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# Muslims and Secularism

## Some Contributions to the Debate

*David Marshall*

This essay explores different Muslim approaches to secularism, a topic on which a great deal has been written.<sup>1</sup> Even more has been written on secularism in itself. It is important to clarify that I do not write as a political scientist or philosopher and will not be discussing different theories of secularism, or offering close readings of Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, or other giants in the land. My focus will be on Muslim writing on secularism and especially the secular state, of which my working definition is: a state that seeks to be neutral regarding religious doctrine and that does not seek to enforce or privilege a particular religion. Put as simply as possible, my question is: Can Islam be authentically itself – can Muslims be authentically themselves – without control of the state in the name of Islam? Or, a bit more fully: Can Muslims successfully give an account of Islam that allows them to live permanently, and with good conscience vis-à-vis their religious identity, in a state that does not recognize Islam as its fundamental source of legitimacy and authority? We will hear Muslim voices from the last 100 years, beginning with an argument from the 1920s in favour of the secular state, followed by another from the mid-20th century passionately opposed to it, and then some more recent contributions on both sides of the debate, including arguments that problematize the very concept of the modern nation-state (whether secular or Islamic). Limitations of space prevent any detailed discussion of particular states in the Muslim world today.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay developed out of a lecture first given on 27 May 2019 at the Institut für Christkatholische Theologie of the University of Bern and then again in a longer version on 12 December 2019 at the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam (PISAI), Rome. It has also been published in similar form under the title ‘Muslims and Secularism: Some Contributions to the Debate’, in: Herman Roborgh/Joseph Victor Edwin (eds), *Witness to a Common Hope. Festschrift in honour of Father Christian W. Troll SJ* (Gujarat: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 2022), 131–155.

## 1. Ali Abd al-Raziq

The first of the Muslim writers considered here is Ali Abd al-Raziq, who was born in Egypt in 1888, when Egypt was under British control. Abd al-Raziq's thinking was shaped by very different intellectual worlds. He received a traditional Islamic education at al-Azhar, but was also exposed to the influence both of reformist interpretations of Islam and, through a period studying in Oxford, of Western thought. He began his career as a scholar when the declining power and prestige of the Muslim world was reaching its lowest point, with the collapse after World War I of the Ottoman Empire, and the abolition of the caliphate in 1924, followed by its replacement by Atatürk's secularizing Turkish republic.

We note here the crucial significance of the abolition of the caliphate. As Ovamir Anjum writes, "For some fourteen centuries (...) the Muslim world had been synonymous with the caliphate".<sup>2</sup> Whatever differences of interpretation there might have been of this fundamental Islamic political concept, its "religious necessity (...) remained unquestioned until the twentieth century".<sup>3</sup> According to Mawardi's standard definition in *al-Ahkam al-sultaniyyah*, a caliph is "the successor of the Prophet who protects the religion [Islam] and manages and governs worldly affairs of the community by it".<sup>4</sup> Despite de facto political divisions among Muslims over the centuries, the rule of the caliph was in principle over all Muslims, the whole *umma*. The loss of the caliphate was thus a huge crisis, which, as Anjum puts it, "sent convulsive waves of shock and lament throughout the lands of Islam".<sup>5</sup>

It was at the heart of this crisis that Abd al-Raziq published in 1925 his controversial volume *Islam and the Foundations of Rule (al-Islam wa-usul al-hukm)*. He makes his case boldly: Muslims should not lament the passing of the caliphate; rather, they "are free to demolish this worn-out system (...) before which they have debased and humiliated themselves. They are free to establish (...) the organization of their state according to more recent conceptions of the human spirit and according to the princi-

<sup>2</sup> Ovamir Anjum, 'Who Wants the Caliphate?', <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/who-wants-the-caliphate/>, published 31 October 2019 (accessed on 20.02.2023). As this substantial online essay has no page numbers, I indicate the titles of sections to help locate passages cited. This citation is from the essay's opening paragraph.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., section entitled 'The loss'.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., section entitled 'The theory of the caliphate'.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., opening paragraph.

ples of government whose excellence and firmness have been consecrated by the experience of the nations.”<sup>6</sup> Note here the attitude of openness to the wider, non-Muslim world, and in particular to its political systems. Abd al-Raziq’s answer to the question I defined earlier is a clear “Yes”. Muslims can be authentically themselves under a range of political systems; they can disregard the demand of their tradition that they should live in a political order that recognizes the supreme authority of Islam. Yes, Muslims can embrace the idea of the secular state.

Of course, Abd al-Raziq, a graduate of al-Azhar, knew that his Muslim readers would have objections to his thesis. How does he address these? The key distinction to which he appeals is between religious and political forms of authority. “It is well known”, he writes, “that prophecy is something other than royalty: there is no intrinsic connection between the two notions. Prophecy is one sort of dignity, royalty another.” But he knows that his claim runs against the consensus of Islamic tradition because “Muslims in general tend to believe that the Prophet was both prophet and king and that he established with Islam a political government of which he was king and head.” Challenging this position, Abd al-Raziq insists that Muhammad “dedicated himself to purely religious propaganda without any tendency whatsoever towards temporal sovereignty” and “he established no kingdom in the political sense of the word”. Muhammad was only a prophet “like his brother prophets” before him.<sup>7</sup> Recognizing an inevitable counter-argument, Abd al-Raziq admits that Muhammad did wield power:

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<sup>6</sup> Ali Abd al-Raziq, *The Caliphate and the Bases of Power*, in: John J. Donohue/John L. Esposito (eds), *Islam in Transition. Muslim Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 29–37: 37. This publication provides excerpts from Abd al-Raziq’s book. An English translation of the whole work is available in Ali Abdel Razek, *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power*, ed. Abdou Filali-Ansary (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012). For a German translation, see Hans-Georg Ebert/Assem Hefny, *Der Islam und die Grundlagen der Herrschaft. Übersetzung und Kommentar des Werkes von Alî Abd ar-Râziq* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2010). On Abd al-Raziq and the debate around this book, see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 183–192.

