

# INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

**Secularism in Singapore:  
Asatizah's Perspectives on its Reconcilability with Islam**

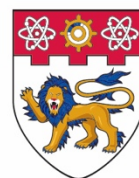
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# **INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS**

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**Secularism in Singapore: *Asatizah*'s Perspectives on its  
Reconcilability with Islam**

Mohammad Alami Musa and Nursheila Muez

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## Abstract

A qualitative study that involved a representative group of *asatizah* (religious leaders and teachers) in Singapore found that they embraced secularism as a political ideology, largely due to its utilitarian and pragmatic values. However, a majority of them remain sceptical about the reconcilability of secularism with Islam. This scepticism stemmed from the *asatizah*'s understanding that the Prophet and the Rightly Guided Caliphs who succeeded him were both religious and political leaders, hence setting the example and precedence, for an Islamic polity to be governed by Islamic laws. Further, they acknowledged that Islam's characteristic as a perfect and holistic religion meant that it provided guidance on all dimensions of life including political governance. This study is significant because it can be one indicator of the thinking and views of the larger body of *asatizah* who are the primary influencers of Islamic life in Singapore. This article looks at the resources within Islamic tradition and scholarship to respond to issues that surfaced in the study which have a bearing on the reconcilability of secularism in Singapore with Islam. It also discusses Singapore's model of secularism and how its unique characteristics have attracted the *asatizah* to embrace it for pragmatic benefits in providing a conducive socio-political context for Islam to be practised as a minority religion.

## Introduction

The reconcilability of secularism in Singapore with Islam was the subject of a qualitative study from July 2017 to August 2018. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty-seven *asatizah*. They came from four different sectors which engaged almost all of the *asatizah* in Singapore, namely state establishments, mosques, private religious educational institutions, and social service organisations. They were chosen based on their age group, gender, and the region (either Middle East or Southeast Asia) where they pursued higher Islamic education, so that the *asatizah* involved in the study matched the general profile of the *asatizah* fraternity in Singapore.

The questions for the interview were divided into four broad sections: (1) general views on secularism (2) secularism and politics, (3) secularism in Singapore, and (4) the idea of an Islamic state. The questions were reviewed with regard to their intent and clarity. Trial interviews were then conducted. Several changes were made to the questions before they were finally adopted. The interviews were done in person in a language preferred by the interviewees. As they were open-ended, interviewees had the opportunity to express their thoughts comprehensively. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants and a code of ethics governing research interviews was explained to them. A report was then prepared for each interview, analysed and a scoring system was used to categorise interviewees according to their responses. There was an undertaking that opinions expressed in the interview would be anonymised and would not be attributable to any specific individual.

### Key Findings

The findings of the interviews were already published as an occasional paper in this series. In summary, there were two key findings. First, almost all of the *asatizah* (thirty-five out of thirty-seven) accepted secularism as a political ideology of the state – in other words, they accepted the separation of religion and state, and agreed that the state and its functions should remain secular. Their embrace of secularism as the state ideology was based on pragmatic as well as utilitarian reasons. Second, however, the majority of those who accepted secularism as a political ideology of the state (thirty-three out of thirty-five), hesitated to accept the reconcilability between secularism and Islam.<sup>1</sup>

The interviews revealed the reasons that have contributed to the hesitation to accept the reconcilability between Islam and secularism. They are as follows: (a) the understanding that secularism is regarded as irreligious and immoral and could lead to moral relativism; (b) the belief that the model provided by Prophet Muhammad both as a religious and political leader governing Medina ought to be followed as a Sunna (way of the Prophet); (c) the recognition that the roles of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (632-660 CE) were a combination of religious and political leaderships; (d) the acceptance of the notion that the system of caliphate after the Rightly Guided Caliphs, that is in the era of Islamic empires, possessed a strong element of religion; (e) the aspiration to see that the Islamic state project is actualised as an alternative to the idea of the caliphate; (f) the understanding of Islam as an all-encompassing religion that includes a political dimension; (g) the scepticism that the governing of a state without religion may result in weaker accountability on the part of leaders; (h) the belief that the implementation of Shari‘a based laws is a divine command and it can only be achieved with the establishment of an Islamic state.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this paper is to present a broader discussion on the reconcilability between Islam and secularism in Singapore based on the above findings of the interviews with *asatizah* and to provide perspectives

