Secularism and its Fate in the Arab World

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Introduction

Over the last two centuries, Arab societies have faced a conflict over the relationship between Islam and modernization. The two key questions are: “Can Islam meet the political, economic, and social demands of modernity?” and “Is Islam compatible with democracy?” These challenges urged a number of Arab intellectuals, including some already exposed to European culture and impressed by the accomplishments of European civilization, to call for radical reform. The main concern of these thinkers has been to examine the reasons for the decline of Arab societies and to determine how these societies should perceive European democratic principles.

Since the late nineteenth century, Arab societies have witnessed intellectual and political debates between three main trends. The first trend, mainly Arab secular nationalists, advocates the direct borrowing of the principles of secularism and nationalism. On the other end of the spectrum, extremist Islamists seek to establish an Islamic state based on their literal understanding of Islamic law or...
A third trend lies between these two opposite trends. It rejects both secular and fundamentalist points of view, believing that Islam is in essence a moderate religion (din al-wasatiyya). They stress that principles of development or modernization should not be formed via the direct transplantation of preconceived approaches; instead, these principles should be reconsidered in terms of the particular religious, social, political and economic conditions of Arab societies.

Exploring the different positions of such trends over the relationship between Islam and modernization, this paper seeks to answer the following two questions. Firstly, are there any similarities, or differences, between the setting of secularism in the west and the setting of its counterpart in the Arab region? i.e., is there any problem of equivalence when scholars consider the circumstances and settings of secularism in the west and in the Arab region. Secondly, what are the differences between secularism in the West and the secular model many governments seek to emulate in the Arab region? i.e., is there conceptual equivalence between the western concept of secularism and Arab secularism?

The assessment of these questions is organized into two sections: First, the doctrine of secularism—its settings in Europe in the beginning of the Modern Age, and its impacts—will be described. This part also includes the concept of civil religion in current Western societies—a concept that shows how politicians have used religious values and principles to attain their political aims after depriving such values and principles of their religious contents. Second, the conflict among Arab intellectuals and thinkers over the relationship between modernity and Islam will be examined as this conflict is one of the most serious challenges Arabs have been facing since the beginning of the twentieth century, and thus affecting any democratization process. This section explores three main trends—reconciliatory, secularist, and rejectionist—that Arab intellectuals and thinkers have introduced in response to modernization, secularism, and other challenges. Nevertheless, emphasis here is on the secularist and reconciliatory trends. The
former succeeded in consolidating the concept of secularism in the Arab region and establishing secular régimes in the most of the Arab countries. The latter articulates moderate, open-minded, and peaceful reform visions. The reconciliatory trend is also gaining ground and followers as many political Islamic movements and parties, in many Arab and Middle Eastern countries, have adopted its core ideas and visions.

The Rise and Decline of Secularism in the West

The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, defines secularism as a nineteenth-century movement – the term being coined by George Jacob Holyoake (1817–1906) that was expressly intended to provide a certain theory of life and conduct without reference to a deity or a future life, and, politically, it sprang from the turmoil which preceded the passing of the Reform Bill in 1832. Secularism has also been conceived as a “liberation movement from religion.” Harvey Cox defines secularism as “the liberation of man from religious and metaphysical tutelage, the turning of his attention away from other worlds and toward this one.” Others understand the concept of secularism in terms of “freedom of thought” or “freedom of religion.”

The French equivalent of secularism, laïcisme, (laicism) has a much more radical connotation than the English term. The French term is conceived as a doctrine of complete freedom from, and non-interference by, religion. It involves the belief that functions previously performed by the priesthood should be transferred to the laity, especially in the judicial and educational spheres. By the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, laïcisme had accomplished the complete constitutional separation of church and state in France, and religious instruction in state schools was abolished in 1882 and replaced by general ethical instruction. In its extreme form, laïcisme demanded anticlericalism and the advocacy of a Kulturkampf (the repressive political movement against the Roman Catholic Church, instigated in 1871 by German chancellor Otto von Bismarck, with the intention of wresting all educational and cultural
institutions from the church, and conferring them instead upon the state). 6

Referring that his argument is not entirely new, but is implicit in the works of many authors (Max Weber, George Weigel, Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, and others), the Egyptian scholar Abdelwahab Elmessiridistinguishes between what he calls “partial secularism” and “comprehensive secularism.” Partial secularism is “a view of the world that does not claim any comprehensiveness, confining itself to the realms of politics and perhaps economics. This view of secularism is implicit in the familiar definition of secularism as ‘the separation of church and state’...”7 He argues that this definition maintains complete silence regarding absolute or permanent values (moral, religious or otherwise) and does not address itself to ultimate things, such as the origin and destiny of humanity, and the purpose of life. 8

In turn, comprehensive secularism is a completely different outlook. According to Elmessiri, it aims “not merely at the separation of church and state and some aspects of public life, but at the separation of all values (be they religious, moral, human) not only from ‘the state,’ but also from public and private life, and from the world at large.”9 In Elmessiri’s analysis, comprehensive secularism “strives for the creation of a value-free world...it operates in terms of the nature-matter paradigm; it is nothing but a variation on naturalistic materialistic monism, and the metaphysics of immanence.”10 Comprehensive secularism, like most world outlooks, revolves around three elements: God, man, and nature. It includes neutralizing, marginalizing God, or even announcing the death of God, or as Nietzsche voiced, “God has been murdered,” and placing the human being at the center of the nature and universe as its logos.11

Secularism emerged in response to political problems of Western Christian societies, i.e., the abuse of power by religious institutions, and religious wars in Europe in the medieval age. Thus, separation between religion and state was developed in order to ensure that those in charge of religion, the clergy, would not be able to use the
state’s coercive power to force any religion on the public. In the European case, secularism was aimed at—and succeeded in—safeguarding the freedom of religion and of thought of the citizens.\textsuperscript{12} Herein, secularism was an associated process of nationalism that was based primarily on marginalizing religion apart from political affairs.\textsuperscript{13}

