

The Construction and Deconstruction of Secularism as an Ideology in Contemporary Muslim Thought

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This article starts with a sketch of the encounters and experiences of modern secularism in four areas of the Islamic world (Turkey, Arab world, South Asia and Southeast Asia); these point to the diverse conditions and constructions that have become central issues of regional and trans-regional discourse: laïzism through reform, nationalism through decolonization, Islamic nationalism through state formation, and tolerance through traditional multi-ethnic environments. In analysing the basic writings of five exemplary modern Muslim thinkers, it is shown that modern Islamic thought, tied to the idea of mutual exclusive ideological constructions of secularism and Islamism, remains ambiguous while at the same time facing the factual unfolding of secularism in Muslim countries: the works of Mawdudi contain absolute denial of secularism; al-Qaradawi argues for the strict opposition and separation of the secular and the religious; al-Attas denies that Western processes of religious secularization are applicable to the development of Islam. On the other hand, Iqbal and Rahman, although maintaining a clear distinction between the secular and the religious, point to coinciding dimensions of religious and secular dimensions in modern political and social life. The reflection of the secular and the religious is highly shaped by historical and political influences as well as by ideologization, thus creating obstacles for fruitful conceptual reconstructions of the given dimensions of the coincidence of both — Islam and the secular conditions of modern society.

The term “secularism”, in its semantic journey, has grown in association with ideas of modernity, humanism, rationalism and democracy. It has acquired diverse meanings in this process. It is significant that the trajectory of this semantic journey differs from country to country and culture to culture. Lately, in its close relationship with the idea of democracy and politics, it has been frequently constructed and deconstructed as an ideology. In this paper, I would like to argue that the idea of secularism in Muslim countries has a different trajectory than it has in Europe and that due to different political experiences, secularism has been perceived essentially as a politico-religious ideology. I have selected five Muslim thinkers: Yusuf al-Qaradawi (Arab world), Naquib al-Attas (Southeast Asia) and Iqbal, Mawdudi, and Fazlur Rahman (South Asia). They reflect different experiences of secularism and, therefore, construct and deconstruct secularism accordingly. The selection is not based on their representation of

the area or of the trend of thought, but for the purpose of explaining the diversity in their perceptions of secularism.

Different Experiences of Secularism

It is not possible to review the history of secularism in the Muslim world in the short space of this paper, and that is not also the objective here. My purpose is to underscore that the historical experiences in the Muslim world differed from those of Europe and within the Muslim world in the last two centuries. It is, therefore, difficult to argue that modernity, secularism or democracy were inevitable in the same manner or form in the Muslim world as they were in Europe. It is imperative to understand this difference in experience to appreciate the diversity of responses in the Muslim world. To simplify the history of encounters and experiences of secularism, I have divided the Muslim world into four areas: Turkey, Arab world, South Asia and Southeast Asia. Generally, secularism came to the Muslim world along with modernization, the latter usually perceived as Westernization. It was also an encounter with the West as a colonial power, which was regarded in the Muslim world as a continuation of Christian crusades against Islam. Muslim thinkers found it very difficult to understand new ideas like secularism in isolation from Christian (Western colonial) supremacy.

In Ottoman Turkey, modernization began with Nizam (order) and reforms in the political and social order. It was at the same time a period of armed clashes with Europe, in which Ottomans continuously lost to the European powers. Modernization quite naturally came to mean Westernization under Ataturk. The abolition of caliphate, and the adoption of Latin script, European dress, European laws and reforms in the religious institutions were promoted as secular reforms. Here, the term used for secularism was laicism, thus suggesting that the authority has shifted to the common man. Muslims in other parts of the world reacted very strongly to these reforms; they probably could not fully realize the pressing need that Ataturk and his colleagues felt for such reforms. Opposition to secularism in Turkey was weak and became weaker with the growing demand to become a part of the European Union.

In the Arab world, Arab nationalism emerged as a revolt to the Ottoman caliphate, which was seen as a symbol of religious authority. Arab nationalists, both Christians and Muslims, called for secularism to get rid of Ottoman hegemony. A few Islamic movements were opposed to this type of nationalism but they were politically quite weak. Although the Arab world was divided into different nation-states, pan-Arabism continued to have a political and cultural appeal. This appeal was stronger than pan-Islamism, which at that time meant a revival of the Ottoman caliphate.

A real setback to secularism in the Arab world came with the Six Day War in 1967 and the Gulf War in 1990s (Tibi, 1998). The pan-Islamist movements re-emerged with greater strength in this period. These movements deconstructed secularism especially from this new perspective.

In South Asia, the Muslim minority ruled over a non-Muslim majority for a long time, and British colonial rule brought an end to this rule. While Hindus and others welcomed the British, even their reactions to modernization were mixed. Gradually, as the struggle for freedom against British colonialism progressed, separation between religion and politics gained new meanings. The traditional Muslim religious groups had always believed in a separation between religion and politics — an ideal religious scholar was not supposed to frequent royal courts. The freedom movement could be popularized among the masses only with an appeal to religious identities against the colonial rulers. Hence, both Hindu and Muslim political movements used religious terms in their political language and both invited their religious representatives to join in politics. An important aspect of this development was that a unity of religion and politics also meant Hindu-Muslim unity. The most interesting example was the Khilafat movement in 1924 and 1925. This movement appeared among Muslims as a protest against Ataturk's abolition of the caliphate in Turkey. Muslims in India believed that the abolition of caliphate was a Western (British) plot to weaken Islam and Muslims. The movement called for the restoration of the Ottoman caliphate and the cancellation of secularist reforms in Turkey. The Hindu and other political parties also joined the Muslims in this movement. The Khilafat movement, however, ended with a firm divide between Hindus and Muslims. It was probably during the Khilafat movement that secularism came to be defined in Muslim thought as an anti-religious, anti-Islam, and Western concept. The term "secularism" was not popular but came to be synonymous with nationalism. The nationalists in India called movements in favour of purely religious identity "communal". As religion continued to be important even for the nationalists Hindus, secularism did not mean a complete negation of religion but rather, the placement of religion in a respectful position. The Indian National Congress stood for Hindu-Muslim unity and joint nationalism, and found secularism favourable for secularism, while the Muslims found it advantageous for their political goals. They called it nationalism rather than Ulama, which formed a prominent group in the Congress and preferred to be called nationalist Ulama, not secularists.