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<sup>1</sup> See Mohammad Alami Musa, “Islam and Secularism in Singapore: Between Embrace and Belief,” *Interreligious Relations* 3 (2019): 1-11, available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/IRR-Issue-3-April-2019.pdf>. Three strands of thinking on secularism existed among the *asatizah* who were interviewed. (Strand 1): A minority of them (4 out of 37) strongly embraced the secular state ideology and believed that it is reconcilable with Islam. (Strand 2): A smaller minority (2 out of 37) fully rejected the secular state ideology and (Strand 3): The remaining majority (31 out of 37) embraced the secular state ideology but it was characterised by a degree of scepticism towards its reconcilability with Islam. This article is a response to the findings of the study presented in the earlier article. It is therefore necessary to cross-refer this article with the earlier article, indicated above.

<sup>2</sup> The use of the term ‘Islamic state’ in this article does not refer to the ‘Islamic State’ declared by ISIS. It refers generally to a polity governed by a Muslim leader and under Islamic laws.

from within Islamic tradition and scholarship to respond to the perceived impediments to reconcilability. It hopes to contribute to the discourse on secularism (as the ideology of the state pursued for its pragmatic benefits) and its reconcilability with Islam, in the Singapore context.

## Understanding of Secularism

Many of the *asatizah* interviewed were unaware of the discussions of secularism in contemporary Islamic scholarship.<sup>3</sup> Those who claimed to have come across secularism in their personal readings or undergraduate curriculum mainly cited the work by Malaysian scholar, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, titled *Islam and Secularism*.<sup>4</sup>

Secularism, according to Naquib al-Attas, is an ideology defined as a set of ideas or philosophy that forms the worldview of the state. It is the crystallization of the process of secularisation.<sup>5</sup> Naquib defined secularization as the “deliverance of man from religious and then metaphysical control to reason.”<sup>6</sup> These definitions resonated with *asatizah* who were familiar with the scholar.

The *asatizah*, who from their Islamic perspective, rejected the secular state ideology (2 out of 37) took a firm position that secularism had failed as a basis of public morality and ethical conduct of the state. Nevertheless, their view that secularism is either immoral or amoral was challenged by other *asatizah* during the interviews. For example, an *ustaz* interviewed opined that “secularism had no ‘theology’ and hence there was no question about it going against Islamic values”. Secularism is merely a nineteenth century movement that was expressly intended to provide a certain theory of life and conduct without reference to a deity or a future life. The implications are that human improvement is attained by material means alone.<sup>7</sup> It manifests itself in many domains of life that include the economy, social order and political arrangement of the modern nation-state without religion as its basis.

The negative perception of secularism held by this minority group of *asatizah* is certainly not unique to the local context of Singapore. For instance, citing the Pakistani experience, Moonis Ahmar mentioned that anything that is identified as secular is viewed as anti-religious or non-religious. Secularism is also equated with atheism and Westernisation, which connotes irreligiousness. Hence the term secularism in the Pakistani context is translated as *la diniyya* which literally means no religion.<sup>8</sup> The appropriate Arabic term for secularism was discussed by Nader Hashemi who traced various attempts by past scholars to ascertain it, for example by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (*‘urf, dunyawī, zamānī*), Jamaluddin al-Afghani (*dahr*) and by later scholars who chose *la diniyya*.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> There is a slew of works by Muslim scholars that discuss secularism. Examples are Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam & the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008; Abdullah Saeed, “Secularism, State Neutrality & Islam,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*, eds Phil Zuckerman and John R. Shook, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017: 188-200; Nader Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009; Ali 'Abd al-Raziq, “Message Not Government, Religion Not State,” in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1925]: 29-36; Abdelwahab El-Affendi, *Who Needs an Islamic State?*, 2nd Edn, London: Malaysia Think Tank London, 2008 [1991]; Abdulrahman Abdulkadir Kurdi, *The Islamic State: A Study Based on the Islamic Holy Constitution*, London: Mansell Publishing, 1984; Moonis Ahmar, *Conflict Management & Vision for a Secular Pakistan: A Comparative Study*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; and Muhammad Sa'id al-Ashmawi, “Shari'ah: The Codification of Islamic law,” in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed. Kurzman: 49-56.

<sup>4</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, Malaysia: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, 1978. Naquib al-Attas is a frequently referred to Malaysian scholar of Islam. About 30 per cent of *asatizah* in Singapore received higher Islamic education in Malaysia and they are familiar with his writings and ideas. Moreover, Naquib al-Attas wrote in Malay, which is a working language for Singaporean *asatizah*.