In its essence, secularism has been a historical compromise or reconciliation between the state and the church in Europe. The modern state emerged out of a struggle against absolutist monarchical régimes and against the hegemony of the Catholic Church. According to that reconciliation, the church was prohibited from forming political parties, but it reserved the right to support a political party or a candidate. The church was granted the freedom to conduct its proselytizing activities in society and to establish educational, social and economic institutions. Furthermore, the church admitted that the people have the right to freedom of faith, including the freedom not to believe.\textsuperscript{14}

Some, such as Richard Rorty, argue that modern democracies should “privatise religion without trivialising it.”\textsuperscript{15} The religious experience is appropriate for “what we do with our aloneness” and citizens living together within an open society are certainly entitled to freedom of religious worship. This is a sort of political pact; by which citizens must tolerate each other, and peaceful competition, civility and indifference toward the passions of others are respected in the society.\textsuperscript{16} Alfred Stepan generated a similar “twin tolerations” argument, which is “the minimal boundaries of freedom of action that must somehow be crafted for political institutions vis-à-vis religious authorities, and for religious individuals and groups vis-à-vis political institutions.”\textsuperscript{17}

Evidently, secularism in the West has not been able to assume absolute leadership or control over polities. Both secularism and religious institutions were obliged to make significant compromises, which managed to limit all tendencies of extremism and intolerance, and achieve historical equilibrium between religion on one hand, and the state and society on the other hand.\textsuperscript{18} Both state and society in
Islam, Islamist Movements and Democracy in Middle East

the West have managed to avoid falling into the danger of religious despotism and the pitfall of irreligious secularism. The democratic system in the West, therefore, has in its entirety been established upon an equation governed by a definite balance of powers attained at all levels following a series of bitter conflicts, civil wars and revolutions.¹⁹

In addition, secularism is related, as many sociologists argue, to the Enlightenment movement, ideas of figures like François Marie Arouet de Voltaire, the French and American revolutions, and the secularization of the Napoleonic era.²⁰ Moreover, the secular approach to improving human beings’ affairs by material means alone took place at a period when the relationship between science and religion in Europe was seen as one of sharp opposition.²¹

It should be mentioned that one of the most debatable issues among scholars and politicians is whether secularism is a universal paradigm. The philosopher Charles Taylor has stressed that “although secularism emerged in response to the political problems of Western Christian society in early modernity—beginning with its devastating wars of religion—it is applicable to non-Christian societies everywhere that have become modern.”²² Excluding religion from politics was also one pillar of the theories of development and modernization that many Western governments have attempted to implement in many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America since the 1960s of the twentieth century.

Other scholars deny the universal nature of secularism. Peter Glassner criticizes most theories of secularism for being nothing more than “generalizations from limited empirical findings used by sociologists to bolster an implicit ideology of progress.”²³ Citing Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, H. Richard Niebuhr, Bryan R. Wilson, Peter L. Berger, and David Martin, Steven Bruce has asserted that secularism is not a universal and inevitable theory; rather it is an attempt to “explain a historically and geographically specific cluster of changes.”²⁴ It is an account of what happened to the relationship between religion on the one side, and the state and society on the other in Western Europe since the Reformation. Thus, any attempt
to implement it in other societies is an empirical matter and must rest, as Bruce asserts, on the extent to which the causal variables found in the original setting are repeating elsewhere.25 The conflict between Islam and modernization, as will be illustrated, stemmed basically from the contradiction between the empirical setting and the attempted secularism in the Arab region.

Furthermore, some sociologists have come to believe that secularization is an inadequate concept of societal analysis. David Martin, for instance, argues that, far from providing an objective description of modern society with scientific validity, the term secularization acts mainly as “a tool of counter-religious ideologies.”26 A recent critique further asserts that secularism is basically “a hodgepodge of loosely employed ideas rather than a theory,” and that “existing data simply do not support the theory.”27 Other scholars conclude that the modern advocacy of secularism stems basically from an ideological commitment rather than from any commitment to the scientific method,28 and that the idea of secularism “has turned itself into a faith: a faith in man and a faith in progress, both a secularized faith and a faith in secularisation.”29

Finally, it is important to note that some scholars have developed the concept of “civil religion” to highlight how some politicians have used religious values and principles to achieve their political goals after depriving such values and principles of their religious contents. The concept of civil religion, which was developed by Jean Jacques Rousseau and Alexis de Tocqueville and is consistent with Emile Durkheim’s understanding of the role of religion in public life, may be regarded as an associated process of secularism. Many polities could not exclude religion from public life and thus they need religious values and principles to justify and legitimize their policies and decisions.30

Lester R. Kurtz refers to one of the most significant forms of what he calls “quasi-religion” in the twentieth century. “Quasi-religion” has grown out of the social organization of the nation-state, which often replaces traditional religious institutions as a focus of identity and basis of the cultural ethos.31 Following Kurtz,
the growth of civil religion has been widespread primarily for two reasons: first, to provide cultural unity among a set of pluralistic belief systems shaped by population migration (such as the U.S.) or artificially constructed states (usually established by colonial powers such as some Third World countries and Israel).32

Secularism and Islam in the Arab Region

The first Islamic approach toward the relationship between religion on the one hand, and the state and society on the other, appeared during the experience of the Prophet and the four Rightly Guided Caliphs who succeeded him in leading the Muslim community. The Qur’an and the Sunna (the sayings and tradition of the prophet) together formed the state’s frame of reference regarding the state’s policies in economics, war, politics, and its foreign relations with others. According to this frame of reference, Muslims were free to regulate their affairs as long as they did not violate the main principles and values of Islam. Furthermore, the state had a global mission, i.e., to invite humankind to Islam, the religion of pure monotheism, through the establishment of justice and by setting a good example. The mission, according to the religion of Islam, is to free humans from the worship of idols, to free them from the abuse of power, and to guide them toward the worship of their Creator alone. It is also the mission of the state to implement justice among all peoples without discrimination on the basis of religion, color, race, or nationality.33

It is important to note here that the model of a guided Islamic state cannot be described as a theocracy. Theocracy, derived from two Greek words meaning, “ruleby the deity,” is a political régime that claims to represent the Divine on earth both directly and immediately.34 An Islamic state is, however, a state whose frame of reference, the Qur’an and sunna, is religious. It is a model of a state in which the ruler rises to power through bay‘ah (pledge of allegiance) after having been freely elected by the community. Furthermore, the community reserves the right to withhold its allegiance, and change the rulers if they violate the law and abuse
their power. The ruler in the Islamic model is an ordinary human being who is supposed to practice shura (mutual council) and ijtihad (endeavoring to make the right judgment), and thus is liable to err; hence his opinions may be accepted or rejected. The mix between the Western concept of theocracy and the original Islamic model of rule reveals a problem of conceptual equivalence in understanding Islamic principles and values.