The Muslim League, founded in 1916, shared similar political objectives to the Congress, but gradually moved from Hindu-Muslim unity to a separation between Hindus and Muslims as two nations in India. Muslim nationalism was initially a debatable term because in its technical sense, nationalism implied secularism. The Pakistan movement demanded a separate

homeland for Muslims in India and pleaded for Muslim nationalism. Muslims in India were divided in terms of language and ethnicity. It was Islam that united them with one another. Hence, the term “Muslim nationalism” made sense, particularly in Pakistan, which was geographically divided into east and west wings. Interestingly, in Pakistan, the term “nationality” (*qawmiyyat*) was used for different language-based communities that demanded autonomy. This term increasingly gained a sense of secularism when contrasted with Muslim nationalism in Pakistan. Secularism also became pronounced between left and right political thought during the Cold War period.

The political parties in Pakistan were gradually divided between religious and secularist when Jama’at Islami, a political party founded in 1941, called for an Islamic state and Islamic revolution in Pakistan. Several other religious political parties, which termed those who were opposed to the Islamization of Pakistan secularists, supported the Jama’at. The two sides openly debated whether Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Iqbal envisioned Pakistan as an Islamic or a secular state. This debate was reflected in the different constitutions of Pakistan. The 1956 and 1973 constitutions declared it an Islamic republic while the 1962 version deleted the word “Islamic”.

The independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 came as a great setback to the idea of a two-nation theory and Muslim nationalism. The debate between the Islamists and secularists became more vigorous. Islamists who were opposed to communism and socialism and equated these with secularism began to deconstruct secularism as a political ideology. This strategy gained favour with world powers that were opposed to communism. Consequently, secularism again posed as a negation of religion and Islam in Pakistan. The impact of the Gulf War in the 1990s and the US occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq gave Islamists an opportunity to successfully replace communism with secularism as the greatest enemy of Islam.

In Southeast Asia, Muslims had both majority and minority positions in different countries in the region, yet over the years, the political economy had necessitated the environment of religious tolerance. It was a type of secularism that differed from that of other Muslim countries. There arose Islamist movements that called for Islamic states in the region, but these could not gain political popularity because religious identity often did not differ much from ethnic identity. Still, the Islamist movements have been involved in the deconstruction of secularism. It is significant that this deconstruction differs from those in other Muslim countries in its focus; it is spiritual and cultural rather than political. In general, as I will argue later, although Muslim countries had different experiences, the Turkish experience became a point of reference throughout the Muslim world.

Interpretations of the Experience

I have given a rough overview of the four regions in the Muslim world, explaining how their political experiences differed and how these differences impacted their perceptions of secularism. To sum up, one may say that these experiences differed in at least three perspectives: political, cultural and theological. From the political perspective, secularism came to be defined with reference to power relations between the majority and the minority. When the minorities feel threatened, they protect their religious identity in political terms. Political secularism, thus, does not necessarily negate religion, rather it stresses on religious freedom as a basic right. From the cultural perspective, secularism is perceived as diversity and pluralism. Islamists oppose this aspect of secularism as well. For them, Islamization also means cultural unification and centralization. From the theological perspective, the Islamist position on secularism is very clear. Secularism means a godless polity and society. Other political groups also support this definition. The Islamists popularized this theological meaning of secularism among the Muslim masses in order to gain popular support against their political rivals. The fact that this experience was perceived and interpreted in these three perspectives of politics, culture and theology reflects the new power relations in the modern period. These interpretations are requisites of modern political thought that give birth to the need for ideology. Since ideology is an important theme of the paper, let me first explain the term.

Ideology

The term “ideology” has undergone a great deal of semantic change in the last half of the century. Originally, it meant particular ideas and ideals or certain specific philosophies. Later, when it came to be associated with political systems, especially with the communist regime, the term was debated among social scientists. In 1965, social scientists described ideology as a cluster of beliefs, ideals and concepts that has become deeply ingrained in the social consciousness of people over time (Mujahid, 2001:1, citing Gould, 1965). In the communist bloc, the term was used for a scientific worldview but in the non-Communist world, the term had negative connotations of bias, oversimplification, and emotive language. Edward Shils in 1955 and Daniel Bell in 1960 both wrote about the end of ideology. The term came to be downgraded as non-scientific, especially since the demise of the Soviet Union (Mujahid, 2001:17).

Social scientists decried ideology as thoroughly evaluative; it was dualistic, alienative, doctrinaire, totalistic and futuristic (Geertz, 1996:2). Criticism of ideology very strongly reflected an anti-Communist stance. Geertz observes that there were two main approaches to the social determinants of ideology:

the interest theory and the strain theory, and he says that they are not necessarily contradictory. In the first, ideology is a mask and a weapon, and in the second, it is a symptom and a remedy. Geertz disagrees with the interest theory, which defines social action as an unending struggle for power, and society as a battlefield for a clash of interests (Geertz, 1996:4). Geertz also disagrees with those who contrast ideology with science and describe ideology as unscientific.