<sup>7</sup> Abd al-Raziq, *Caliphate* (as note 6), 30.



We know that to make Islamic unity triumph, the Prophet fought with word and sword, that he obtained divine aid and victory, that he (...) exercised an authority over his nation such as no king before or since has ever wielded.<sup>8</sup>

So, yes, Muhammad presided with authority over a community, but: “This unity which existed from the time of the Prophet was in no respect a political unity. It had none of the aspects of a state or government. (...) It was based on a unity of faith and religious dogma, not on a unity of state or a system of temporal authority.”<sup>9</sup> He goes on to observe that in the community over which Muhammad presided there was nothing like the bureaucratic structure and processes of the modern state. His authority was religious, not political.<sup>10</sup>

Abd al-Raziq knew that he must defend his argument in scriptural terms, and he claims that the Qur’an does indeed support his position; the Qur’an, he insists, does not present Muhammad as a man of temporal power. A significant theme in this essay will be the different ways that modern Muslim approaches to the secular state refer to the Qur’an, so by way of background both to Abd al-Raziq and other thinkers to follow, a brief excursus on the Qur’an is necessary here.

The time of Muhammad’s activity as a prophet is traditionally divided into two periods: first at Mecca, and second at Medina. For the first 13 years in Mecca, Muhammad only proclaimed the Qur’an, the message he believed God had given him; he did not use force. He and his followers were not permitted to fight those who opposed and mistreated them. But during the following ten years in Medina, Muhammad proclaimed that God had permitted, and indeed commanded, him and his followers to fight their enemies, which they did – and very successfully. Islam triumphed in military and political terms as well as religiously.

Muslims believe that the Qur’an is the collection of all the revelations to Muhammad over these 23 years, first in Mecca and then in Medina. Traditional Islamic scholarship identifies different sections of the Qur’an as either Meccan or Medinan. An important reason for this is that interpretation of the Qur’an faces the challenge that on certain matters the Qur’an gives different instructions at different times. Crucially, Meccan revelations commanded Muhammad and the believers not to fight, but in Medinan revelations, in contrast, they are commanded to fight. Both com-

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 33–34.

mands remain in the Qur'an. The traditional Islamic exegetical procedure for dealing with this is the theory of abrogation (*naskh*), whereby later revelations, such as those commanding fighting, abrogate (or repeal) earlier ones.<sup>11</sup>

The theory of abrogation may sound like an obscure corner of Islamic studies, but it is in fact highly relevant to contemporary debates. In either accepting or rejecting secularism and its socio-political implications, Muslims need to offer Qur'anic arguments. In the Qur'an there are essentially two socio-political paradigms: first, the Meccan paradigm, advocating religious disagreement but peaceful co-existence with unbelievers; and second, the Medinan paradigm, which involves fighting unbelievers and achieving power over them. The Meccan paradigm is more obviously compatible with secularism than the Medinan paradigm, so it is no surprise that, implicitly or explicitly, Muslim supporters of secularism tend to appeal to Meccan parts of the Qur'an and either ignore or somehow relativize the Medinan parts of the Qur'an which do not sit so well with their agenda.

When Abd al-Raziq turns to the Qur'an, seeking support for his argument that Muslims should accept life in a secular state, he thus naturally focuses on Meccan parts of the Qur'an. He quotes many Qur'anic verses, which all speak of Muhammad as a preacher and not as a figure of political authority. Abd al-Raziq understandably prioritizes the Meccan paradigm. The vulnerability of his argument is that he largely – not totally, but largely – ignores the Medinan parts of the Qur'an which had traditionally served as the basis for Islamic political power.<sup>12</sup> De facto, he relativizes Medina and prioritizes Mecca. This is a decisive break with tradition, but Abd al-Raziq (understandably, perhaps) does not really acknowledge how radical a step he is proposing. Later we will look at a more recent Muslim

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<sup>11</sup> For an introduction to the distinctive features of the Meccan and Medinan surahs of the Qur'an, see Nicola Sinai, *The Qur'an. A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 161–214. On abrogation, see John Burton, "Abrogation", in: Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 11–19.

<sup>12</sup> The excerpts from Abd al-Raziq's work in the publication cited above do not include his listing of the passages from the Qur'an which he identifies as relevant to his argument. For this section of Abd al-Raziq's work, see 'Message not Government, Religion not State' (another selection of excerpts), in: *Liberal Islam. A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 29–36, with the section on the Qur'an at 32–34.

argument that, in contrast, makes absolutely clear the need for an explicit prioritization of Mecca over Medina.

As we take our leave of Abd al-Raziq, we thus note a certain question-begging evasiveness in the way he framed his argument, a failure to provide a convincingly Islamic basis for the political vision he was promoting. This helps us understand why his work was so decisively rejected as unorthodox by the authorities of al-Azhar, who stripped him of his authority as an *'alim*, an authorized Muslim scholar, and in effect silenced his modernist, secularizing voice. Albert Hourani comments:

It is not difficult to understand why [Abd al-Raziq's] book met with such opposition. It propounded a new historical theory about matters of which the accepted historical view had something of the nature of religious doctrine; and this theory was drawn more from non-Muslim writers on Islam, who might be accused of trying to weaken its hold on its adherents, than from the fundamental Islamic sources (...).<sup>13</sup>

Anjum's more recent assessment of Abd al-Raziq's work is that it represented "a forced, ahistorical reading of both the Prophet's mission and the succeeding caliphs and an equally shallow understanding of modernity".<sup>14</sup>

The caliphate was abolished in 1924. Abd al-Raziq's book was published in 1925. In the following years there was much debate about these matters in Egypt and a key moment was the founding in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna of the Muslim Brotherhood, the first Islamist movement, which would take a very different approach to that of Abd al-Raziq to the relationship between Islam and politics. Elsewhere in the Muslim world other Islamist movements emerged, and for our next example of a Muslim response to secularism we turn to a highly influential Islamist thinker from India/Pakistan in the mid-20th century.