Nevertheless, over the years, and since the founding of the Umayyad Caliphate (661) and until the end of the Ottoman period (1923), the relationship between religion and politics has changed. Some rulers no longer represented the Rightly Guided model. Instead, rulers tended to distance their policies from the shari’a and alienate the ulama who adhered to the principles of justice. While, in public, such rulers claimed to be the true protectors of religion, in reality they sought to implement their own interests and led in private a way of life that contradicted the basic tenets of Islam. They kept a role for the shari’a to play in personal matters, and found persons known as ulama al-sultan (scholars of rulers) in order to perpetuate an image of attachment to the shari’a, which did not really exist.

In the nineteenth century, the decline of Arab societies urged many thinkers, Muslims and Christians, to appeal for political reform. The Arab region encountered one of their greatest challenges. As noted earlier, the question became whether or not Islam could meet the political, economic, and social demands of modernity. The challenge urged a number of Arab intellectuals, including some already exposed to European culture and impressed by the accomplishments of European civilization, to call for radical reform. The focus of intellectual discourse was on the relationship between religion (din) and reason (‘aql); nobility (asala) and modernity (mu‘asara); din and state (dawla), and din and science or knowledge (‘ilm). In the following sections, I will examine different reactions—introduced by adherents of the three trends—in response to modernization, secularism, and other challenges that Arab societies have faced over the last two centuries.
Secularists: Secularism is the Only Solution to the Problems of Arab Region

One main factor that led to the appearance of a Western secular model among Arab thinkers has been the transition in global power in favor of Western colonial powers, which began interfering directly in the affairs of Arab societies in order to impose on them its own model of secularism. An important secular Arab reform trend was dominated by a group of Christian Arab thinkers and writers who migrated from Syria and settled in Egypt. This group included figures like Shibli Shumayyil (1850–1917), Farah Antun (1874–1922), Georgie Zaidan (1861–1914), Ya’qub Suruf (1852–1917), Salama Musa (1887–1958), Nicola Haddad (1878–1954), and others. They wrote in two Egyptian publications (Al-Muqtataf and Al-Hilal founded respectively in 1876 and 1892) attempting to propagate ideas like love of country and fellow countrymen over all other ties, even those of religion. In fact, those thinkers succeeded in consolidating the foundations of secularism in the Arab region. They stressed the reason and the liberal thought of France and England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and condemned the hegemony of tradition over the human mind. In order to modernize Arab societies, they argued, only traditions that were compatible with this objective should remain. The fundamental aim of those thinkers was to pave the way for a secular state in which Muslims and Christians could participate on a footing of complete equality.

Shibli Shumayyil, who after graduation from the Syrian Protestant College went to Paris to study medicine, is the first figure who has introduced the theories of Darwin to the Arab region through his writings in Al-Muqtataf. He believed that science is the key to unlock the secret of the universe, even as a form of worship, and that the “religion of science” necessitated a declaration of war on older religions. According to Shumayyil, social unity should involve the separation of religion from political life since religion was a cause of division. He argued that nations grew stronger as religion grew weaker, and pointed out that this was true
of Europe, which had only become powerful and civilized once the Reformation and the French Revolution had broken the hold of religious leaders on society. He regarded both Islamic scholars and priests as resisting progress and development.

Farah Antun, who migrated from Tripoli (located in Lebanon now) to Cairo in 1897, studied the life and philosophy of Ibn Rushd, and was influenced by Ernest Renan’s works. Antun believed that the conflict between science and religion would be solved only by assigning each to its proper sphere. Like that of Shumayyil and other Lebanese writers of the time, Antun’s aim was to lay the intellectual foundation of a secular state in which Muslims and Christians could participate on a footing of complete equality. He emphasized two conditions for the success of secularism: the invalidity of what he termed “the inessential part of religion,” and the separation of temporal and spiritual authorities. He noted that the separation of the two powers in Christianity made it easier for Christians to be tolerant than for Muslims, and that European countries were more tolerant not because they were Christian, but because science and philosophy had driven out religious fanaticism, and because the separation of temporal and spiritual authorities had taken place.

Similarly, Salama Musa called for separating the spheres of science and religion, asserting that religion, due to the influence of religious institutions and clergy, had lost its progressive nature and become a heavy burden. He emphasized that Islam and Christianity have identical positions regarding the freedom of thought and emancipation of the mind, asserting that “society cannot advance or progress unless the role of religion in the human conscience is restricted; progress is the new religion of humanity.”

Another group of Muslim thinkers and writers in Egypt, like Judge Qasim Amin and writer Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, had been influenced by the Christian pioneers of the secularist school of thought and began to propagate the principles of secularism in Arab societies. They sought to reconcile secular ideas with Islam, and went so far as to develop Abduh’s emphasis on the legitimacy of
social change into a de facto division between the two realms of religion and society, each with its own norms. Qasim Amin (1865–1908), known as the emancipator of women in Egypt, argued that the problem with Muslims was a lack of science, and that it was useless to adopt the sciences of Europe without coming within the radius of its moral principles. The real cause of the decay is the disappearance of social virtues, and the cause of that is ignorance of the true sciences. In his view, the position of women is in the heart of that social problem. Amin denied that decay is due to Islam; on the contrary, he asserted that the shari’a was the first law to provide for the equality of women with men. He stressed that corruption came into Islam from outside, with the people who were converted to Islam bringing in their customs.