<sup>5</sup> Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 44.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Azzam Tamimi, “The Origin of Arab Secularism,” in *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East*, eds John Esposito and Azzam Tamimi, London: C. Hurst & Co, 2002: 13-28, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Ahmar, *Conflict management & Vision for a Secular Pakistan*, 41-44. Ahmar cited Saqlain Imam, “A Fallacious Binary,” *The News International*, Karachi, 3 October 2010 and Hasan Yilmaz, “Egypt, Pakistan, Islamic Secularism,” <http://beta.todayzaman.com/columnistDetail-getNewsById.acton?newsId=z61690> (website has since been shut down).

<sup>9</sup> Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy*, 135-138.

Furthermore, the minority group of *asatizah* mentioned above cited Naquib al-Attas' affirmation that secularism caused a deconsecrating of values which makes all value systems transient and relative.<sup>10</sup> According to Naquib al-Attas, secularism carries little normative essence. It cannot handle fundamental ethical and moral questions, but it is conducive to pluralism and inter-religious co-existence.<sup>11</sup> An important principle of secularism is the recognition and tolerance of diverse ideas, beliefs and orientations. According to the above-mentioned *asatizah* who rejected the secular state ideology, this has paved the way for pluralism with regard to values, ethics, principles and fundamental truths to be embraced as part of the social ethos. They raised concern and expressed that such pluralism could lead to relativism with regard to what is right and wrong as well as what is true and false. Their fear is not unfounded. Pluralism with respect to religions and beliefs emerged in secular Europe as a reaction to the absolutist thinking of dominant central religious authorities which dictated fixed ways of how Christianity must be understood and practiced. As a result, contending ideas as well as ideologies proliferated in society and this pluralism and spirit of tolerance led to the situation of relativism where it was declared that there was no such thing as one idea or belief that was true. The circumstances in which relativism could occur were discussed by Syed Hussein al-Attas (d. 2007) in his book *Kita Dengan Islam*.<sup>12</sup>

## The Issue of Reconcilability: A Discussion Based on Islamic Traditions and Historical Experiences

### *Fusion of Political and Religious Authorities in Early Islamic History*

All the *asatizah* interviewed held the opinion that Prophet Muhammad was both a religious and political leader. This provided the basis of their thinking that there was no separation between religious and political authority during the time of the Prophet. While some of the *asatizah* acknowledged that there was a degree of separation of religion from worldly matters, most ultimately did not dispute that the Prophet was both a religious leader and a political leader, and that he governed Medina according to religious principles and laws. This was why, to some of the *asatizah*, the Prophet's leadership model and his governance of Medina is regarded as the ideal example of Islamic governance and an Islamic state.<sup>13</sup>

However, we argue that these *asatizah* need to consider another perspective on the context of Muhammad's prophethood. We cite here the views of Egyptian scholar 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq (d. 1966) that while the Prophet indeed performed a political role, it was not in the form of a king or emperor. He dismissed the identification of Prophet Muhammad as a king or founder of a state. To 'Abd al-Raziq, the Prophet was the Messenger of a religious call but he did not have a government, nor did he rule or establish a kingdom in the political sense of the term. 'Abd al-Raziq argued that the Prophet exercised his leadership through a "prophetic political unity", that is, his political power was derived from his special prophethood status, and that he performed "many other worldly functions without the set-up of what a political entity like a state would entail". It is also explicit in the Qur'an that the Prophet was only a Messenger, and not a guardian or dominator and hence could not be a king as the pre-requisite for kingship was absolute domination and might over his subjects (Q 4:80 and Q 6:66-67). Furthermore, 'Abd al-Raziq emphasised that there is nothing in the Qur'an and Hadith (traditions or sayings of the Prophet) which shows that Islam has a political character.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Islam is not a political ideology and hence does not set out any specific political guidelines or solutions for managing the affairs of a state. Political scientist P.J Vatikiotis reiterated this point when he said, "Political authority in Islam, therefore, is not simply based on Koranic sources."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Naquib al-Attas cited Dutch philosopher Cornelis van Peursen. See Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>12</sup> He listed a total of eight circumstances for the rise in the trend of relativism. See Syed Hussein al-Attas, *Kita Dengan Islam: Timbuh Tiada Berbuah*, Singapore: Pustaka Nasional, 1979, 9-14. Syed Hussein, however, did not believe that secularism was antithetical to Islam.

