious identity often coexists with ethnic identity, forming a complexity of identity constructions. They form a much stronger survival strategy together than alone. A common feature of all four case studies was that religious life plays a central (or at least a significant) role for most within the given minority. Nevertheless, there are significant differences in the ways it is lived. For example, in the case of the Uralian Tatars, inhabitants of Araslanovo and Kunashak evaluated and lived their religiosities differently. There are many forms of lived or vernacular religiosity among all the minorities that I studied in this paper, although their importance is very different. I observed the most diverse ways of lived religion in the case of the Sami and then in the Transylvanian Szeklers. For Uralian Tatars and Hunzakuts, it was a much less relevant term and theoretical concept.



To search for the relation between ethnic minorities' religious identity and their political claims, I analyzed the four case studies according to their historical context and political objectives. Their attitudes toward political and social secularism showed significant similarities. Ethnic minorities have to live in a multilayered discourse field, where their ethnic representations and discourses are in interaction with the majority's. There are relatively separate discourse spaces, such as workplaces, schools and classes, friendships, families, localities, and political and other social organizations (such as religious conglomerations). Reality is constructed, maintained, and reconstructed through these discourses. Religions and religiosity play different roles in the societies I studied, but it is a common element that most of their members consciously reject social secularism on principle. They consciously recognize that their religious and ethnic identities cohere, although in different ways. In the case of the Hunza society and the Uralian Tatars, their Muslim faith distinguishes them from the surrounding majority; in the case of the Transylvanian Szeklers, it is certain Christian churches that do so. In the case of the Sami, the majority also belongs to the Lutheran Church in Sweden, Norway, and Finland, but the Laestadian subgroup and the neo-pagan movements rely greatly on the Sami ethnicity. This has resulted in various forms of syncretism—and disputes—among them.

The situation is contrary in the case of political secularism. Political secularism is a key factor in providing better circumstances and strategies for their minority's survival (comp. [Berlinerblau 2021](#)). The Pakistani state—which is strongly engaged with Sunni Islam institutions—shows tolerance to other Islamic ways, such as the Ismaili and, with less importance, the Shia in Hunza. When the majority takes political action, such as the 1948 forbiddance of the Greek Catholic Church in Romania and the forced integration of it into the Romanian Orthodox Church, it is widely considered a conscious assimilation endeavor. Common historical experiences and social memory cause a requirement for political secularism by the four studied minorities. Religious leaders and institutions often take part in political actions, such as causing agitation during elections, making political claims for autonomy or self-determination, or, in case of the Sami, claiming indigenous rights not only for themselves but also for other indigenous minorities around the world. Nevertheless, minorities' religious leaders interpret political secularism as something that pertains to the majority's political power. As a final conclusion, political secularism—regarding the majority or the minority—and social secularism have opposite meanings, appreciation, and roles in all of the four cases I studied.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Not without certain roots (see [Gorski 2000](#); [Taylor 2007](#)).

<sup>2</sup> Their disdainful position has not been accurately studied, even though in other fields of social science, the first wave of evolutionist perspective was considered intolerant and untenable.

<sup>3</sup> The religious identity of Boas generated disputes only after his death (see [Opler 1967](#), p. 741).

<sup>4</sup> Sociologists prefer grand theories and statistical comparison rather than traipsing and navigating among the unique examples that social anthropologists do.

<sup>5</sup> I use the term “discourse” in the Foucauldian way.