Islam played an insignificant part in Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid’s thought (1872–1963), although he was a close associate of Muhammad Abduh. He was not concerned, like Gamal ad-Din al-Afghani, with defending Islam, nor, like Abduh, in restoring the position of Islamic law as the moral foundation of society. As Albert Hourani noted, “religion [in Lutfi al-Sayyid’s thought] whether it be Islamic or not, was relevant to his thought only as one of the constituent factors of society.” Thus, the concerns of al-Afghani and Abduh have been abandoned, and the questions have been changed from “in what conditions do Muslim societies flourish or decay?” to “in which conditions any society flourish or decay?”

After the official abolition of the Khilafa (Caliphate) in 1924, Ali Abdel Raziq (1888–1966), a graduate of Al-Azhar and Oxford, contributed to the debate among thinkers over the importance of the Khilafa with a book published in 1925 that turned to be one of the most controversial works in modern Islamic history: Al-Islam wa Usul Al-Hukm: Bahth fil-Khilafa wal-Hukumah fil-Islam (Islam and the Fundamentals of Governance: A Thesis on Caliphate and Government in Islam). Abdel Raziq denied the existence of a political order in Islam and stresses that the Prophet had never established one, and that it had not been a part of his mission to found a state. This work has become a fundamental source of secular argument
in later times against the validity of Islamic shari’a. Some critics have argued that this book pioneered the idea of rejecting conventional interpretations and replacing them with innovations based mostly on “orientalists” writings on Islam.51

**Reconciliatory Reformists: Democracy and Islam are Compatible**

In their first reaction to modernization and democratic principles, early reconciliatory reformists regarded democracy as a concept compatible with Islam. Nineteenth-century Arab scholars and thinkers like Rifa’a at-Tahtawi (1801–1873), Khairuddin at-Tunisi (1810–1899), Gamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897), Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), and Abdurrahman al-Kawakibi (1849–1903) tried to explain why the Muslim umma declined and then proposed reform plans in order to limit the rule of despotism. They were clearly influenced by liberal democratic thought and practice, while they tried to improve the state of affairs of their societies. They attempted to establish a resemblance between democracy and the Islamic concept of the shura and sought to legitimize the borrowing of some features of the Western model which they thought were compatible with Islam and capable of resolving their societies’ problems.53

The start of modern Islamic thinking in the Arab region is usually traced back to at-Tahtawi.54 In *Takhlis al-Ibriz ila Talkhis Bariz* (1834), at-Tahtawi praised the concept of democracy as he saw it in France, and diagnosed the illness of the umma as being due to the lack of freedom, suggesting multi-party democracy as a remedy. He criticized those who opposed the idea of taking knowledge from Europe saying: “Such people are deluded; for civilizations are turns and phases. These sciences were once Islamic when we were at the apex of our civilization. Europe took them from us and developed them further. It is now our duty to learn from them just as they learned from our ancestors.”55 He compared political pluralism to forms of ideological and jurisprudential pluralism that existed in the Islamic experience. In his view, religious freedom and the freedom of political practice and opinion does not contradict
Islam, and that leaders are asked in the realm of politics to pursue various routes that in the end serve only one purpose: good administration and justice.

Muhammad Abduh asserted that many important ideas attributed to Europe were not alien to those brought up in the tradition of Islamic political thought. Among these attributions: humans are fulfilled as members of society; a good society is directed by the principle of justice; and the purpose of government is the welfare of the ruled. He attempted to reconcile Islamic ideas with Western ones, suggesting that maslaha (interest) in Islamic thought corresponded to manfa’a (utility) in Western thought. He also equated shura with democracy and ijma’ with consensus. Examining the question of authority, Abduh denied the existence of a theocracy in Islam, and insisted that the authority of the hakim (governor), qadi (judge) or mufti, was civil. According to Abduh, ijtihad should be revived because “emerging priorities and problems, which are new to Islamic thought, need to be addressed.” Abduh supported parliamentary democracy and pluralism, refuting the claim that pluralism would undermine the unity of the umma. He noted that their objective is the same, and that what varies is only the method they pursue toward accomplishing them.

In 1867, Khairuddin al-Tunisi, leader of the nineteenth-century reform movement in Tunisia, crafted a general plan for political reform in the Arab world in a book entitled Aqwam al-Masalik fi Taqwim al-Mamalik (The Straight Path to Reformation of Governments). He called for an end to absolutist rule, which he blamed for the oppression of nations and the destruction of civilizations. He asked politicians and scholars to explore all possible means to improve the status of the community and develop its civility, and criticized the general Muslim public against shunning the experiences of other nations on the misconceived basis that all the writings, inventions, experiences, or attitudes of non-Muslims should simply be rejected.

In Tabai’ al-Istibdad (The Characteristics of Tyranny, 1902), al-Kawakibi addressed the issue of despotism and the relationship
between religion and politics, asserting that Islam is not responsible for any of the despotic governments that have emerged and reigned in its name. He attributed the success of Western nations in modern times to the adoption of logical and well-practiced rules. These rules are not harmed by what appears to be a division into parties and groups. This division, in al-Kawakibi’s assessment, concerns only the means of applying the rules and not the rules themselves.60

Gamal al-Din al-Afghani, who asserted religion as the foundation of civilization and materialism as the enemy of religion and human society, criticized those who believed in imitating the European model without modification and accused them of posing a threat to the sovereignty of the umma. In his analysis of the causes of decline in the Muslim world, he attributed this decline to the absence of adl (justice) and shura (counsel) and the government’s non-adherence to the constitution. He called the people to be allowed to assume their political and social role by participating in government through shura and elections. Al-Afghani noted that republican government was a “constricted” government, a government accountable to the public, and thus the antithesis of absolutism. Such a government would consult the governed, relieve them of the burdens laid upon them by despotic governments and lift them from the state of decay to the first level of perfection.61

Critics: Secularism cannot be a Solution to the Backwardness of Arab Societies

Most critics of secularism in the Arab region62 argued that secularism is not only justifiable in the West, but has had positive achievements. This is due to many reasons related to the nature of the Christianity and the role of churches in Medieval Europe. These reasons include: (a) Christianity already recognized the division of life into what belonged to God and what belonged to Caesar, (b) Christianity lacked a system for the legislation and regulation of mundane affairs, (c) Christianity had for many centuries been associated with despotic régimes and power abuses, and (d) Medieval Christianity entertained the existence of a special class of people,
the priests, who claimed to be God’s representatives on earth, interpreting what they claimed were God’s words and using their religious authority to deprive members of the community of their basic rights. Thus, critics of secularism asserted that in the West the religious establishment was one of the main obstacles to progress and development, and consequently to democracy.63