## 2. Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi

Born in India under British rule in 1903, Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi came early to a deep sense of concern with the state of the Muslims of India, weakened both by the surrounding Hindu majority and the influence of Western ideas mediated by the British. From 1947, following Partition, he moved to Pakistan and threw the Islamist organization he founded behind

<sup>13</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought* (as note 6), 189.

<sup>14</sup> Anjum, 'Caliphate' (as note 2), section entitled 'The loss'.

attempts to transform what had been created as a homeland for Muslims into something quite different, an Islamic state. The distinction was vital. Before Partition, Mawdudi questioned the idea of Pakistan as a homeland for the Muslims of India because of the lack of decisively Islamic ideology in the plans for this new nation. Mawdudi believed that for Muslims to regain a strong sense of their identity and task, they had to focus on the sovereignty of God. It was not enough for Muslims to acknowledge the existence of the one God. They had to recognize that God is the sovereign who commands and that it is the task of humans to obey, in all aspects of life. Muslims were therefore obliged to work towards a social order that expressed submission to God's revealed will – in other words, an Islamic state. For Mawdudi, the Western secularism that influenced the Muslims of his day (including the political elite that founded Pakistan) was ultimately rebellion against God, because for all practical purposes it sidelined God into irrelevance and exalted the collective human will over the will of the creator.

Mawdudi was originally a journalist and was noted for his lucid, rhetorically powerful Urdu prose. Even in English translation one feels the power of his writing, as in the passionate attack on secularism in the following extended quotation:

(...) "secularism" implies that the Divine guidance, the worship of God, and obedience to Him should be confined to the personal life of each individual and except for the small sphere of a person's private life, all the other affairs of this world should be settled purely from the worldly viewpoint according to our own wishes and expediency (...). God should have nothing to do with this world and its collective affairs (...).

[To which Mawdudi responds...] Either God is the Creator of man and the world in which he lives, as well as being its Master and Sovereign, or He is not so. If He is neither the Creator nor the Master, nor again the Sovereign then it is entirely unnecessary to have even any private relations with Him. It is utterly absurd to worship a Being entirely unconcerned and having nothing to do with us. But if He is in reality our Creator, Master, and Sovereign, and so also of this universe, then it is equally meaningless that His jurisdiction should be limited to the private life of an individual (...)

In so far as the Muslims are concerned I must say very clearly that modern secular national democracy is utterly against their faith and religion. If they bow to it and accept it they will be turning their backs on the Holy Quran. If they take part in its establishment and maintenance it will constitute an open rebellion against the Holy Prophet. And if they stand up to raise its standard they will only be raising the standard of revolt against their Lord God. The

spirit of Islam, which you profess to believe and from which you derive the name Muslim, is in conflict with the spirit of this dirty and rotten system; its fundamental principles are at loggerheads with the fundamental principles of the other system; and every part of the one is opposed to every part of the other. Islam and this system cannot meet for compromise at any stage.<sup>15</sup>

For Mawdudi, Muslims are in the midst of a battle, and this is reflected in the black-and-white, “no compromise”, tone which is so evident here. As will be noted later, there is more than one form of secularism, and they can have very different bearings on the place of religion in public life, but Mawdudi here keeps his definition of secularism very simple, which enables him to reject it as effectively as possible.<sup>16</sup>

What about Mawdudi’s approach to the Qur’an? Earlier, I mentioned that Abd al-Raziq appeals to the Meccan parts of the Qur’an and largely ignores the Medinan. Mawdudi’s approach is quite different. He forcefully reaffirms the mainstream of traditional exegesis and its approach to abrogation by insisting that those Medinan passages which speak of Muslims fighting unbelievers and gaining power over them continue to be authoritative. For Mawdudi, such passages point to the need for an Islamic state in which only Muslims committed to the ideology of that state can hold effective power, and non-Muslims, though tolerated, must be subordinate. A key text is 9.29, a very late Medinan verse, traditionally understood as commanding Muslims to fight Jews and Christians till they submit to Islamic rule and pay a tax (*jizya*) to indicate that submission. In his widely read commentary, Mawdudi writes on this verse:

<sup>15</sup> Sayyid Abul Ala Maudoodi, *Our Message* (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, 1998), 16–17.22.39.

<sup>16</sup> For an example of a more theoretical, less rhetorical approach by Mawdudi to this question, see excerpts from his work *Islam. Its Meaning and Message* under the title ‘Political Theory of Islam’, in: Donohue/Esposito (eds), *Islam in Transition* (as note 6), 252–260. Although he here states boldly that Islam is “the very antithesis of secular Western democracy” (253–254), he does also acknowledge the “limited popular sovereignty under the suzerainty of God” granted by Islam, so that in this sense “the Islamic polity is a democracy” or “theo-democracy” (254). Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr argues that there is a greater complexity to Mawdudi’s relationship to Western political ideas than his “rejectionist rhetoric” may suggest. See his *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), e.g. at 52. For a selection of texts by Mawdudi related to the themes discussed here, and a brief introduction and commentary by Abdullah Saeed, see David Marshall (ed.), *Tradition and Modernity. Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 115–132.

