

## *Book Reviews*

### **Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'ah**

*Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim*

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An-Naim's book is an addition to the genre of studies that apply the tools and mechanisms of secular liberal change and social engineering to Muslim societies behind a benign façade of Islamic concern. His opening words emphasize the necessity of a secular state for a Muslim to be a believer by conviction. He claims a different perspective of the term, which really is not that distinct from common understandings of what constitutes a secular state, namely, neutrality regarding religious doctrine (p. 1). According to this organizational principle Islam does not need to be separated from politics or public life, but rather from the state, so as not to allow for its manipulation.

At first glance this sounds like a perfectly sensible premise, as many Muslim countries do, in fact, suffer from such a predicament. The problem is that in the process of suggesting the means and methods of how to do so, An-Naim contests Islamic values as relative, infusing them with ambiguity, as a prelude to essentializing western values and structures of state, constitutionalism, human rights, and citizenship as universal and deterministic. This way, he sets the hierarchy of privilege in favor of the latter. Consequently adaptation, if not clearly succumbing to instead of challenging, the "reality" of a Eurocentric postcolonial world (pp. 31-32) should be accepted as a starting point. This is the contextual fact to which Islam and Muslims have to reconcile themselves, and thus any notions of applying the Shari'ah should be forsaken and is, in fact, "impossible" (p. 18).

To justify his disenchanting approach, he cites Egyptian Islamic scholar Ali Abd al-Raziq as having "conclusively" established that the state is a political and not a religious institution (p. 1). Notwithstanding the merits or otherwise of Abd al-Raziq's viewpoint, his argument remains to this day controversial rather than conclusive. One problem with An-Naim's language in this study is its sometimes imprecise, deterministic and emphatic allusions. Thus,

implementing the Shari'ah is "impossible," Islamic societies have "chosen" to be bound by a minimum level of national and international obligations, and in case of any doubts, these "facts" are "irreversible" (p. 19).

Despite An-Naim's confidence, one may still ask the question: Why is it so? All kinds of counterarguments can be presented to challenge his position or "truth" statements. The problem gets trickier when he states that the meaning and implementation of the Qur'an and Sunnah are "always" a matter of "interpretation" and "historical context" (p. 20). Perhaps this is partly so, but by no means is always or totally so. Otherwise, if the divine will cannot be "known," revelation would be largely superfluous. But then if An-Naim's purpose is to "historicize" Islam and the Shari'ah, it may help to commit a hopefully unobservable error of omission. In the process, he blurs the difference between the Shari'ah as embedded in revelation and "*madh-hab*" as an interpretive and methodological human construct (pp. 10-11).

Having leveled the grounds, he suggests how to accomplish the above. As a first step, the principles of constitutionalism, human rights, and citizenship must be affirmed by or through an "Islamic perspective" (p. 24) to legitimize calls for changes in "cultural" norms and values. In effect, An-Naim is proposing an Islamic façade behind which bringing about the desired changes can be made after reducing religious norms and values, through historicization, to mere cultural manifestations (pp. 24-25). Who, then, is qualified to bring this about? He suggests that this has to be done by proponents – presumably himself included as an engaged "Muslim" (p. 6) – with "credible" claims to being cultural "insiders" capable of presenting "internally valid arguments" to persuade local populations (p. 25). Such arguments should invite the support of what An-Naim calls a "cultural ideal" in proposing any public policy or action. Thus, if the principles of constitutionalism, human rights, and citizenship or "empowerment" of women or any other value in consonance with western norms or set agendas is to be introduced with minimal resistance, such values must be presented as conforming to some Islamic standard. It becomes that for which, in fact, Islam is calling.

The following step is to get external influences or "outsiders" (read "westerners") to help bring about acceptance of such change. This is best done by engaging in parallel discourses in their own societies, not necessarily with the intention of changing or accomplishing anything as far as *they* are concerned, but simply to enable "internal actors" to point to a similar process taking place elsewhere. The point is to alter behavior by inducing the objects to let their guard down and to reduce restraints toward change. While outsiders may still offer active assistance to "internal participants," this should avoid any form of "overt interference" lest the latter's credibility be compro-

mised. Cross-cultural dialogue should also be conducted to offer “insights” and help with “strategies” of internal discourse to promote universal acceptance of these values as well as to highlight the “shared moral and philosophical positions” (p. 27). Covert interference, that is, is no problem.

An-Naim is essentially doing four things here: (1) presenting himself as a self-styled native informant who, as a trusted “insider,” would help break down the walls of resistance or perhaps even open the gate from the inside for external entry (a fifth column?); (2) by detaching practices from pre-existing moral and social limitations, “isolating” and then “recombining” them in ways more propitious to concurring with the demands of colonizing external values, he effects the colonization of the Islamic life world (see Charles Tripp, *Islam and the Moral Economy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 4); (3) by calling for state neutrality toward all religions, he is conducting a replay with a strong sense of *déjà vu*. The earlier colonial wave introduced the discourse of human equality (a form of neutrality) to Muslims who, having acquiesced, were then introduced to the corollary that some people are more equal than others. Once Muslims accept the principle of religious neutrality (equality), they will be reintroduced to the corollary that some religions are, in fact, more equal than others. This is why An-Naim argues that Muslims should abandon their belief in Islam’s superiority, i.e. de-privilege Islam (p. 271); and (4) by continuously applying the term *postcolonial*, he obscures the reality of the synthesis of colonialism’s different stages and forms: classical (Palestine as well as many Arab and Muslim countries), neocolonialism (dependency), and cultural (identity reconstruction, domination, and hegemony). Colonialism, in fact, is alive and thriving under the camouflaging name of *globalism*.

The body of the book, consisting of seven chapters (including the introduction and conclusion), elaborates on and applies the above themes to India (chapter 4), Turkey (chapter 5), and Indonesia (chapter 6). Interestingly, he mentions nothing about Iran except in the concluding chapter, where he states that there has never been an Islamic state from the time of Abu Bakr to present-day Iran (p. 281). Apparently, the values that permeate a state’s foundations make no difference. To An-Naim, a state is a secular enterprise pure and simple, and the whole idea of it being Islamic is totally irrational and to be dismissed. His approach effectively does not leave much room for negotiation, and his methodology is nothing but old wine in the same old bottle.