In contrast, Arab societies had completely different circumstances. These societies were Islamic in norms, laws, values and traditions until the beginning of the nineteenth century and specifically until just before Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798. Furthermore, although some Arab societies witnessed various kinds of despotic rule, Islam as a religion had nothing to do with these despotic rulers. Instead, critics of secularism in the Arab region argued that the violation of Islamic principles and rules is one of the main reasons for the decline of Arab societies. They noted that Islam has its own set of principles of governance that completely refutes all characteristics of authoritarianism and theocracy and includes virtually all characteristics of democratic régimes. Similar to liberal democracies, the model of rule in Islam is based on its own ideological framework, i.e., Islamic law or the shari’a. The shari’a poses the main principles to guide relationships between people and government, and leaves the matters of details to scholars to determine how to apply these principles with the purpose of meeting the increasing requirements of every time and age. In addition, principles of rule as well as al-Huqouq al-Shari’iya or Hoqouq An-Nas or El’ibad in Islam (human rights and liberties in the Western terms) which are all a part of Islamic faith and therefore not a matter of choice—provide authentic guarantees of righteous rule. The principles of rule in Islam include rule of law, the accountability or rulers, shura or mutual consultation, people’s freedom to regulate their behavior based on rational judgment mechanisms, ijtihad, and public participation in all aspects of human behaviors.64

The major difference, then, between the role of Islam in Islamic civilization, which has remained so for more than 1,000 years, and
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the role of the church in Medieval Europe is that whereas the Islamic experience reflected in justice, progress, equality, and respect for freedom of expression, human dignity and human rights, the experience of some religious leaders has been associated with what many people would describe as the “Dark Ages.” Thus, it has been possible and preferable to separate religion from the state and society in Europe, while in Arab societies; the separation has had many negative consequences.65

Only when the Western colonial powers came to the Arab region, inaugurated by the French campaign, did the Arab world witness gradual intellectual, social and political changes that imitated Western modes of thought and conduct, laws, codes and values. Western secularism was presented as a solution to the backwardness of Arab societies, which has originated in completely different circumstances.

Reactions of Reconciliatory Reformists to European Colonialism after the First World War: the Priority is for Defending Islam and Liberating Muslim Land

The focus of Arab reformists has changed in the aftermath of the First World War, following the demise of the Caliphate in 1924. The challenge was no longer despotic rulers, because Muslims lost their Caliphate—the symbol of unity that they had been trying to reform. Moreover, European countries, which provided inspiration for and were greatly accepted by Arabic reformists, had occupied much of the Arab world, dividing Arab land (which formerly constituted one great empire) among Europeans and imposing artificial borders. As such, Western colonialism was viewed as a severe threat to the Arab-Islamic identity, and, thus, it became a priority to liberate Muslim lands from colonialism.

Among the Arab reformists was Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865–1935), who argued that the reason for the backwardness of the umma is that the Muslims had lost the truth of their religion, and that despotic political rulers had encouraged this. True religion, Rida argued, involves the acceptance of tawhid (the creed of monotheism)
on the one hand, and acceptance of shura (consultation) on the other. Rida added that despotic rulers have tried to make Muslims forget the second by encouraging them to abandon the first. In his book, al-Khilafa (The Caliphate), Rida asserted that Islam comprised guidance, mercy and social civic policy, a term he used as a synonym for politics. In his view, Islam laid the foundations and rules of the social civic policy, and guaranteed the exertion of opinion and the pursuit of ijtihad in matters related to it. Such foundations and rules include principles like: authority belongs to the umma, decision making is through shura, the government is a form of a republic, the ruler should not be favored in a court of law over the layman (as he is only employed to implement the law and the wish of the people) and the purpose of this policy is to preserve religion and serve the interests of the public.

Like Afgani, Abduh and others, Hassan al-Banna (1904–1949), the founder of al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun in Egypt (the Muslim Brotherhood), argued that the final objective of its movement was to create an Islamic state of the Four Guided Caliphs. Al-Banna announced that the goals of the first and largest Islamic movement in modern times are to free the Islamic homeland from all foreign colonial powers, and to establish it as an Islamic state. The main goal of the Muslim brotherhood, as Richard H. Dekmejian argued, was to revive “the Islamic community without regard to sectarian or political divisions.” Al-Banna held European powers and corrupted rulers responsible for “dismembering the Islamic Empire and annihilating the Islamic state and erasing it from the list of powerful living states.” He believed that it is possible to select those aspects of Western civilization that are compatible with Islamic values and principles. In contrast with Abduh’s and al-Kawakibi’s ideas, al-Banna saw political parties as a threat to the unity of the umma. He also criticized those ulama who had withdrawn from the real world around them, and condemned any attempt to separate religion from society. Like most reformers from the early nineteenth century on, al-Banna regarded the Islamic model of state, created by the Prophet Muhammad in Medina as the ideal form of any reform plan. Al-Banna’s thoughts were Islamic to the core.
Reconciliatory Reformists in the Post-independence Period: 
the Arab Model of Secularism Overlooked the Equilibrium 
between State and Religion in the West

In the post-independence era of the Arab region, one party, 
military régime, or absolute monarchy replaced the colonial power 
in most Arab countries. The models of development of emerging 
Arab states were heavily influenced by Western secular paradigms. 
Saudi Arabia and Turkey reflected the two polar positions. While 
Saudi Arabia was established as a self-proclaimed “Islamic” state 
based upon the shari’ā (or to be specific on a particular interpretation 
of Islam: the Wahabbi one), in contrast, Mustafa Kamal Ataturk 
created a secular republic in Turkey, where the shari’ā, the Caliph, 
Islamic institutions and schools were replaced by legal systems 
inspired by Western secular codes, and European-inspired political 
and educational systems.72