The purpose for which the Muslims are required to fight is not (...) to compel the unbelievers into embracing Islam. Rather, their purpose is to put an end to the sovereignty and supremacy of the unbelievers so that the latter are unable to rule over men. The authority to rule should only be vested in those who follow the true faith; unbelievers who do not follow this true faith should live in a state of subordination. Unbelievers are required to pay jizyah (poll tax) in lieu of the security provided to them as the *Dhimmi*s ("Protected People") of an Islamic state. Jizyah symbolizes the submission of the unbelievers to the suzerainty of Islam (...).

Some nineteenth-century Muslim writers and their followers in our own times [secularizing modernists like Abd al-Raziq may be in mind here] never seem to tire of their apologies for jizyah. But God's religion does not require that apologetic explanations be made on its behalf. The simple fact is that according to Islam, non-Muslims have been granted the freedom to stay outside the Islamic fold and to cling to their false, man-made, ways if they so wish. They have, however, absolutely no right to seize the reins of power in any part of God's earth nor to direct the collective affairs of human beings according to their own misconceived doctrines.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas Abd al-Raziq avoids engaging frankly with Medinan texts such as 9.29, Mawdudi affirms their continuing authority and is scornful of modernist Muslims for their "defeatist" mentality in avoiding or reinterpreting such texts and prioritizing the Meccan paradigm of peaceful co-existence. In practice, Mawdudi may have had to adopt a pragmatic, gradualist approach to the Islamization of Pakistan, but his underlying theory is quite clear. On his reading of the Qur'an, there can ultimately be no accommodation between Islam and any version of secularism. Mawdudi is unflinching in his logic. Islam is the system, the ideology, that God has provided for the good of all humanity. It should in principle prevail everywhere and, by definition, only Muslims are competent to implement Islamic rule. Power should therefore be in the hands of Muslims and should not be shared with non-Muslims.

Going back to my opening question, Mawdudi's answer is "No". Until Islam is in power, until political power is in the hands of Muslims, something fundamental is lacking. Islam is not authentically itself until there is an Islamic state.

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<sup>17</sup> Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an*, Vol. III, Surahs 7–9, translated and edited by Zafar Ishaq Ansari (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1990), 202.



### 3. Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im

For our next example, we turn to a Muslim scholar of Sudanese origin who for many years has taught Law at Emory University in the USA. A key point in Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im's formation is that he was a devoted disciple of the controversial thinker Mahmoud Mohamed Taha. Taha was committed to the ideal of Muslims and non-Muslims living together as equal citizens of the same state. But he believed that it was not possible to achieve that goal so long as Muslims accepted the final authority of the second stage of the Qur'an (what I have called the Medinan paradigm). Taha argued that Muslims must admit frankly that because the Medinan paradigm requires Muslims to fight non-Muslims and come to power over them it is not compatible with the equal rights of all human beings. So Taha proposed a radical solution, which, as far as I am aware, is unique in the history of Islamic thought.

In *The Second Message of Islam*, Taha argues that the Meccan paradigm – in which Muhammad lived peacefully (for his part, anyway) alongside unbelievers, with no command to rule over them – is the heart of the Qur'an, its eternal message, with abiding authority. It teaches the equality of all people (the equality of men and women, incidentally, as well as of Muslim and non-Muslim). What then does Taha say of the Medinan parts of the Qur'an? He argues that they were genuinely revealed by God but only as a temporary measure, required by the challenges of establishing Islam in a hostile environment. The fullness of God's purpose is for the Meccan paradigm to be established, and the time is now right for this to happen. This bold approach overturns the traditional Islamic theory of abrogation, and Taha is explicit about the need for this. He does not diplomatically ignore or tinker with the Medinan paradigm; instead, he insists on a principle of reverse abrogation by which Mecca abrogates Medina.<sup>18</sup> For teaching these ideas, Taha was executed in 1985 by the Sudanese authorities as an apostate, one guilty of having abandoned Islam.

Following Taha's execution, his movement was banned, his books were burned, and advocating his views became a capital crime. An-Na'im left Sudan the same year and thereafter developed his scholarly career in the USA. In 1990 he published *Towards an Islamic Reformation*, which includes a lucid English account of the complex, mystical ideas which Taha

<sup>18</sup> Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, *The Second Message of Islam*, translated by Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987).

had developed in Arabic.<sup>19</sup> An-Na'im's book has much in common with other modernist works. What makes it unique is its use of Taha's reform methodology based on reverse abrogation, and its argument that modernist reformists were generally avoiding the elephant in the room: the fact that democracy, the secular state, human rights, international law and so on were all completely incompatible with the Medinan paradigm and the principles of Shari'a derived from it. An-Na'im criticizes the superficiality and evasiveness of modernist Islam's engagement with the Qur'an. As regards my opening question, an-Na'im says "Yes": Islam can authentically be itself without state power, but only if it deals honestly with the different paradigms of political power within its own scripture.

How was this received? Western academic circles showed considerable interest but even among reform-minded Muslim scholars there has so far been little evidence of willingness to embrace the key idea of reversing the theory of abrogation. However attractive and indeed urgent one might find an-Na'im's vision, it is nevertheless important to grasp why Muslims might reject it. From the beginnings of Islam, Muslims have understood the Qur'an in a clear, linear way that works through to Muhammad's triumph by the end of the Medinan period, seeing this as the God-given glory of Islam, not some kind of compromise with a barbaric age that can now be shelved. Islam came to rule, to bring to the world the harmonious and just order decreed by God. That was Muhammad's crowning achievement; it cannot be edited out of Islam.