- 6 My ethnological fieldwork was conducted in 2001, but I continued research online until the present. I use my ten life-history interviews recorded in Hunza, thirteen short interviews, my ethnological fieldnotes, and state statistical data (census) for the present analysis, along with the archive that I created based on my digital ethnographical research after my return from the field.
- 7 I conducted my ethnological fieldwork between 2008 and 2013 with several shorter visits (lasting some weeks or a month) to the region. I use my five life-history interviews, seventeen shorter interviews, my ethnological fieldnotes, and state statistical data (census) for the present analysis.
- 8 My anthropological fieldwork started in 2010 and ended in 2018. I use my twenty-seven life-history interviews, forty-five shorter interviews, my ethnological fieldnotes, and state statistical data (census) for the present analysis, along with the archive that I created based on my digital ethnographical research.
- 9 My first ethnological fieldwork trip among the Sami people was in 1999, as an assistant of the linguist and ethnologist Ildikó Tamás, who is a specialist of the Sami culture; our last visit happened in 2015, but we continued research in the form of an online ethnography until the present. I use the nine life-history interviews that Tamás conducted with my assistance, twenty-one shorter interviews, our ethnological fieldnotes, and the state and Sami ethnic parliament's statistical database for the present analysis, along with the archive that Tamás created, based on her digital ethnographical research.
- 10 Figures and photos were made by me unless otherwise noted.
- 11 The colonial rivalry between the British and the Russian Empire to occupy Central Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century.
- 12 There was no Hunzakuts who would have wanted to belong to India, since they were frightened of being a Muslim minority there and they had horrible memories of the Sikh rule of Kashmir in the late nineteenth century (Dani 2001). Although the Pakistani state is strongly engaged with Sunni Islam, it is tolerant to other Muslim ways.
- 13 Both are called *qáum*, an emic term for an ethnic group.
- 14 It is both a singular and a plural term for the residents of Hunza.
- 15 A much more detailed analysis of this topic can be read in my previous study (see Csáji 2018b).
- 16 Followers of the Aga Khan are an Ismaili subgroup (Willson 1999, p. 185).
- 17 Ismaili—as part of Shia Islam—is called the “sevensers,” dividing them from the Shia majority in the world, the so-called “twelvers.” Shia Islam (the twelvers) is dominant in the Gilgit region, although the Noorbakshia way of Islam is also present in Baltistan as a religious minority (Csáji 2018a, pp. 119–20).
- 18 For more about the religious specialists in Hunza, see (Csáji 2011).
- 19 The word for this documentation is the same in the Bashkir, Tatar, and Kazakh languages.
- 20 Transylvania belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary for most of the second millennia. It became part of Romania in 1920 (after World War I), but the northern part was reintegrated into Hungary between 1940 and 1945 (for the very complex history of Transylvania, see Pop et al. 2018).
- 21 Catholics with the Byzantine liturgy united with the Roman Catholic Church in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Pop et al. 2018). The Catholic Church granted them collective rights; for example, a married man can also be ordained as a priest.
- 22 The Greek Catholic Church was seized by the Communist regime in 1948, many bishops and priests were killed, and believers were forcibly united with the Romanian Orthodox Church until 1989 (Negruți 2014, p. 45).
- 23 They are called “Moldavian Hungarian” or *Csángó* (Laihonen et al. 2020)
- 24 He travels on foot or by an age-old motor scooter. He lives in poverty and never asks but accepts small food and petrol donations to be able to continue his journey. There is no common property or “tax” in the movement (Csáji 2018b, 2020b).
- 25 He frequently goes to Romanian and Roma communities as well, but those people who he visits, evangelizes, and blesses cannot join the group because of the language barrier (Csáji 2018b, 2020a).
- 26 The tourist and cultural industry have built a whole range of references and marketing actions on it (Mohay 2009).
- 27 The emic term for the land inhabited by Sami people.
- 28 There are more than a dozen known dialects/languages of the Sami.
- 29 The absence of statistics on religiosity requires me to suppose according to my fieldwork that Protestant (predominantly Lutheran) Christianity plays a central role even nowadays for the Sami communities, and the religiosity rate is much higher than that among the major Swedish, Norwegian, and Finnish societies (especially if we compare it with the southern Scandinavian cities).
- 30 Nils-Aslak Valkeappää, Mari Boine Persen, Wimme Sari, Sara Margrethe Oskal, Niillas Holmberg, etc.
- 31 The political platform for the arctic indigenous societies and the countries with Arctic territories.
- 32 <https://voima.fi/hairikot/artikkeli/suopunkiterrorin-kannukset/>, accessed on 1 January 2023.
- 33 From one of the author's interviews in Kunashak conducted in 2012.
- 34 The Sami-founded Laestadianism is also widely considered a Sami (ethnic) subgroup of Lutheranism, despite the fact that there are non-Sami Laestadian communities in locales as far as Austria.

- 35 According to the modern art–culture system, they often appear in videoclips, poems, political speeches, etc. (comp. Hilder 2014, pp. 120–29).
- 36 This is a well-known, frequently described phenomenon in other inner and Central Asian Islamic societies as well.
- 37 More so for the northern Scandinavian than the Transylvanian society.
- 38 This is my term for the various configurations of the discourse field (see Csáji 2018b, p. 162).
- 39 In one of my interviews in Crăciunel (Romania) in 2013.
- 40 From one of my interviews. Note that the Laestadian community is part of the Lutheran Church.
- 41 Michael York (2009, p. 293) stresses, “Paganism does indeed overlap with secularism on its focus of being this-worldly.”
- 42 From a conversation with a Hunzakuts *bitan* in 2001.
- 43 Comp. (Bourdieu 1971).
- 44 Contrary to ethnicity, nationalist ideology claims self-determination for only one layer—the “nation”—as a legal and social sovereign unit, neglecting multiethnic identities and the multilayered complexity of ethnic communities (Llobera 1994).

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