Explaining ideology as a cultural system, Geertz argues that ideology is not less scientific as the sciences are not less ideological. “Where science is the diagnostic, the critical, dimension of the culture, ideology is the justificatory, the apologetic one. . . . But though science and ideology are different enterprises, they are not unrelated ones” (Geertz, 1996:15).

It is significant to note that although the experience of the Muslim world differed from that of Europe, the term “ideology” has been used in a more positive sense than “secularism”. Interestingly, Islamist literature did not take notice of the academic criticism of the term “ideology” and continues to present Islam and refute secularism as ideologies, although it is no longer associated with the sense of being scientific as it was in Marxist thought.

I will illustrate this deconstruction and construction of secularism by analysing the writings of the following Muslim thinkers: Sayyid Abu'l A'la Mawdudi, Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Sayyid Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Muhammad Iqbal and Fazlur Rahman. The first three authors are well-known for their deconstruction of secularism in the Muslim world. Their works on this subject have gone into several editions and have been translated into other languages. Writers on secularism often do not take a positive view of Islamic tradition but I found Muhammad Iqbal and Fazlur Rahman supporting secularism from an Islamic perspective.

Deconstruction of Secularism

The Latin word *saeculum*, which is the root of “secularism”, means “age” in a temporal sense. In common usage, it referred to worldly matters. “Laicism” has its roots in the French *laïcité*, which means lay people, not clergy. Thus, the term in English and French signifies its two components in a contrastive manner: this world, not the hereafter; and layperson, not the clergy. The definition of secularism or secularization emerged from the European historical experience, it meant a gradual separation of almost all aspects of life and thought from religious associations and ecclesiastical direction (Smith, 1995:20). It developed in England in the sixteenth century with the transfer of political power from the religious arena to the state, and of legal cases from religious to secular courts. As Smith explains, “secularization did not mean a necessary erosion of religious belief . . .

Religious belief and practice, as faith, intensified rather than declined during the secularization of the state and later following the French and Industrial Revolution, that of society” (Smith, 1995:20).

The secularization process in the Western world was gradual and varied. In the European colonial regimes, native religions and belief systems were regarded as hindrances to modernity and development; hence, modernization came to mean the displacement of religion. Modernization and secularization became synonymous as far as “native” religions were concerned. In the USA, religion co-existed with industrial and secular society. In some parts of Europe, it vigorously replaced religion in public spheres. In the Communist world, secularism meant scientific materialism together with a complete negation of religious beliefs.

In passing through these different experiences, secularism has come to be associated with power politics and has been transformed almost into an ideology. It was particularly pushed into this situation by at least three developments. One was the Marxist presentation of communism as an ideology. The term “ideology” was developed in the Marxist tradition to talk about cultures and how they are structured so as to enable the groups holding power to have maximum control with the minimum of conflict. Ideology legitimizes the current order through values, worldviews and symbol systems. According to Marx, ideology naturalizes, historicizes and eternalizes the political structure and power (Lye, 1997). Secularism, as a part of this ideology, presented itself as a replacement to religion. The areas of communist influence that bordered the Muslim world focused especially on secularism as an antithesis of Islam. A number of Muslim apologetic writings in this period presented Islam as an ideology that accepted ideology as a substitute for religion.

Second, Muslim movements for independence and political autonomy found the term ideology more suitable for a political reconstruction of Islam. The Islamists developed Islamic ideology as a justificatory theory for the foundation of an Islamic state. They identified secularism as a real threat to the Islamic ideology. It seems that they equated ideology with the concept of religion to argue that secularism is another religion and, thus, a threat to Islam.

Third, after the demise of Communism, policy makers in the West stressed secularism as the most essential ingredient of modernity and democracy in Muslim countries. Secularism in this new interpretation is pointedly opposed to religion, religious values and religious identities. Secularism is thus evolving as a liberal ideology that is crucial in defining the future relations between the West and the Muslim world. It is this rise of secularism as an ideology that vindicates the Islamists’ stance of treating secularism as an ideology, and as a threat to the future of Islam.

Mawdudi (1903–1979)

Sayyid Abu'l A'la Mawdudi began his career as a journalist in the local press in South India, from where he moved to the *Al-Jam'iyyat* in Delhi; this was a very influential newspaper of an organization of the Ulama, *Jam'iyyat ul Ulama-i Hind*, which supported the Indian National Congress. Mawdudi founded his own monthly journal, *Tarjumanul Qur'an*, in 1932. Through his continuous criticism of the West and contemporary political Muslim thought, he was able to expound an Islamic political theory that differed from the composite nationalism of the *Jam'iyyatul Ulama-i Hind* and the Muslim nationalism of the Muslim League, which was supported by Muhammad Iqbal. Mawdudi was opposed to the idea of nationalism and nation-states because they divide the Muslim Ummah, instead, he called for an Islamic state based on Islamic ideology. This ideology expounded the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, which was contrary to the idea of the sovereignty of the people. The Islamic state must be in accordance with the divine order revealed as *Shari'ah*. Mawdudi was scathingly critical of the idea of Pakistan. In 1941, he founded *Jama'at Islami*, a religious political party that called for the establishment of an Islamic state. In Pakistan, he and his followers campaigned for an Islamic constitution and a complete Islamization of economic, social, educational, political and legal systems in the country. He wrote extensively, expounding his ideas on how to bring about an Islamic revolution. Among his several works, "Islamic Law and Constitution" — composed from his various lectures on the subject — had a great impact on political and legal thought in Pakistan. His party never fared well in elections but his influence on Pakistani politics was considerable.