<sup>13</sup> See Musa, "Islam and Secularism in Singapore," 9-10.

<sup>14</sup> 'Abd al-Raziq, "Message Not Government, Religion not State," 29-34. 'Abd al-Raziq's views were rejected by the traditional scholars of al-Azhar in Egypt and also by modernist scholars like Rashid Rida.

<sup>15</sup> P.J. Vatikiotis, *Islam and the State*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2017 [1987], 24. Vatikiotis mentioned other influences (traditional, cultural and environmental) like tribalism and Turkish autocracy, that helped to shape political authority in Islam.

However, all of the *asatizah* interviewed agreed that, upon the demise of Prophet Muhammad, the Rightly Guided Caliphs who succeeded him were simultaneously religious leaders and political leaders. Although they recognised that there was no specific form of governance that was consistently employed throughout the era of the four caliphs, many of the *asatizah* agreed that religion was not completely divorced from politics and governance during this period. These *asatizah* viewed the Rightly Guided Caliphs to be excellent emulators of the Prophet in view of their closeness with him. As such, this era, which spanned thirty years after the Prophet's demise was also seen as the era in which these caliphs wielded both religious and political power.

It is interesting to note that a small minority of the *asatizah* who believed that Islam is not opposed to the secular state ideology (4 out of 37), felt that the fusion of political and religious authority within the Prophet was unique and this must not be used to justify such an arrangement beyond him. They echoed the view expressed by Islamic scholar Abdullahi An-Na'im. According to An-Na'im, the nexus between political power and religious authority was only possible during the time of the Prophet. He questioned the practicality of combining the two together which he viewed as requiring different skills sets. That is why, in the post-Muhammad era, the caliph needed to depend on religious authority to legitimise their political position.<sup>16</sup> This position was shared by Abdelwahab El-Affendi when he said that the idea of caliphate is unworkable because it is difficult to get an individual with the skills to run the entire state. That is why Umar (d. 644), the second Caliph, appointed a consultative council of six rather than just one successor. Moreover, although the ruler was theoretically expected to enforce Shari'a, he more often legislated and governed on the basis of customs and traditions. It is not easy to get a leader who is well acquainted not only with religion but equally important with the customs and traditions which are affairs of the world. Commenting on the demise of the caliphate of the Ottoman Empire, El-Affendi stated that in today's modern world, real authority has returned to the people because the caliphate has declined and it is no longer possible to have a true caliphate system.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Decline of Caliphate in the Era of Empire*

The caliphate started as a consultative form of leadership, with regard to appointment and functioning, during the time of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. Soon after this early era, the caliphate degenerated into a hereditary, authoritarian and usurpatory form.<sup>18</sup> The caliphate suffered disintegration early in Islamic history.<sup>19</sup> The majority of the *asatizah* interviewed held similar historical perspectives about the caliphate. In fact, they viewed that religious authority and political authority became separate during the period of the succeeding empires, namely the Umayyads, Abbasids and Ottomans. They quoted the distinct functions of the *ulama'* (religious scholars) and *umara'* (political leaders) as evidence of the separation. Another view that they highlighted was that these empires were not caliphates but in fact established monarchies, in which political power was decided based on lineage rather than spirituality, religious knowledge or level of piety. This meant that the ruler was not simultaneously a religious or spiritual leader. Nevertheless, these *asatizah* opined that political power had to be intrinsically sacred (which was no longer the case), and hence Muslims after the era of Prophet Muhammad and the Rightly Guided Caliphs had to make do with this illusion that the caliphs during the Umayyad, Abbasid and Ottoman empires possessed religious power.<sup>20</sup> The caliphs governed the land according to Islamic principles and Islamic laws and in this regard all of the *asatizah* interviewed considered these empires as Islamic empires. Nevertheless, the separation of political and religious authorities was more apparent during the last of the empires, the Ottoman Empire, because the state, in effect, ceased to lay claim to religious authority which then ended up in the exclusive hands of the *ulama'*.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> An-Na'im, *Islam & the Secular State*, 53-54.

<sup>17</sup> El-Affendi, *Who Needs an Islamic State?*, 81-83. El-Affendi discussed the demise of the Ottoman Caliphate and the bid by the Kemalists to salvage it to just be a spiritual caliphate without political power so that the dignity of the system could still be safeguarded. The attempts by the Khilafat movement in India in 1919 and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928 failed to resurrect the caliphate system because they could not find suitable candidates.