Years later, an-Na'im published another book, *Islam and the Secular State*. Here he is pursuing the same essential goal as in the earlier book (offering Islamic grounds for the secular state) but even though he makes clear his continuing preference for the methodology proposed by Taha, he now turns to other arguments.<sup>20</sup> The memorable opening sentence reads: "In order to be a Muslim by conviction and free choice, which is the only way one can be a Muslim, I need a secular state."<sup>21</sup> An-Na'im emphasizes that his project is profoundly religious. He is not asking Muslims to abandon their religion in order to live equally with non-Muslims in secular societies. Rather, he argues that it is only in a secular state that Muslims

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<sup>19</sup> Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation. Civil Liberties, Human Rights and International Law* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State. Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2008), 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.



are free to be Muslims voluntarily, and therefore sincerely. He also stresses from the first paragraph that he is not opposing Shari'a but rather arguing for the proper context for its free observance, which, he says, "cannot be coerced by fear of state institutions or faked to appease their officials".<sup>22</sup> The alternative, living under pressure to conform to Islam, "promotes hypocrisy (...) which is categorically and repeatedly condemned by the Qur'an".<sup>23</sup> So an-Na'im here offers religious arguments for the secular state, emphasizing that true religious practice must be marked by freedom, sincerity, and the avoidance of hypocrisy. It is notable that these are arguments which focus much more on the conscience of the individual believer than on the cohesion of the believing community.

We saw that Mawdudi understands secularism in one simple way, as the exclusion of religion from public life. In contrast, an-Na'im insists that secularism does not have to be like that. He acknowledges that there have been authoritarian secular states, like Atatürk's Turkey, but there is also the kind of secular state that is not hostile to religion showing itself in public life and even acting as a motivation in politics. Rather, this kind of secular state acts as an honest broker, negotiating between different religions and preventing any one religion imposing itself over others. While Mawdudi is black-and-white, an-Na'im frequently admits that his project is complex, difficult; it involves challenging negotiations. In particular, he touches on the "difficult distinction between the state and politics", arguing for the separation of Islam and the state, but not of Islam and politics.<sup>24</sup> Along with Christians and others, Muslims will inevitably be inspired by their religion to seek to influence politics. But they must not (as Mawdudi would have encouraged them to do) seek to take over or control the state in the name of Islam.

An-Na'im argues, further, that serious study of the history of Islam supports his case over against that of Islamist promoters of the Islamic state such as Mawdudi. An-Na'im recognizes that in Muhammad there was a combination of religious and political authority in one person, but argues that this was a unique, unrepeatable occurrence. Ever since Muhammad, Islam has involved a difficult negotiation between individuals and institutions expressing religious authority and individuals and institutions expressing political authority, with some cross-over. So the kind of

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

difficult negotiation of the place of religion in a secular state that is necessary in the modern world is, for an-Na'im, simply a continuation of what Muslims have always had to do. In contrast, along with many other commentators he insists that the idea of an Islamic state is genuinely something new in Islam; this political concept is not part of the Islamic tradition and (ironically, in view of Islamist disdain for the West) it in fact derives mainly from modern European ideology, with sinister Fascist undertones.<sup>25</sup>

An-Na'im might be right that his ideal of Muslims living faithful lives in secular states has better grounding in Islamic history than Mawdudi's vision of the Islamic state. However, it is natural to ask how an-Na'im's arguments are being received today. Even though *Islam and the Secular State* was published only fifteen years ago, it is nevertheless worth reflecting on whether any discernible pattern has emerged in these recent years indicating the direction in which the nations of the Muslim world are moving. Is there more to encourage an an-Na'im or an Islamist follower of Mawdudi? In *Islam and the Secular State* an-Na'im offers case-studies of secularism and Islam in three different contexts: India, with Muslims as a minority in a secular state; and Turkey and Indonesia, states with different kinds of secular tradition and Muslim majorities.<sup>26</sup> Writing in 2008, an-Na'im appears cautiously optimistic about the prospects for "Islam-and-the-secular-state" in Turkey and Indonesia. President Erdoğan seemed at that time to be achieving a reasonable balance between allowing religion more of a role in public life and respecting Turkey's secular traditions. I suspect that most observers who shared an-Na'im's hopes at that time have felt growing disappointment about developments in the years since then, not just in Turkey and Indonesia, but also, for example, in Malaysia and Pakistan. In many places, the Islamization of the state has advanced and non-Muslims, as well as some Muslim minorities, feel under increasing pressure.

Pessimistic observations of this kind could, however, be criticized for taking far too short-term a view of history and overlooking the long and tortuous processes of political development in, for example, the nations of Europe. We should also beware of concluding that recent movements away from secular principles in nations such as Turkey or Pakistan are all related to issues internal to Islam. There is not space here to ask the important

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., chapters 4, 5 and 6.

balancing question of whether the pattern is different, and perhaps more encouraging, elsewhere in the Muslim world, recognizing that any grand overarching theory in this field is likely to break down at points. Furthermore, we must acknowledge developments outside the Muslim world, noting, for example, that India has recently also been moving towards greater identification of the state and the dominant religious tradition, in its case Hinduism, resulting in increasing pressure on its religious minorities, particularly Muslims. Muslim minorities also suffer in other contexts. In some Western nations too, liberal secular ideals are under pressure and on the retreat, and in many parts of the world religious minorities are feeling more vulnerable. Globally, there is a growing reluctance to engage in the “difficult negotiations” that an-Na’im describes as the core work of secular states. Developments in the Muslim world must be seen both in terms of debates within Islam, but also in the wider global context.