Mawdudi also gained international fame when his works were translated into Arab, and his influence spread to Egypt and other parts of the Arab world. He was the founding member of the World Muslim League, while his influence on Sayyid Qutb has been noticed by a number of scholars (Shepard, 2003). Mawdudi expounded his political theory of Islam in 1939, and it remained a foundational treatise on his political thought. The following is a brief analysis of a revised version of this treatise (Mawdudi, 1964).

Mawdudi defined Islam as "a systematic order (Nizam), founded on solid principles". The basic principle of Islamic ideology was the sovereignty of God, which meant that the authority of legislation does not belong to humans, who cannot amend it. It is from this perspective that he defines secularism as *la diniyyat* (absence of religion). He supports democracy but subjects it to divine rule. According to him, an "Islamic State is not *La dini jamhuriyyat* (secular democracy); sovereignty does not belong to the people". He coined the term "theo-democracy" (*Ilahi Jamhuri hukumat*) for the type of democracy in an Islamic state. He was extremely critical of the

Western idea of democracy, which to him was not really democracy. In elections, which are the hallmark of a democratic system, a special group of people is elected because this group is able to influence people by its wealth and propaganda. This group in power makes laws for its own personal and class interests. In Islam, people are not absolutely free to make their own laws. There are divine limits (*Hudud Allah*) on freedom. Islamic ideology regulates economy through the principles of private property and divine laws about *Zakat*, *riba*, and lottery. It governs family life with laws of *Hijab* (veil and social separation between men and women); male supervision; rights and duties according to social status; and laws about marriage, divorce, and a qualified permission of polygamy. It also controls civil life through laws for crime and punishment. As these laws are given as divine revelations, there is no place for secularism or secular laws. In Mawdudi's thought, Islam is presented as a comprehensive, total and immutable ideology. It has no space for change or reform as initiated by the state. Consequently, secularism, because it calls for some basic changes in this ideology, poses itself as a counter ideology, which is why secularism and Islam stand opposed to each other; Islam is *din* and secularism is *la din* (no religion).

Dr. Ahmad Shafaat supports Mawlana Mawdudi, adding that "secularism is an ideology which denies that there is a God, prophethood and revelation or declares that the role of these is limited to the personal or inner life of man . . . this ideology conflicts with the very mind and heart of Islam". He defines secularism as *Nifaq* (hypocrisy) and *Kufr* (disbelief) — both negations of Islam (Shafaat, 1985).

Qaradawi (1926–)

Qatar-based Shaikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi is considered one of the leaders among contemporary Islamic scholars. Born in Egypt in 1926, he studied at Al-Azhar and obtained his Ph.D. in 1973. He has worked as a teacher and writer in Egypt, and was also a popular *Khatib* who delivered sermons before the Friday congregational prayers. Presently, he is the dean of the College of Shariah and Islamic Studies and the director of the Center for Sunnah and Sirah Studies at the University of Qatar. The author of numerous books, he is known for his writings and *fatawa* on vital contemporary issues. He is a member of many Islamic academic societies and associations.

Qaradawi has written about secularism extensively. Here, I refer to one of his works, in which he focuses on the subject. Since 1925, when Ali Abd al-Raziq submitted his doctoral thesis at al-Azhar arguing that Islam as a religion does not necessitate a state and politics, his thesis has been debated continuously in Egypt. In 1986, again when Fuad Zakariyya wrote favourably about Ali Abd al-Raziq, Qaradawi felt obliged to clarify the point. This debate was later published in Arabic with the title "Islam

and Secularism” and was translated into Urdu as well. The following is a brief analysis of Qaradawi’s views as published in a revised Urdu version of this book (Qaradawi, 1997).

Qaradawi defines Secularism as *la dini* (irreligious or not religious) and *dunyawi* (this worldly), with the same terms that Mawdudi used (Qaradawi, 1997:49). He clarifies that “The division between *dini* (religious) and *ghayr dini* (non-religious) is un-Islamic, rather Western in origin”. It is significant that he uses the terms *la dini* and *ghayr dini*, “not-religious” and “non-religious” respectively, in the same meaning. For Qaradawi, “Secularism is antithetical to Islam. It has never succeeded in Muslim societies”.

Mawlana Mawdudi defined secularism as *Ilhad* (atheism) but Qaradawi disagrees with this description in some of his writings. He explains that “Ilhad means denying the existence of God . . . but as far as secularism is concerned it is not necessary to deny God. The secularists in the West did not deny God. They only denied church’s right to interfere in matters of science and in daily life. Their objective was only this: religion which existed in the form of church and clergy must not be allowed to interfere in government, politics, economics, education, culture and social aspects of life” (Qaradawi, 1997:76). He does not, however, endorse the idea of separation between religious and worldly affairs: “Islam is different; it cannot accept this division”. Since secularism calls for this separation, it leads to *Kufr*. A secularist, according to Qaradawi, must be punished for apostasy. Thus, although it is not atheism for Qaradawi, secularism is like a religion opposed to Islam. Opting for secularism is similar to abandoning Islam and converting to another religion.

Elsewhere, Qaradawi explains that Christianity and Islam differ in their attitudes to secularism. “Secularism can be accepted in a Christian Society, but it can never enjoy a general acceptance in an Islamic Society”. He argues that there is no concept of Shari’a in Christianity as the Church can accept the authority of the state in certain matters. Similarly, secularism is also compatible with the Western concept of a God who accepts limits on his authority. Islam, on the other hand is a comprehensive system of laws that govern every sphere of life. This line of argument allows Qaradawi to define secularism as anti-religion and even as the atheism that he had earlier denied. He clarifies that acceptance of secularism means an abandonment of Shari’a, and a denial of divine guidance, which means a denial of God. A call for secularism among Muslims is akin to atheism and a rejection of Islam; it is downright apostasy (Qaradawi, <http://www.islaam.com/Article.asp?id=117>).