Most Arab countries preferred a middle ground in nation building, 
borrowing heavily from the West and relying on Western-educated 
elites and foreign advisers. The separation of religion and state was 
not total. All Islamic institutions (mosques, religiously endowed 
properties or awqaf, religious courts etc.) have come under state 
control. Yet, Islam remains as a source for legitimating rulers’ 
policies and even their existence in some cases. That is to say, most 
rulers maintained a modest Islamic façade, including some reference 
to Islam in their constitutions such as that the ruler must be a 
Muslim or that the shari’ā is a source (or the source) of legislation, 
even when it is not.73

Most Arab countries accepted secularism without any 
consideration for their own historic and religious circumstances, or 
the historic conditions that led to the development of secularism in 
the West. That is, the Arab model of secularism overlooked the 
equilibrium, which exists in Western societies between the state and 
religion. The freedom of religious institutions to support a political 
party or a candidate, and the freedom to conduct its activities in 
society and to establish educational, social, and economic institutions 
were denied. This is because such freedoms would create an
opportunity for the ulama and other religious institutions to play a role in societies. Depending on this model of secularism, the ruling secular elites in the Arab countries have alienated themselves from society. And in search of a way out of this dilemma, they increased its subordination to foreign powers and intensified its despotic attitude toward society, thus alienating themselves even further.

Therefore, the newly independent states in the Arab regions did not emerge as a result of a domestic reconciliation, or resolution of internal conflicts, and did not represent the society. Some, as does Munir Shafiq, argue that these states have been isolated even from the elites who were trained in the missionary or secular Western schools and universities. Shafiq regards these states as “extensions of the colonial states and their institutions, including the army, the police, the intelligence services and legal system.” They were “imposed upon the society from outside,” he argues.

Furthermore, in the post-independence era, Islam came under a savage attack in the name of secularism, modernization and nationalism. The Muslim Brotherhood was hit hard under the post-independence régimes, especially in Egypt. Thus, the more recent challenge did not involve a struggle for independence and freedom, but rather a struggle to protect the Islamic umma against what was perceived as a destructive and offensive attack on Islam and the identity of Muslims, not only by colonial powers but also by post-independence régimes.

Scholars, like the Lebanese Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din and the Tunisian Rachid al-Ghannouchi, admitted that in the European context the doctrine of secularism certainly helped to reduce Christian fundamentalism and to nurture the values of civility and power-sharing. Yet they also asserted that the attempted secularization of Arab societies, in the twentieth century, has produced dictatorship, state-enforced religion, the violation of human and civil rights and the weakening of civil society. Al-Ghannouchi argued that the model of secularism that emerged specifically in Arab North African countries is one of its most radical forms, and it has created
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This is because, he added, that the secular elites of the North African Arab countries “are all graduates of the French school of thought which declared war against the church and had absolute confidence in reason, in the human being as the centre of the universe and in science as the ultimate solution to human problems.”

Al-Ghannouchi explained how the secularization process in the Arab region came into being, asserting that ruling elites have the responsibility of its negative impact. He said:

“[T]he modernity/modernisation package brought by the colonialists to the Arab region, and then adopted by the national governments that succeeded them, was carefully designed to impose foreign hegemony on Arab and Islamic societies, especially in the Maghreb, denying them the beneficial aspects of modernity that brought about political and economic successes in the West. Secular elites in these societies, who claim to be the missionaries of modernity, have inherited the role of the colonialists and have inherited their thoughts as well as their means and methods of dealing with the masses which they view as primitive and backward.”

It should be noted that since the early 1970s, some Islamic movements and activists have been mainly influenced by what can be seen as a rejectionist point of view. This trend can be traced to the views of the Pakistani scholar Sayyid Abul Ela al-Mawdudi (1903-1979), the Indian scholar Syed Abul Hassan Ali Nadwi (1913-1999) and the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). Qutb, in particular, rejected completely any compromise with democracy. He believed that democracy as a form of government was already bankrupt in the West, and thus should not be imported to the Islamic World. The torture and execution of top Islamic activists in Egypt in the fifties by Nasser’s régime was met with rejection of all but what was considered pure Islamic methods, and democracy was deemed alien and un-Islamic. By blaming Muslims for having separated religion from politics, Mawdudi called for full obedience to Islamic law. According to his views, politics is an integral and inseparable component of the Islamic faith, and establishing an Islamic state is the cure to all the problems faced by Muslims.
The Centrist School

Reconciliatory ideas are derived from what is known in the Arab region as *al-Wasatiya al-Islamiya* (or Islamic Centrism), which was presented by three prominent thinkers in Egypt, namely law professor Muhammad Salim al’Awa, ex-Judge and Islamic thinker Tariq al Bishry, and law professor and former Information Minister Ahmad Kamal Abu al Majd. Based on the centrist thought, many Islamic parties and groups in countries like Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco have proposed reform agendas that combine Islam and democracy. The aspired-for political régime would put into practice the Western mechanisms of democracy (such as the separation of the executive, judicial and legislative authorities, and the rotation of the authority through free, periodical elections), and preserve all principles, values and freedoms which were proclaimed by Islam, including cultural, economic, social and political freedoms.

The centrist school has influenced the political discourse of Islamic movements and groups in many Arab countries. For example, according to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the would-be *Al-Wasat* party in Egypt, Islam should be considered as a frame of reference and the main source of legislation (in the MB’s discourse) or as a “civilizational framework” of a civic state (in the *Al-Wasat* party’s discourse). The aspired-for state is civic, not religious, and would be governed by civilian politicians, not religious leaders. The MB reform plan, announced in March 2003, proposed a system that relies on Islamic law as the country’s ideological framework and the main source of legitimacy, as well as on the main democratic procedures applied in the West, including the separation of the executive, judicial and legislative powers and the rotation of power, through fair and free elections. The would-be *Al-Wasat* party also seeks to incorporate Islamists into Egypt’s political scene by espousing Islam as its civilizational framework with the procedures of liberal democracy applied in the West. The founders of this party stress that there is no conflict between the party’s civil platform and Islam, because of the distinction they made between Islam as a religion and Islam as a civilization, a distinction which was a notable element of Gamal al-Din al’Afghani’s thought.
Conclusion

Secularism is a “multi-faceted” process whereby the state and society on the one hand and religion on the other hand are separated from each other. It emerged in Europe because of a variety of events and developments such as religious abuse of power, the Enlightenment, the French and American revolutions and nationalism. Although, it has had positive achievements with regard to the relationship between religion and politics in the West, it cannot be a universal instrument, as any attempt to implement it in other societies depends on circumstances in those societies.