<sup>18</sup> Hassan al-Turabi, "The Islamic State," in *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, ed. John Esposito, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1983: 241-251, 243.

<sup>19</sup> Vatikiotis, *Islam and the State*, 20.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 26. Citing orientalist and historian Patricia Crone, Vatikiotis concluded that what eventually happened was that the Ottoman state ceased claiming religious authority and that religious authority fully rested on the shoulders of the *ulama'*.



### *The Islamic State in the Modern Era*

When asked about their conception of an Islamic state, all of the *asatizah* were quick to reject the idea of the Islamic State that was popularised by ISIS. Instead, one of the interviewees outlined three characteristics of an Islamic state. An Islamic state is a state that is: (1) governed by a Muslim leader; (2) peaceful and ensures the safety of its citizens; and, (3) able to implement Islamic laws justly. Many of the *asatizah* echoed these points.

Nonetheless, the *asatizah* who rejected the secular state (2 out of 37) held the view that Islam was not compatible with the separation of religion from state, and offered several reasons, namely: religion was needed to make political leaders accountable for their actions; religion would ensure public morality and ethical conduct of the state; and, the fusion of religious and political authorities would enable God's sovereignty to govern the earth. These *asatizah* questioned if leaders or rulers could be made accountable for their actions if religion, which they believed provided the legitimacy to rule, was not the basis of governing the state. They argued that in a secular democracy, leaders were accountable to the people whose interest might not be aligned to what God commanded and this would invoke His wrath. An example that was commonly cited by the interviewees was the legalisation of same-sex marriages or what was seen as the leniency of states in allowing this agenda to enter mainstream public discourse and debates. This was perceived by the *asatizah* as a serious weakness of the secular system, that is the will of the people could lead to the normalisation and legalisation of unlawful (*haram*) activities which go against God's commands. This then contradicts the purpose of human beings to achieve God's pleasure (*rida*) in their worldly life.

The views of Abdullahi An-Na'im are cited here in response to the above position. An-Na'im maintains that secularism is not amoral or immoral. It encourages a civic ethos, the value of pluralism and acceptance of differences.<sup>22</sup> On this note, an *asatizah* who shared a similar view opined, "If there is to be an Islamic state, it should be based on secularism because secularism promotes positive values." As an ideology that is not devoid of ethical values, secularism fundamentally has as its end objective the promotion of human welfare. This is indeed virtuous although it exclusively employs material means. It gives due attention to moral human development. By the way, to be secular does not mean that one cannot believe in an afterlife.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, secular countries have been shaped by secular ethics. The philosopher Ibn Sina (d. 1037), for example, spoke about the idea of a just and prosperous state that relied on Aristotle's ethics which is founded on natural laws. He defined happiness to incorporate moral virtues which include courage, generosity as well as justice and intellectual virtues such as knowledge, wisdom and insight.<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, *asatizah* who rejected the secular state highlighted that Islam is a religion that is all-encompassing and comprehensive (*shumul, kaffah*), which meant that Islam permeates everything in life including governance of a state, which is carried out in the service of God.<sup>25</sup> They believed that there were sufficient resources within the Islamic tradition to form the underlying principles of managing a state to achieve the ultimate purpose of seeking God's pleasure. This understanding supported their view that Islam should not be divorced from the state. This view is in line with views of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian theologian, who maintained that throughout Islamic history, Islam has forged an inseparable relationship with the state in line with its status as a holistic system of belief and life.<sup>26</sup> As such, these *asatizah* looked back to Medina during the Prophet's time as their ideal Islamic state.

The *asatizah* interviewed were presented with the hypothetical situation in which Muslims form the majority community in Singapore. A majority of them responded with the view that the state should be governed by a dominantly Muslim leadership and run along Islamic lines. What was significant was that *asatizah* who

<sup>22</sup> An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*, 36-37.

<sup>23</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *The Principles of Secularism*, New York, NY: Dossier Press, 2015. See chapters III and IV.

<sup>24</sup> Zainal Abidin Ahmad, *Negara Adil Makmur Menurut Ibnu Siena*, Jakarta: Penerbit Bulan Bintang, 1974, 29. In the scheme of Aristotelian ethics, he also touched on the various forms of friendship and the relationship between the individual, society and state to lead a virtuous and moral life.

<sup>25</sup> al-Turabi, "The Islamic State," 242.