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1931–)

Syed Naquib Al-Attas was born in 1931 in Bogor, Java into a family of scholars. His formal primary education began in Johor, Malaysia but dur-

ing the Japanese occupation of Malaysia, he went to study Arabic in Java at Madrasah Al-‘Urwatu’l-wuthqa. After the Second World War II he returned to Johor to complete his secondary education. He studied Malay literature, history, religion, and the Western classics in English. After secondary school in 1951, he joined the Malay Regiment and was selected to study at Eton Hall, Chester, Wales and later, at the Royal Military Academy in Sand Hurst, England (1952:55).

Al-Attas traveled widely, and his journey to Spain and North Africa had a profound influence on him. Al-Attas served in the Royal Malay Regiment while pursuing his studies at the University of Malaya in Singapore from 1957 to 1959. He studied at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University in Montreal (1959–1962) and received an M.A. degree in Islamic philosophy with his thesis, “Raniri and the Wujudiyah of 17th Century Aceh”. He went to the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, where he wrote his doctoral thesis (1962) on the mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri.

In 1965, Dr. al-Attas returned to Malaysia and taught at University of Malay, Kuala Lumpur and National University of Malaysia. He also founded and directed the Institute of Malay Language, Literature, and Culture (IBKKM) at the National University of Malaysia in 1973. In 1987, al-Attas established in Kuala Lumpur the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) and served as its founder and director. This institution strives to bring an integrated Islamization into the consciousness of its students and faculty. This institute, now one of the faculties of the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur, is headed by Professor Hashim Kamali.

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas’s philosophy and methodology of education aim at an Islamization of the mind, body and soul. He has written on various aspects of Islamic thought and civilization, particularly on Sufism, cosmology, metaphysics, philosophy, and Malay language and literature. His work on secularism, originally published in 1978, has been quite popular among university students because its analytical framework is largely of Western philosophy. The following is a brief overview of the latest edition that is available to us (Attas, 1993).

Attas’s Deconstruction of Secularism

Al-Attas argues that “The term ‘secular’ has dual connotation: time and location; now and this world. The concept secular refers to the condition of the world existing at a particular time or period or age” (Attas, 1993:16). Secularization, according to Attas, is Man’s deliverance first from religion and then from metaphysical control over reason and language. Like Qaradawi, Attas maintains that while secularism is possible to conceive in Christianity, it is not the same in Islam. He argues that “secularization has its roots

not in Biblical faith, but in the interpretation of Biblical faith by Western man". In Islam, it is not possible to even think of secularism. The nearest equivalent to the concept of secularism is connoted by the Qur'anic concept *al-hayat al-dunya*, which is frequently downgraded in Islamic teachings.

Worldly life in Islam is governed by divine laws, and the legitimacy of any social or political organization depends on obedience to these laws. "Thus every Muslim individually and collectively as society and nation and as a community (*Ummah*) all deny to anyone, to any government and state, sacred legitimacy unless the person or the government or state conforms with the practice of the Holy Prophet and follows the injunctions of the sacred law revealed by God". Secularism as an ideology and secularization as a process both deny this basis of legitimacy.

In defining secularization, Attas stresses that even though Islam and secularism may share the same ideological elements, their perspectives differ in the actualization of their ideologies. Thus, secularization is distinguished from secularism. He elaborates that "the integral components in the dimensions of secularization — that is the disenchantment of nature, the desacralization of politics and the deconsecrating of values — when seen in their proper perspectives, indeed become part of the integral components in the dimension of Islam, for they reflect one of the fundamental elements in the Islamic vision of reality and existence, and characterize Islam in true and real manifestation in history bringing about the effect that revolutionize the world-view of man". "Islam de-secularizes politics, but not to the extent they mean, for Islam itself is based on Divine authority and on the sacred authority of the Prophet".

Attas distinguishes between secularization and secularism. Secularization implies a continuing, open-ended process in which values and worldviews are continually revised in accordance with "evolutionary" changes in history. Secularism, like religion, projects a closed worldview and an absolute set of values in line with an ultimate historical purpose that has a final significance for men. Secularism, according to them, denotes an ideology. Attas thus finds secularism and secularization both totally opposed to Islam. He maintains: "Not only is secularization as a whole the expression of an utterly un-Islamic Worldview, it is also set against Islam and Islam totally rejects the explicit and implicit manifestation and ultimate significance of secularization, and the Muslim must therefore vigorously repulse it wherever it is found among them and in their minds, for it is a deadly poison to true faith (*Iman*)" (*ibid.*).

Al-Attas compares secularism to religion as two mutually exclusive ideologies, but he explains that Islam and Christianity, and Islamic and European thought are not comparable in their theological and thought categories. He maintains that modern science sees things as mere things, and that it has reduced the study of the phenomenal world to an end in itself. Certainly,

this has brought material benefits; however, it is accompanied by an uncontrollable and insatiable propensity to destroy nature itself. To study and use nature without a higher spiritual end has brought mankind to the state of thinking that men are gods or God's co-partners. "Devoid of real purpose, the pursuit of knowledge becomes a deviation from the truth, which necessarily puts into question the validity of such knowledge" (ibid.).

Al-Attas views Western civilization as constantly changing and "becoming" without ever achieving "being". He analyses that many institutions and nations are influenced by this spirit of the West and continually revise and change their basic developmental goals and educational objectives to follow Western trends. He points to Islamic metaphysics, which shows that reality is composed of both permanence and change — the underlying permanent aspects of the external world are perpetually undergoing change.