Of the thinkers discussed so far, Abd al-Raziq and an-Na’im offer support for the secular state, while Mawdudi rejects it. We now move on to two more recent contributions which introduce a significant further dimension to this debate. A key feature of the arguments discussed so far is that they all take for granted the givenness of the nation-state: for Abd al-Raziq and an-Na’im, Muslims can and should live in secular nation-states, while Mawdudi wants Muslims to take control of the nation-state and make it an Islamic state. However, they are all thinking within the nation-state box. That is the available political reality within their frames of reference. In striking contrast, Wael Hallaq and Ovamir Anjum, the next two thinkers to be considered here, argue that Islam should not be constrained in this way: Muslims should aim for a quite different political reality.

#### **4. Wael Hallaq**

In 2013, Hallaq, a professor at Columbia University in New York City, published *The Impossible State. Islam, Politics, and Modernity’s Moral Predicament*.<sup>27</sup> The “impossible state” of the book’s title is the Islamic state. Hallaq writes that “judged by any standard definition of what the modern state represents”, the idea of an Islamic state is “both an impossi-

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<sup>27</sup> Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State. Islam, Politics, and Modernity’s Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

bility and a contradiction in terms”.<sup>28</sup> However, what is challenging about Hallaq’s book – certainly for the average western reader – is that he does not go on to argue, as we might expect from a New York professor, that Muslims need to reconcile themselves to the modern western secular nation-state. On the contrary, he launches a blistering attack on it, drawing on the arguments of many western scholars as he does so. The fundamental problem with the modern state is that it has replaced God in the lives and loyalties of its citizens.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, because it has no moral basis, its outworkings are ultimately unjust and destructive, as seen in effects such as the psychological state of western societies, and, in the wider world, the plight of refugees and the degradation of the environment.<sup>30</sup>

Islamists might be expected to agree with this damning view of the West and its influence in the world, so is Hallaq arguing, like Mawdudi, that Islam can redeem the nation-state, redirecting it towards righteousness, justice and equality? No again. For Hallaq, the mistake of Islamists is to think that the nation-state is a neutral structure that can be filled with Islamic content. Built into the very idea of the modern nation-state, Hallaq insists, are assumptions that are profoundly antithetical to Islam. So recent attempts to create Islamic states have failed because of the impossibility of reconciling the modern foundations on which they were building with the versions of Shari’a that they sought to impose.<sup>31</sup> Instead of failing miserably in their attempts to work within the Western system, Muslims should do something quite different by returning to their own tradition and recovering the fundamental principles, not of the Islamic state – a contradiction in terms – but of “Islamic governance”.<sup>32</sup> Hallaq acknowledges the danger for Muslims of mere nostalgia, but insists that while Shari’a is at present “institutionally defunct”, it remains “psychologically and spiritually latent” and can be reactivated as a “moral resource” in the modern world.<sup>33</sup> A very attractive picture of traditional Islamic societies follows. Hallaq argues that the effect of Shari’a was to create just, principled, egalitarian societies, based on a shared acceptance of the sovereignty of God (rather than the sovereignty of the state, as in the modern West).

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 27–28.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., e.g. 4–5.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., x–xi.2.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 6.48–70.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 13.

There is not time here, and I do not have the competence, to assess the historical accuracy of Hallaq's account of mediaeval Islamic societies. But he certainly presents a significant scholarly appeal to Muslims to turn away from the political models offered by the West and dig deep into their own tradition to find creative ways of re-establishing "Islamic governance" today.

## 5. Ovamir Anjum

Going one step further, Ovamir Anjum, again a professor at an American university (Toledo, Ohio), builds on Hallaq's work but gives his own argument a particular focus and a sharp edge by making it an explicit appeal for the restoration of the caliphate. In Anjum's learned and eloquent essay "Who Wants the Caliphate?", published online in October 2019, a sentence that particularly stands out is: "For nearly a century now [i.e., since the end of the caliphate], Islam has not been allowed to be Islam."<sup>34</sup> Mawdudi would surely say "Amen" to that, and to a considerable extent Anjum would, I think, sympathize with Mawdudi, certainly over against Abd al-Raziq. Anjum criticizes the modernist, secularizing Abd al-Raziq for his departure from the Qur'an, the Sunna and the clear consensus of the Islamic tradition.<sup>35</sup> We can be confident that Anjum would also reject an-Na'im's reverse abrogation theory. Like Hallaq, however, Anjum believes that to aim for the creation of an Islamic state is to be drawn onto the enemy's godless territory and so into an exercise which cannot end well.

Instead, Muslims should restore the caliphate. This task is, however, complicated by the discredit recently brought upon the concept of the caliphate by the claim of ISIS to have re-established it. Anjum dismisses ISIS as a racist "bunch of angry thugs and psychopaths" trading in the "pornography of violence".<sup>36</sup> He recognizes, however, that the creation of a new caliphate would require much hard thinking and consultation. Although the main burden of the essay is a discussion within the Muslim community about the history of thinking about the caliphate and why it should be restored today, Anjum also acknowledges the need for dialogue with "non-Muslim citizens of Muslim lands, regional neighbors, and the

<sup>34</sup> Anjum, 'Caliphate' (as note 2), section entitled 'Dreams, pasts, and futures'.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., section entitled 'The loss'.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., section entitled 'Looking ahead'.

global scholarly and scientific community”<sup>37</sup>; he notes, for example, that the “constitutional architecture” of the USA would be a valuable resource in the planning of a new caliphate.<sup>38</sup> His hope is that not just Muslims, but “most well-meaning people worldwide” will sympathize with his vision.<sup>39</sup> The task, he says in his essay’s final sentences, is to

reimagine the caliphate as a confederation of governments in the core regions of Islam that protects a range of human rights for all, provides political and economic stability to these regions, and allows Muslims to develop a variety of local political arrangements while embracing the larger religious and cultural unity of these regions. Such an order would not only be in accordance with the divine command but also is the only long term alternative to the [current reality in the Muslim world of a] mutually reinforcing coterie of despots and terrorists.<sup>40</sup>