<sup>26</sup> Abdullah Saeed, "Secularism, State Neutrality and Islam," 195. Saeed presented al-Qaradawi's comparison between Islam and Christianity. According to Qaradawi, Christianity can accept secularism relatively easily while Islam's experience has been the opposite. Islam has provided a comprehensive guide regulating all aspects of life including those in the political sphere.

initially felt that the secular state was the best political arrangement when Muslims are a minority religious community, changed their position and felt that a "more Islamic" country would suit a Muslim-majority population. The reasons cited for this view varied: some opined that it was a matter of expedience as a Muslim leader would be able to understand the majority of the population better, while others thought that it "made sense" for a Muslim majority to be governed by a Muslim leader, and under Islamic laws. One respondent saw it as a necessity: a Muslim-majority country "had to" have a Muslim leader who could implement Islamic laws. Based on these responses, it could be argued that the majority of *asatizah* interviewed preferred a polity governed by Muslim leaders and Islamic laws if Muslims form the majority community.

## Islamic State, Shari'a and the Idea of a Good State

In their conception of a good state, the majority of *asatizah* interviewed did not see the need for the state to implement Shari'a laws. Three examples of laws that were popularly cited by them to clarify what they meant by Shari'a laws were laws on civil matters that involve usury, penal code based on *hudud* (Qur'anic penalties for penal crimes), and laws of apostasy as practiced in Muslim majority states like Pakistan. These *asatizah* had a very broad understanding of the term Shari'a which they understood to be the spirit or intent behind laws to achieve the "pleasure of Allah" like the preservation of life or the protection of property. Hence these *asatizah* interviewed felt that the spirit of the Shari'a was more important than the letter of the law. This was the view of Egyptian legal scholar Muhammad Sa'id al-'Ashmawi (d. 2013). According to al-'Ashmawi, Shari'a means a path or a way to God. It transcends the different schools of jurisprudence as it is a totality of norms common to these different schools.<sup>27</sup> It is therefore not a code of laws, rather it is normative. It is the spirit that brings one nearer to God. Most of the *asatizah* interviewed felt that the interests to be achieved by civil laws of a good state could be aligned to the spirit of the Shari'a. On this note, al-'Ashmawi recalled the adage of Islamic jurisprudence according to which: "where one finds the common interest, there is situated the law of God."<sup>28</sup> This provides the latitude for Muslims to create Shari'a-compliant civil laws that are appropriate to their context in this world.

Moreover, most *asatizah* interviewed were cognisant of the fact that the nation-state as we know it today, is a modern construct. They disagreed that there is any reference in the Qur'an about the idea or notion of state. This is similar to the view of 'Abd al-Raziq that nothing in the Qur'an or *Sunnah* or wisdom of reason that points to the obligation to establish a political state. There was no call to set up either a government or a state and nothing "of the tendencies to politics, nor of the aims of kings and commanders."<sup>29</sup> The idea of a nation-state came to the Middle East and the Muslim world from the West, defining for the first-time the idea of state by territory, language, common identity and common political loyalty.<sup>30</sup> In Islamic or Arabic tradition, ancestry and genealogy are important to define "people" rather than an understanding tied to the idea of territory.<sup>31</sup> This fairly recent introduction of the "state" in Islamic thought could explain why there are contradictory views on the idea of Islamic state.

Nevertheless, there were two (out of 37) *asatizah* interviewed who believed that religion must be the basis of the state. They supported the idea of the establishment of an Islamic state. For the purpose of discussion, the views of Islamic thinkers, notably, Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) will be cited here. The Tunisian historian threw out the arguments by Muslim theologians and philosophers that religion must be the basis of social order and statehood. This was because history, according to Ibn Khaldun, showed that people who did not recognise any divinity still lived in states that maintained prosperity and central authority.<sup>32</sup> The majority of *asatizah* involved in the study felt that a secular country could, in fact, be more Islamic than a self-declared Islamic state, if the former was able to govern its citizens fairly and justly as well as provide equal opportunities for all citizens.

<sup>27</sup> al-'Ashmawi, "Shari'ah: The Codification of Islamic law," 50-51.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 54-56.

<sup>29</sup> 'Abd al-Raziq, "Message Not Government, Religion not State," 36. 'Abd al-Raziq's position is summed up succinctly by saying that the prophetic epoch displayed very little of the aims of the political state and very little of the aspects of government.