According to al-Attas, Islam is also not comparable with Christianity to conclude that Islam would undergo similar experiences. He explains that "Islam is not similar to Christianity in this respect that secularization, in the way in which it is also happening in the Muslim world, has not and will not necessarily affect our beliefs in the same way it does the beliefs of the Western man".

Construction of Secularism

As is evident from Attas and Qaradawi, there have been elements in Muslim thinking that have supported the idea of secularism. For instance, the separation between *Din* and *Dunya* was quite prominent in Islamic tradition. It was particularly pronounced in Sufi thought, which stressed the significance of the hereafter and spirituality against worldliness. Modernist Muslims and the Islamists opposed Sufism for almost similar reasons — both refuted the emphasis on other-worldliness. Islamists rejected the ascetic views of the Sufis and refuted separation between this world and the hereafter because it supported separation between religion and politics. This emphatic refutation, nevertheless, suggests the prevalence of this distinction between the religious and the worldly in common Muslim thinking.

This distinction is also noticeable in Islamic scholarly tradition in the debates about the definitions of *Bid'a* and *Shari'a*, for instance, and in the distinctions between *'Ibadat* (purely religious acts signifying close relations between God and humans) and *Mu'amalat* (signifying worldly transaction between humans), for example. *Bid'a* or innovation refers to additions or new things in Islam that are condemned as deviations from the true path; however, not every innovation is rejected. The majority of the jurists insists that only those innovations that relate to purely religious matters are rejected. A distinction, therefore, is maintained between what is purely

religious and what is not. Similarly, the distinction between 'Ibadat (purely religious acts) and Mu'amalat (worldly acts) is often described as a separation between obligations to God and obligations to humans.

Muslim tradition also supports diversity to the extent of pluralism, even in a purely religious sphere. For instance, in the history of Islamic law, there emerged numerous schools of law, each recognizing the validity of the other on the basis of the possibility of a diversity of interpretations of the revealed text. This diversity in purely religious matters exists today as *Madhahib*, several schools of Islamic laws. In the Sufi tradition, there is also a diversity of Sufi orders, although they are all regarded as leading in the same direction. Sometimes, a Sufi may join more than one order at a time. Contemporary Muslim scholars, including Muhammad Imara, Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, Abu Zuhra and Fathi Yakun (1981), have supported this pluralism (*ta'addudiyya*) in political spheres as well (Milad, 1999). Modern Muslim thought has quite significantly stressed on the importance of the role of individuals as responsible, moral person. Movements like Tablighi Jama'at call for the renewal of individual faith for the revival of faith in society.

Consequently, we find in contemporary Muslim thought a diversity of views about secularism. We have outlined above one Muslim trend that opposes secularism as entirely contrary to Islam, but there are those who disagree with this absolute opposition. Rashid Ghannushi, a Muslim thinker and activist from North Africa, for instance, distinguishes between different forms and concepts of secularism — those who seek to separate religion and politics and those who seek to control or exclude religion from public life. North African governments have practised pseudo secularism in seeking to control religious symbols and institutions, and monopolize the right to interpret and implement Islam. Ghannushi also distinguishes between Anglo Saxon notions of secularism, which do not see a necessary conflict between the religious and the civil, and the French Revolution's legacy in which secularism becomes absolute and marginalizes religion. He argues that Muslims are able to borrow aspects of Western liberal notions of civil society. He emphasizes, however, that civil society should not be based on a secularism that marginalizes or suppresses religion (Esposito, 2001:116–117).

There are other Muslim thinkers who have studied secularism as closely associated with modernity and found that it is not opposed to Islam in absolute terms. We have chosen Iqbal and Fazlur Rahman to explain this trend of thought.

Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938)

Born in Sialkot, Punjab to a modest Kashmiri family, Iqbal received his education in law and languages in Lahore. In 1905, he studied at Cambridge

and then went to Germany where he earned his Ph.D. in philosophy with a dissertation on the development of metaphysics in Persia. Iqbal was a poet and a thinker. He wrote poetry in Urdu and Persian, which earned him popularity and respect. He was also a reformer — his poetry transformed Muslims of India from a nation that was lost in pessimism to a politically active and confident people. He took part in politics, supported the Muslim League and called for a separate homeland for Muslims in India. His work, “Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam” was the outcome of a series of lectures in Madras and Aligarh; in it, he provides an innovative Islamic ideology that calls for *Ijtihad*, dynamism and reform.

Discussing separation of religion and politics or church and state, Iqbal explains that “in Islam the spiritual and the temporal are not two distinct domains . . . In Islam it is the same reality which appears as Church looked at from one point of view and state from another” (Iqbal, 1986:122). Iqbal disagrees with the view of secularism that maintains an absolute distinction between the temporal and spiritual; the distinction is not real, it appears only because of different perspectives.

Iqbal disagreed with those who advocated this separation in absolute terms. He distinguished between the European and Muslim perspectives on secularism. He wrote, “Nor is the idea of separation of Church and State alien to Islam. The doctrine of the Major Occultation of the Imam in a sense effected this separation long ago in Shi’a Persia. The Islamic idea of the division of the religious and political functions of the State must not be confounded with the European idea of the separation of Church and State. The former is only a division of functions . . . the latter is based on the metaphysical dualism of spirit and matter”. He added, “Islam was, from the very beginning, a civil society with laws civil in their nature though believed to be revelational in origin . . .” (Iqbal, 1976:47–48).