As shown in this paper, the main difference between the role of Islam in Islamic civilization, which has remained so for more than 1,000 years, and the role of the church in Europe, is that whereas the Islamic experience reflected in justice, progress, equality and respect for freedom of expression, human dignity and human rights, the experience of some religious leaders in Medieval Europe has been associated with what has been described as the “Dark Ages.” Thus, it has been possible and preferable to separate religion from the state and society in Europe, while in Arab societies the separation has had many negative outcomes. When the Western colonial powers came to the Arab region, Western secularism was presented as a solution to the backwardness of Arab societies, something which had originated in completely different circumstances. Thus, introducing secularism as a solution to the challenges faced by Arab societies has given rise to a problem of equivalence in exploring such challenges.

Today, broadly speaking, Arab societies are witnessing intellectual and political debates between three main trends, which without a doubt have influenced the ongoing reform process in Arab countries. The first trend, espoused mainly by leftists, Arab nationalists and incumbents, advocates the direct borrowing of the principles of secularism and nationalism. On the other end of the spectrum, the Islamic rejectionists, or extremists, seek to establish an “Islamic state” based on their understanding of the Islamic shari’a, which is
mainly based on a literal interpretation of the Qur’an and Sunna. Between these two opposite trends is a reconciliatory trend, which rejects both secular and fundamentalist points of view. They believe that the so-called “imported models” have not offered sound solutions to Arab societies over the past two centuries because Western models have been rooted in the historical and social experiences of Western societies, and because the actual experiences of different Arab societies have been distorted.

The advocates of the reconciliatory trend believe that Islam is in essence a moderate and liberal religion, and stress that principles of development or modernization should not be formed via the direct transplantation of preconceived approaches; instead, these principles should be reconsidered in terms of the particular religious, social, political, and economic conditions of Arab societies. They also argue that the only way to deal with the dilemma of secularism and Islam is to apply the principle of the ijtihad (religious interpretations that depend on rational judgments) and renovate the present systems by means of Islamic principles and the best aspects of other sociopolitical experiences. There is a reasonable agreement among Arab thinkers that the process of the application of Islamic principles to political and economic reconstruction is not a simple task and therefore requires creative efforts.

So far, Arab countries are still facing what the UN Arab Human Development reports regard as a “Democracy Deficit,” or “Freedom Deficit,” which characterizes almost all Arab countries. The 2002 UN Arab Human Development Report states that the region has three critical deficits (freedom, women’s empowerment, and knowledge).86 The 2003 report regards “the Freedom Deficit” and the absence of democracy as the basic factors behind the overall problem in the Arab region.87

NOTES

3. According to Robert Audi, the theory of separation of church and state has three basic principles: (1) the “libertarian” principle: the state must permit the practice of any religion, though within certain limits; (2) the “equalitarian” principle: the state may not give preference to one religion over another; and (3) the “neutrality” principle: the state should neither favor nor disfavor religion (or religions) as such. See Robert Audi, “The State, the Church, And the Citizen,” in Paul J. Weithman (ed.) *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997): 39.


6. Roger Scruton, 250.


10. *Ibid*.

11. See: Abdelwahab Elmessiri, Secularism, “Immanence,” 68/69, and Abdelwahab Elmessiri, ‘*Alamaniyah Ashamila wa ′Alamaniyah Aljuz’iyia*, 346/351, Vol. II. See also: Heba Raouf Ezzat, “Secularism, the State and the Social Bond: The Withering Away of the Family,” in Tamimi and Esposito, 125. In addition, Herbert Spencer argues, in *Data of Ethics*, “now that moral injunctions are losing the authority given by their supposed sacred origin, the secularisation of morals is becoming imperative.” T.S. Eliot, in *Choruses from ‘The Rock’*
(1934), argues that “it seems that something has happened that has never happened before: though we know not just when, or why, or how, or where. Men have left GOD not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never happened before.” Quoted in John Keane, “The Limits of Secularism,” in Azzam Tamimi and John L. Esposito, (ed.) Islam and Secularism in the Middle East, New York: New York University Press, 2000: 30.


14. However, throughout Western countries, the pattern of Church-state relationship varied from one country to another, and from one time to another, with each state considering its own circumstances and peculiarities. In Britain, for instance, the monarch is head of church as well as of state, while in the United States after the 1776 revolution, and in France after the 1789 revolution, there was no established religion. See: Munir Shafiq, “Secularism and the Arab-Muslim Condition,” in Tamimi and Esposito, 139.

15. Quoted in Keane, 31.

16. Ibid., 32.

17. Alfred Stepan, “Religion, Democracy, and the ‘Twin Tolerations’,,” Journal of Democracy, 11.4 (2000): 36. According to Stepan, religious institutions “should not have constitutionally privileged prerogatives that allow them to mandate public policy to democratically elected governments,” and individuals and religious communities “must have complete freedom to worship privately,” and “must be able to advance their values publicly in civil society and to sponsor organizations and movements in political society, as long as their actions do not impinge negatively on the liberties of other citizens or violate democracy and the law.” This argument implies that no group in civil society, including religious groups, can be prohibited from forming a political party. Stepan stressed that only courts can impose constraints on a political party if a party violates democratic principles. See: Ibid., 38:39.
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18. Only in the Bolshevik socialist régimes, secularism has attained a free hand and absolute command, and oppression and despotism prevailed.