<sup>30</sup> Vatikiotis, *Islam and State*, 41.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 37-38. Vatikiotis argued that the idea of state did not exist in Islamic political culture.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in El-Affendi, *Who Needs an Islamic State?*, 42-45. Ibn Khaldun's ideas have streaks of Machiavelli's thinking that might is right and power comes from the factor of *assabiya* (a concept of social solidarity in the context of tribalism).

The *asatizah* who rejected the secular state based their position on the perceived obligation for Muslims to implement the Shari'a which according to them can only be executed by an authority that has powers to mete out God given laws as revealed in the Qur'an. This authority, according to them, needs to be a governing body within the structure of an Islamic state or at least in a country with a Muslim leader and a majority Muslim population. These points had been discussed by thinkers like Iranian reformer Abdolkarim Soroush and Egyptian religious scholar Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905). Soroush maintained that there was no prohibition in the Qur'an or Hadith that might prevent religion-state separation. On the same note, Abduh reiterated that what were forbidden were the abandonment of religion, doing harm to people and damaging their interests. The separation of Islam from state did not result in either of the three harms.<sup>33</sup>

However, the few *asatizah* who rejected the secular state were able to describe neither what an Islamic state looks like nor what an Islamic state entails. They could not define whether the state was a democracy, monarchy, or caliphate. Scholars like Faisal Gazi and Sami Zubaida maintained that neither the Qur'an nor Hadith specify a particular form of governance, saying that God and the Prophet have left matters of governance for the believers to decide for themselves.<sup>34</sup> 'Abd al-Raziq offered another opinion. He maintained that Islam did not prescribe any definite system of government; the Prophet did not establish any state; and the types of government after the Prophet had no basis in Islamic doctrine.<sup>35</sup>

There is continuing controversy, according to political scientist Vatikiotis, about whether the Islamic state exists in reality or merely as an ideal.<sup>36</sup>

Except for the above few *asatizah* who desired the establishment of an Islamic state, all the other *asatizah* involved in the study spoke more about the idea of a good state rather than an Islamic state. They could describe a good state with greater clarity when compared to their understanding of the idea of an Islamic state. They strongly believed that a secular state could have the attributes of a good state and they affirmed this as citizens and *asatizah* performing their religious roles in the context of secular Singapore. In expounding this view, the *asatizah* believed that the characteristics of a good state were convergent with Islamic precepts. While Singapore's secularism posed several challenges to Islamic life, most *asatizah* interviewed felt that Singapore encapsulated the criteria of a good state, citing reasons of stability, freedom of belief and freedom to worship, safety, cleanliness, and absence of corruption.

Furthermore, they strongly felt that a good state is one that remains neutral towards religious beliefs. The majority of *asatizah* interviewed believed that the secular state can unite diverse communities as the principle of neutrality in secularism dictates that the state has to be impartial towards all religions. They were in consonance with the ideas of An-Na'im that legislation and public policy should reflect the beliefs and values of all citizens, including religious values, provided they do not belong to any specific religion.<sup>37</sup> *Asatizah* interviewed recognised the important condition of free will when speaking about practising Islam. According to another scholar, E.I.J. Rosenthal (d. 1991), an Islamic state is pure Shari'a and is unattainable whereas a state whose functions of authority are divided between secular power and religious power (*ulama'*) is historically feasible.<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, *asatizah* interviewed who believed that the secular state is not against their Islamic beliefs concurred with the idea that the role of a state is one that takes care of peoples' civil interests which include the preservation of life, protection of liberty, promotion of health and safeguarding of property rights. This view is aligned with John Locke's (d. 1704) definitions of the role of a state, which is not about other-worldly matters or securing a good after-worldly life.<sup>39</sup> These *asatizah* preferred to see that the state provides a neutral legal and administrative framework to achieve the above objectives. On the above question of the objectives of the state,

<sup>33</sup> Abdullah Saeed, "Secularism, State Neutrality and Islam," 195

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>35</sup> Cited in El-Affendi, *Who Needs an Islamic State?*, 85-88. El-Affendi noted the controversy generated by 'Abd al-Raziq's severe critique of the idea of the caliphate, the Prophet's form of leadership and political arrangement and the Islamic state that 'Abd al-Raziq's opponents claimed had been set up in the city of Madinah. 'Abd al-Raziq had to finally reverse his positions in the later part of his life.