Iqbal had an opportunity to clarify his views on this point when *Ata Turk*’s reforms in Turkey came to be debated in India. He examines Turkey’s “erroneous” innovations one by one. Is it the development of a general materialist outlook in Turkey inimical to Islam? Islam had had too much of renunciation, it was time for the Muslims to look to realities. Materialism is a bad weapon against religion but it is quite an effective one against Mullacraft and the Suficraft, which deliberately mystify the people with a view to exploiting ignorance and credulity. The spirit of Islam is not afraid of its contact with matter. Indeed, the *Qur’an* says: “Forget not thy share in the world” (28:77). It is difficult for a non-Muslim to understand that, considering the history of the Muslim world during the last few centuries; the progress of a materialist outlook is only a form of self-realization (Iqbal, 1976:43–44).

Is it, then, the abolition of the old dress or the introduction of the Latin script? Islam as a religion has no country; as a society it has no

specific language or specific dress. Even the recitation of the Qur'an in Turkish is not without some precedent in Muslim history (Iqbal, 1976:44). Justifying the right of the Turkish state to reform, Iqbal wrote: "According to the law of Islam, the Amir of Muslim State has the power to revoke the 'permission' of the law if he is convinced that they tend to cause social corruption. As to the licentiate Ulama I would certainly introduce it in Muslim India if I had the power to do so to the inventions of the myth-making Mulla is largely due to the stupidity of the average Muslim. In excluding him from the religious life of the people the Ataturk has done what would have delighted the heart of an Ibn Taymiyyah or a Shah Waliullah" (Iqbal, 1976:44).

Religious reforms by the state are justified because in Islam, the state is responsible for the dissemination of religious teachings. He explains: "There is a tradition of the Holy Prophet reported in the Mishkat to the effect that only the Amir of the Muslim State and the person or persons appointed by him are entitled to preach to the people. I do not know whether the Ataturk ever knew of this tradition; yet it is striking how the light of his Islamic conscience has illumined the zone of his action in this important matter" (Iqbal, 1976:45).

Iqbal's construction of secularism begins with an emphasis on unity of religion and politics but with a focus on social, political and legal reforms. Secularism, in his philosophy, refers to the negation of the authority of the church and shifting it to the state. Mawdudi, Qaradawi and Attas do not allow this authority to the state. They keep the question of reform ambiguous as they insist on the complete nature of divine laws. The ambiguity also remains about who has the authority to interpret these divine laws in case such interpretation is required. Stressing that only Ulama, and not the state, has the final authority only reaffirms a separation between the church and state. Iqbal clarifies this ambiguity by raising the question of Ijtihad and shifting its responsibility to state. By further suggesting an integration of Ijma', the principle of consensus that Islamic jurisprudence gradually restricted to the Ulama, with Ijtihad and locating it in the modern democratic institutions, Iqbal removed this ambiguity. He also removed the ambiguity of the idea of the sovereignty of God by suggesting that the Ummah as a whole and the masses in a country constitute the caliphate or the deputyship of God. Democracy is shifting the locus of caliphate from the individual personal authority of the Amir/Sultan/Khalifa/King to the elected representative of the people. Iqbal's construction of secularism means shifting the authority from church to state and from Ulama to the people.

Dr. Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988)

Dr Fazlur Rahman was born in Hazara in Pakistan. His father, Mawlana Shihab al-Din, had studied at Deoband and was a well known scholar of his time. In Lahore, he was widely respected for his outstanding scholarship. Fazlur Rahman completed his religious education with his father. He studied Arabic at Punjab University and went on to Oxford University where he wrote his doctoral dissertation on Ibn Sina. He later taught Persian and Islamic philosophy at Durham University in the UK, and Islamic studies at McGill University, Canada.

In 1961, he returned to Pakistan as Director of the Central Institute of Islamic Research. He was also a member of the Islamic Advisory Council, where he soon came into conflict with the religious groups. The worsening political situation hindered him from making progress in his endeavours, and he resigned from the post. He went to the USA and taught at UCLA as a visiting professor for a few years. He then moved to the University of Chicago in 1969 and distinguished himself as a Professor of Islamic Thought. Rahman died in 1988 and his writings have continued to be popular among scholars of Islam and the Near East. His outstanding contribution to Islam is widely acknowledged in the Muslim and Western academic world.

Similar to Iqbal, Fazlur Rahman also distinguishes between the European and Muslim perceptions of secularism. According to him, the Western scholars view Muslim reforms as similar to Reformism in Christianity. They cannot understand that reform in religious matters does not necessarily mean secularism. In this perspective, they do not differ much with those who regard any reform or call for reform in religious matters as secularism. Views by Attas and Mawdudi, as shown above, illustrate this view. Rahman criticizes this Western perception by saying, “In the West, however, there is a pervasive confusion with regard to the concept of secularism in Islamic Society. . . . [the Westerners] tend to think, along with Muslim conservatives, that changes induced into the content of the Shari’a constitute secularism (Rahman, 1970:331).

Rahman’s critique of modernity and Muslim modernist apologetics further illustrate that for him, secularism is an essential part of modernity. Rahman argued that “Apologetic-controversial literature (for example, Amir Ali’s *The Spirit of Islam*) made modernity acceptable, probably because it aimed at creating self-confidence among Muslims and also in obtaining the necessary bona fide. But it created a barrier against further modernist development” (Rahman, 1969:252).