25. Ibid.


32. Using the concept of civil religion, scholars understood why religion is not fully separated in the United States. In the United States, which was shaped by different religious and cultural groups, religious values and principles are manipulated in order to provide a unity among a set of different groups. Therefore, there are some slogans like: “In God We Trust.” For more details on civil religion in the U. S., see: Kenneth D. Wald, *Religion and Politics in the United States*, 4th ed. (Lanham and Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC., 2003), 55-65, and for more details on civil society in Israel see: Abdel Fattah Mady, *Al-Din wa Al-Siyasa fee Israel: Dirasa fee Al-Ahzab wa Al-Jama’at Al-Diniya fee Israel wa Dorha fee Al-Hayat As-Siyasiya* (Religion and Politics in Israel: A Study in Religious Parties and Movements in Israel and their Roles in Political Life), Cairo: Madbouli library, 1999, 291-300.

33. Shafiq, 145.

34. See: Robert Wuthnow, ed. *Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion*, 2 Vols, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1998, 733-735. According to *Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion*, some political Christian societies attempted to create political régimes on the notion that kings rule by divine right, where the interpreters—who explain what these events mean—are the rulers. Among these societies were the Papal States under various popes, Geneva under John Calvin’s control in the sixteenth century, and the New England colonies under the Puritans in the seventeenth century. In the contemporary world, only the Vatican might be considered a Christian theocracy.

35. Shafiq, 145.

36. This sort of settlement did not remain stable, as there were periods of conflict between the two sides, rulers and scholars. The most notable example was the case of Al-‘Izz ibn Abdel Salam in Egypt. Other examples of uprisings led by ulama during the last 200 years include Muhammad ibn Abdel Wahab, Abdel Qadir al Jaza’iri, Omar al Mukhtar, and Al--Azhar uprisings. See: Ibid., 147.

38. Shafiq, 148.

39. Secularism, in Arabic ‘ilmaniya (from ‘ilm – science) or ‘alamaniya (from ‘alam – world). The more accurate word may be the word dunyawiya, meaning that which is worldly, mundane or temporal. Nevertheless, the meaning of ‘ilmaniya or ‘alamaniya, in the Arabic, has varied meanings and connotations. In his four-volume encyclopedia on secularism, Abdelwahab Elmessiri lists eighteen different definitions of “secularism” collected from modern Arabic literature. See: Abdelwahhab Elmessiri, *Alamaniyah Ashamela wa Alamaniyah Aljuzeyia*, Vol. I, 53–99 & 219–222.


41. Tamimi, 22.

42. Ibid.

43. Hourani, 253.

44. Tamimi, 23.

45. Hourani, 253–256.

46. Quoted in Tamimi, 24.

47. Hourani, 238


51. Tamimi, 25.

52. The term “‘umma” in Islam is different from the term “nation” in liberal tradition. According to Islam, the basic element of umma is religious, i.e., being a Muslim is a qualified condition to be a part of Islamic umma regardless of racial, lingual, social, and cultural differences, as well as regardless of political borders.

54. Rifāʿa al-Tahtawi is a graduate of Al-Azhar, the Islamic university in Cairo. He was appointed imam (leader of prayers and adviser on religious matters) to the Egyptian regiment that was dispatched by Muhammad Ali to France. He acquired the French language and read books on ancient history, Greek philosophy and mythology, geography, arithmetic and logic, and, most importantly, the French thought of the eighteenth century—Voltaire and Rousseau’s works.

55. Quoted in Tamimi, 18.

56. See: Hourani, 70.

57. Quoted in Tamimi, 21-22.

58. Tamimi, 22.

59. Hourani, 84-87.

60. Al-Kawakibi wrote another important book, Umm Al-Qura. He constructed a series of fictional dialogues between thinkers from prominent towns in the Muslim world. He imagined that all these figures were summoned to a conference organized in Mecca (known as Umm al-Qura) during the hajj (pilgrimage) season to discuss the causes of the Muslim umma’s decline. The conferees agree that progress is linked to accountability while regress is linked to despotism. See: Hourani, 271-273.


62. Among those who criticize secularism in the Arab region are Yufus al-Qaradawi, Fahmy Huwaidi, Rachid al-Ghannouchi, Hassan at-Turabi, Azam Tamimi, Salim al-Awa and others.

63. Tamimi, 16.

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65. Shafiq, 145.
66. Hourani, 228.
68. Dekmejian, 75.
69. Tamimi, 25.

70. In fact, al-Banna’s movement had apparatuses covering almost all aspects of social life. Further, the al-Banna’s followers had engaged in a variety of political activity, lobbying, demonstrations, and electoral politics in Egypt. For more details on the Muslim Brotherhood’s struggle against the palace and the British, see: Dekmejian, 76:78.

71. For more details on al-Banna’s thoughts, see: Five Tracts of Hasan al-Banna(1906-1949): A Selection from the Majmu’at Rasail al-Imam al-Shahid Hasan Al-Banna, Translated from the Arabic and annotated by Charles Wendell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), and Hourani, 360.

72. Only Islamic family law (marriage, divorce, and inheritance) remained in force in most Muslim societies. In fact, family law was regarded as too sacrosanct to be replaced or reformed. See: John L. Esposito, “Islam and Secularism in the Twenty-First,” 2:3.

73. Ibid.
74. Shafiq, 148. For more details on Secularism’s impacts particularly in North African Arab countries, see: al-Ghannouchi’s assessment in the following pages.

75. Shafiq, 148.
76. Ibid.
77. John Keane, 36.
Ibid., 99; The leading Turkish Islamist intellectual Ali Bulac said, “secularism is Satan imitating God.” Quoted in John Keane, 36. While another scholar, John Keane, noticed, “secularity has won a reputation for humiliating Muslims; humiliating them through the exercise of Western double standards in Kuwait, Algeria and Palestine, through the corrupt despotism of comprador governments, and through the permanent threat of being crushed by the economic, technological, political, cultural and military might of the American-led West.”


82. Among other reconciliatory, centrist thinkers are Sa‘id Hawwa, Malik Bennabi, Rachid al-Ghannouchi, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Ziauddin Sardar, Hassan at-Turabi, Khurshid Ahmad, Fathi Osman, Abdelkarim Sorouch, Ali Bulac and Salim al-Awa.


84. Abul Ela Madi, interview by author, Cairo, August 9, 2004.