Going back to my opening question, the answer from Hallaq and especially Anjum is clear: No, Muslims cannot authentically be themselves without political power, without the capacity to structure their communal existence in the light of the revelation in which they believe. They both see it is a mistake for Muslims to seek to create Islamic states, but they are both clear about the need for “Islamic governance”, without which, for nearly a century, “Islam has not been allowed to be Islam”. As regards my discussion of the different approaches to the relationship between the Meccan and Medinan paradigms of Abd al-Raziq, Mawdudi and an-Na’im, my impression is that for Hallaq and Anjum that question simply does not arise. The Taha/an-Na’im proposal for reverse abrogation would not be seen as meriting serious discussion. The abiding authority of the Medinan paradigm is upheld.

## 6. Concluding Reflections and Questions

While all the authors considered in this essay can be understood as primarily offering contributions to a debate within Islam, it is because that debate is so significant, not just to Muslims but also to all who live alongside them, that the work of these authors should be very widely pondered. While the reflections and questions with which I now conclude are framed

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., untitled introductory section.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., section entitled ‘Looking ahead’.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., untitled introductory section.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., section entitled ‘Looking ahead’.



mainly as a response to Anjum's call for dialogue about his proposals, I also refer to Hallaq and an-Na'im and am implicitly reflecting on all the material covered in this essay.

I first acknowledge that reading the work of Hallaq and Anjum in particular challenges me deeply. Western Christians such as myself may wish to push back against aspects of their polemic against a post-truth, morally bankrupt Western world presiding over global catastrophe and approaching collapse. Yes, there may still be features of the West that are worth defending against this polemic; and yes, the way of Christianity in the world, its witness in the political sphere, must in the end be different from that of Islam. Nevertheless, exposure to such Muslim perspectives poses a salutary challenge to Christians to become more faithful in their own vocation, deepening their commitment to speak truth to power and to pursue justice and peace for the most vulnerable and marginalized.

That said, there are important questions to ask. Just as Hallaq notes that Muslims need to be "creative" in their reformulation of the Shari'a and of Islamic governance, so Anjum calls on Muslims to "reimagine" the caliphate.<sup>41</sup> Cynics might suspect that these professors at American universities imagine that buzzwords like "creative" and "reimagine" will soothe western sensibilities and deflect attention from a regressive agenda. However, Hallaq and Anjum are feisty intellectuals with very little inclination to genuflect at western shrines, so let us take them seriously. What would creative Islamic governance or a reimagined caliphate look like? A key question is what they would be like for women and for religious minorities, the most obviously subordinate members of pre-modern Islamic societies, as indeed of other pre-modern societies, notably Christian ones. Regarding women, Hallaq briefly acknowledges the "patriarchal nature" of the pre-modern Islamic society that he so admires, but the implication is presumably that creative Islamic governance would be able to advance beyond this.<sup>42</sup> Both he and Anjum touch on the place of non-Muslims under Islamic rule, but not in any detail. My concern here is that although pre-modern Islam may have offered provision for non-Muslims that was tolerant by the standards of that time, even the most benign version of the traditional Islamic *dhimmi* system, which regulated the place in society of non-Muslims, does not look tolerable today. Would a reimagined caliphate

<sup>41</sup> Hallaq, *Impossible State* (as note 27), 172, n. 15; Anjum, 'Caliphate' (as note 2), section entitled 'Looking ahead'.

<sup>42</sup> Hallaq, *Impossible State* (as note 27), 184–185, n. 77.

offer equal citizenship to non-Muslims? If so, how would it reconcile that with Islamic tradition?<sup>43</sup>

That question about non-Muslims within the Muslim world connects to another, about the relationship of a reimagined caliphate to the nations of the wider non-Muslim world. When Anjum suggests that such a caliphate should be planned in an open dialogue with neighbouring non-Muslim nations, the implied hope is that it would also co-exist peacefully with them. But what, then, of the assumption in the Islamic tradition that the caliphate exists to spread the rule of Islam to the whole world, initially through invitation but if necessary through war? Within that theory, peace between Islam and the wider world of unbelief can only be temporary.<sup>44</sup> Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century new understandings of war and peace and of international order have been articulated by Muslims.<sup>45</sup> Certainly, the idea that Islam only ever mandated fighting in self-defence has become fairly mainstream, but while any such developments towards principles of peaceful co-existence are of course welcome and to be encouraged, one hopes that scholars of Anjum's calibre can undergird them with a greater degree of intellectual rigour than is normally found.

The nagging underlying question here is essentially: how does Islam relate to non-Islam? In broad terms, the classical Islamic tradition, building on Muhammad's triumph over unbelief and the astonishing military and political expansion of Islam in its first generations, worked on the assumption that non-Islam could be tolerated but Islam must rule. How, then, can modern Muslims edit out of their account of Islam this classical assumption that Islam will be in power over non-Islam, ultimately everywhere? Undoubtedly, the immediate goal in Anjum's vision of a reimagined caliphate is for Muslims to take responsibility again for their own life as a global community of believers and to organize themselves politically

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<sup>43</sup> On this point see Anjum's essay 'Dhimmi citizens: non-Muslims in the new Islamist discourse', in: *ReOrient* 2.1 (2016) 31–50.

<sup>44</sup> For an introductory overview of this topic, together with substantial bibliography, see Sarah Albrecht, 'Dār al-Islām and dār al-ḥarb', in: Kate Fleet et al. (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, III, Vol. 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 37–48.