Rahman observes that Sir Syed’s work may be called intellectual modernism but that it declined after him. He distinguishes between two phases of modernism after Sir Syed. The first phase may be called apologetic; it began with Amir Ali and a number of Muslim writers who maintained

that Islam is not only compatible with modernity but that, historically, Islam has been modern. The second phase of Islamic modernism, which began with Iqbal, may be called political. In this phase, modernist Muslims claimed that Islam can establish a Muslim state and even calls for it — Islamic law endorses democracy and legal reforms. This phase of modernism focused on reforms as well as on the comprehensive nature of Islam. Rahman argues that in the Iqbalian phase, paradoxes of the earlier (Sir Syed) modernism came to surface. In the earlier phase of intellectual modernism, admiration of the West for its scientific achievements was combined with political allegiance to it. In the Iqbalian phase, modernism rejected the idea of allegiance to the West and, instead, introduced vehement political opposition combined with a socio-ethical denunciation of the West. It continued admiring the West, however, particularly its scientific achievements. This ambivalence towards the West hindered the progress of Islamic modernism because opposition and admiration cannot go well together.

Rahman observes that “experience shows that it (that is, reception of purely lay modern intellectualism and scientism) cannot (that is, successfully penetrate) unless, of course, religion ultimately is allowed to lose grip on life” (Rahman, 1969:252). He argues that “particularly in a religion like Islam where the religious has no boundaries but governs the entire field of life”, (lay ideas cannot penetrate because they are kept very strictly apart). . . . [N]ew ideas cannot take root in isolation. Recall the fate of intellectual movement in medieval Islam which could not grow, science could not grow, because of this constitution of Islam” (Rahman, 1969:253).

Fazlur Rahman argues that Islamic modernism continues to stress on the comprehensive nature of Islam and Islamic law. It confirms the hold of religion in all aspects of life. Consequently, the changes it wants to introduce cannot succeed, because they are in conflict with the idea of the comprehensive nature of Islam. He concludes, “The chance that the hold of Islam has on its followers will weaken may be written off, because, not only are Muslim masses intensely religious but . . . even the modernist has had to fall in line with the impulses of the masses during the recent decades” (Rahman, 1969:253).

The paradox is so complex that, often, its paradoxical nature is not visible. Islam’s hold on the masses is a recent result of modernist efforts during the political phase of modernism. The modernists argued that Islam offered one of the mainstays of the freedom struggle. They also negated separation between religion and politics or church and state. These were the Islamic modernists who closed the doors on secularism; the position of the Ulama, however, differed from that of the modernists.

Fazlur Rahman argues that the Ulama did not share with the modernists the ideas of the comprehensive nature of Islam and its compatibility with modernity. Strangely, the way for secularism is paved by the

Ulama, not by the modernists. “It is this attitude of the Ulama (that is, the belief that the mediievally formulated traditional beliefs can be kept intact and immune from modern influences), which is directly responsible for secularism in the Muslim world” (Rahman, 1969:254). He illustrates the attitude of the Ulama with an example of the application of the laws of Zakat in a modern state.

The Ulama, however, forbid any change in the rate of Zakah and assert that if Zakah is inadequate to meet the larger welfare needs of the Muslim society, then Muslim governments can levy other taxes. . . . This is the essence of secularism. Indeed, all along the line of confrontation of modernity with traditional Islam, the majority of the ulama exhibits an attitude which is directly conducive to secularism (Rahman, 1969:254).

Conclusion

A critical study of the discourses on secularism in Muslim societies cannot be modelled on the Western experience because religion and religious values have different political and cultural trajectories in the Muslim experience. Secularism has been constructed and deconstructed in the Muslim world in response to diverse experiences. A focus on the deconstruction of secularism as an ideology in Islamic political thought in modern times was the result of several factors, including failure of modernist and secular regimes, threat of communism during the Cold War and recent threat of Western hegemony. Islam was constructed as an ideology in the sense that it was presented as a natural, historical and eternal system. Its construction as an ideology protected it from other ideologies because an ideology must be exclusive to all others. This strategy was useful against the threat of Communism. The same strategy has been used against the threat of secularism. Secularism was part of Communist ideology; hence, its refutation was also strategized by constructing it as an ideology. Once a threat is ideologized, it is easy to project it as a counter religion to Islam.

These discourses on secularism also suggest that the more secularism and Islam are ideologized, the more it is difficult to speak of change and reform. The Islamic modernism that called for reform should have logically allowed some space for secularism in Islam, but as it also ideologized Islam — although from its own perspective — it remained ambiguous about secularism.

Sir Syed was not looking for an Islamic political alternative but was seeking for an intellectual modernism. Colonialism and Western supremacy urged him to seek reform in Muslim societies. The Islamic modernists who sought Islamic justification for modernization argued that Islam is compatible with modernity but unwittingly, this line of argument paved the way for a view that Islam as a comprehensive religion did not support

modernization. Later, when national movements against colonial rule grew stronger, the Muslim national identity was defined in terms of self-sufficiency, rejection of the West and religious polity. It was in this focus on the comprehensiveness of Islam that the question of secularism was debated. Secularism was contrasted with communalism. Political interpretations of a comprehensive Islam necessitated the rejection of the West and separation of politics from religion. This strategy, however, pushed political Islam to a gradual theologization of political concepts. These political interpretations, whether liberal (as in case of Iqbal) or Islamist (as in case of Mawdudi and Attas), were forced to seek Islamic alternatives for modern concepts such as democracy. Their political frameworks were, however, modern Western; they could not accept the traditional political framework because it separated this world from the hereafter. As Fazlur Rahman observes, Islamic modernity that could come with the reform and modernization of the traditional Islamic intellectual tradition would have brought a type of secularism from within the Islamic tradition. The secularism decried by Mawdudi, Attas and Qaradawi is as an inevitable outcome of the paradoxes of political Islamic modernism that forced a modern notion of comprehensiveness on Islam.

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