<sup>45</sup> On Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi's substantial study, *Fiqh al-Jihād*, a particularly significant contribution in this field, see Sherman Jackson, 'The Appeal of Yusuf al-Qaradawi's Interpretation of Jihad', in: Elisabeth Kendall/Ewan Stein (eds), *Twenty-First Century Jihad. Law, Society and Military Action* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 312–333, and Rachid al-Ghannouchi, 'What is New about Yusuf al-Qaradawi's Jihad?', in: Kendall/Stein, *Jihad*, 334–350.



in light of their faith. There is no hint in his essay of the militancy and triumphalist expectations of early Islam and the classical caliphate. So where has that gone? Given the serious and deeply respectful way in which Anjum engages with the Islamic tradition, this is an inevitable and indeed urgent question to address. If it is intended that the triumphalist aspect of the tradition should be permanently left behind, can we see the clear and convincing way in which it is proposed to carry out this transformation of the tradition? I touch here on the complex and sensitive question (with which, in various forms, Christians often wrestle with great perplexity and much mutual recrimination) of how any tradition explains significant reformation of its teachings while also claiming continuity with its authoritative origins. There is, however, no avoiding this question, on which so much depends and which in principle concerns the whole world. The fuller version of his argument which Anjum is presumably developing is therefore to be awaited with great interest.

My final point in response to Anjum arises from a more specifically Christian concern than the more general issues addressed immediately above. It is important for Christians to hear and understand the *cri de coeur* Anjum issues on behalf of millions of fellow-Muslims: “For nearly a century now, Islam has not been allowed to be Islam.” Maybe some version of the caliphate he proposes will prove necessary for the peace of the world. However, in the dialogue for which he calls I suspect many Christians would want to echo his phrase and suggest that in the Muslim world, for 1400 years, “Christianity has not been allowed to be Christianity”. Why? Because Christians have been deprived by Islamic governance of the legal freedom to obey the “Great Commission” entrusted to the disciples by the risen Christ to make and baptize disciples of all nations.<sup>46</sup> In making such a comment, I am aware of the danger of reducing Christian-Muslim dialogue to an unproductive litany of complaints and competitive suffering, angry shouting at each other about not being free to be ourselves. However, the mission of the Church is not an incidental feature of Christianity, but a fundamental aspect of the Church’s *raison d’être*. In this regard, we should note Anjum’s interesting observation that the caliphate is as essential to Islamic identity as the doctrine of the Trinity for Christians: “Why has the caliphate been so central to Islamic creed? Chiefly, because it was the defining problem of Islam – as Trinity was for

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<sup>46</sup> Matthew 28:16–20.

Christianity.”<sup>47</sup> Although this comment displays welcome sensitivity to the centrality of Trinitarian thinking to Christianity, I suggest that a better comparison is between the caliphate and the mission of the Church. For all their obvious differences, these hold broadly similar places in the ways that Muslims and Christians respectively have understood their tasks in the world in response to what they believe they have received from God.

For Christians, Muslims, and others to address how we share the spaces in which we live alongside each other in God’s world calls for “difficult negotiations”. This point is especially emphasized by an-Na’im, and is also acknowledged by Anjum. In their impulses towards being fully themselves, different communities will often be in tension with each other, especially when they believe that in following these impulses they are obeying God. As a starting point in the handling of these tensions, we at least need to understand what matters in the other communities to which we relate, and the debates within them. To that end, I hope that this essay will be of some use. I also hope that listening to how Muslims debate the relationship between their faith, the political order and the common good will deepen the commitment of Christians to reflection, prayer and action in relation to these same questions that face us all in our divided, unjust, violent, and wounded world.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Anjum, ‘Caliphate’ (as note 2), section entitled ‘The theory of the caliphate’.

<sup>48</sup> For further resources for Christian reflection on these matters in the Christian-Muslim interface, see in particular Joshua Ralston, *Law and the Rule of God. A Christian Engagement with Sharī‘a* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) and Felix Körner, *Political Religion. How Christianity and Islam Shape the World* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2020). Also relevant are: John J. Donohue/Christian W. Troll (eds), *Faith, Power, and Violence. Muslims and Christians in a Plural Society, Past and Present* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1998); Lesslie Newbigin et al., *Faith and Power. Christianity and Islam in ‘Secular’ Britain* (London: SPCK, 1998); Richard Sudworth, ‘Christian Responses to the Political Challenge of Islam’, in: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 24 (2013) 191–211; idem, *Encountering Islam. Christian-Muslim Relations in the Public Square* (London: SCM, 2017); Lucinda Mosher/David Marshall (eds), *Power, Divine and Human. Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

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### *Zusammenfassung*

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die innermuslimische Debatte darüber, ob der Islam auch ohne eine staatliche Kontrolle im Namen des Islams authentisch sein kann. Eine Bandbreite muslimischer Stimmen wird hierbei einbezogen. Ali Abd al-Raziq (in den 1920er-Jahren) und Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im (in den letzten Jahrzehnten) boten recht unterschiedliche Argumente für die Kompatibilität des Islams mit einem säkularen Staat. Im Gegensatz dazu stritt Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts leidenschaftlich gegen einen Säkularismus, der dem Islam fundamental entgegenstehe. In letzter Zeit haben Wael Hallaq und Ovamir Anjum die Idee eines modernen Nationalstaats problematisiert, indem sie vorgeschlagen haben, dass Muslime charakteristische islamische Formen der Ausübung politischer Autorität anstreben sollten, so etwa Anjums Vorschlag einer neuen Form des Kalifats. Der Aufsatz schliesst mit Überlegungen zu dieser Debatte aus einer christlichen Perspektive.

### *Keywords – Schlüsselwörter*

Secularism – Islam – Nation-state – Caliphate – Qur'an