<sup>36</sup> Vatikiotis, *Islam and the State*, 30. According to Vatikiotis, militant and radical Muslim movements outlined several characteristics of an Islamic state: it is a religious and not a territorial or ethnic concept; it is ideological since the state/political power is but an end to attain the ideal of implementing the Shari'a; and Islamic norms apply to its life and public affairs.

<sup>37</sup> An-Naim, *Islam and the Secular State*, 1-4, 38-39.

<sup>38</sup> Cited in Vatikiotis, *Islam and the State*, 30-31.

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Saeed, "Secularism, State Neutrality and Islam," 189.

all *asatizah* interviewed echoed scholar of multiculturalism, Bhikhu Parekh's idea that it is not the business of the state to ensure its citizens enter heaven.<sup>40</sup> In other words, all the interviewees did not want to see the state involved in religion unless the practice of religion was jeopardising security, health and public order. They felt that the state should embrace the liberal minimal theory of government. Where society can manage, government has no business to intervene. Social justice is achieved by society without government's intervention.<sup>41</sup>

The above opinions with regard to the demarcation of roles of the state and religion were expressed by the majority of *asatizah* interviewed. An-Na'im puts it across succinctly by saying that the role of the state is to ensure the promotion of human rights defined at two levels. At one level, it is about the will to live and this means the provision of physical means like health-care, education and housing, employment opportunities. The second level is about the will to be free and this entails the provision of impetus to pursue spiritual, moral and artistic well-being and excellence.<sup>42</sup> All the *asatizah* who accepted the idea of a secular state articulated that establishing an Islamic state is not the necessary condition for a good state to deliver the above objectives.

A majority of the *asatizah* interviewed who embraced Singapore's secular state model were also of the view that Shari'a-compliant laws could be derived from human interpretations of the Qur'an and the Sunna. Hence, they viewed that Shari'a-based laws are not divine (not unchangeable) and it is therefore possible for contemporary Muslims to undertake a similar process of modifying or updating the laws by interpreting verses of the Qur'an and Traditions of the Prophet to suit the needs of the present context. As a matter of comparison, the *asatizah*'s idea is akin to Abdullahi An-Na'im's idea of developing an alternative public law of Islam which is appropriate for implementation today.<sup>43</sup>

Most of the *asatizah* interviewed were satisfied that laws in Singapore by and large manifested the spirit of Shari'a as they promoted the well-being of society, preserved public morality and defined rights as well as obligations of citizens for harmonious co-existence. They believe that Singapore's secularism provides the conditions for the existence of such Shari'a-compliant laws in the country, notwithstanding that there are areas that contradict Islam which include the setting up of a casino and the legalisation of the sex industry.

## Singapore's Secularism: "Secularism with a Soul"

Singapore embraced secularism as a pillar of existence when it established itself as an independent and sovereign nation in 1965. This was during an era when the secularisation theory was popular and when even some theologians proclaimed the death of God and the coming of the secular city was celebrated.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, Singapore is not purist in its understanding of secularism. It does not dichotomise the "world strictly into the part with religion and the part without religion." Connotations of time and space being divided into two realities, the sacred and the profane, are truly meaningless.<sup>45</sup> Singapore does not simply confine religion to the private sphere, and is also not antagonistic to religion in the public sphere. This is because the state recognised the usefulness of religion in its early days after independence. It sees religions as functional to provide its citizens with the values, discipline and motivation to work hard and perform well in the economy. The prosperity gained will sustain the nation's survival.<sup>46</sup> Even today, the state acknowledges that the utility of religion lies in its deep and expansive tradition in promoting peace and harmony. The state's positive attitude towards religion gels well with the assertion made by Peter Berger that human consciousness is not coherent

<sup>40</sup> Bhikhu Parekh, "Secularism & Managing Religious Diversity," seminar organised by Centre of Excellence for National Security, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), 15 September 2015, available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/event/cens-seminar-on-secularism-and-managing-religious-diversity-by-professor-lord-bhikhu-parekh/#.Xo19NFMza8o>.

<sup>41</sup> al-Turabi, "The Islamic State," 245-6. Turabi discusses at length the operability of an Islamic state, the role of the *ulama* as the body that represents the *ummah* (people) with regard to enforcing God's will on earth, role of government, rights of the people and institutions of consultation (*Majlis Shura*).

<sup>42</sup> 'Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, "Shariah and Basic Human Rights Concerns," in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed Charles Kurzman, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1990]: 222-238, 225.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>44</sup> Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, 11.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-15. Casanova argued that the wall dividing this world into the secular and religious realms has broken down. There is only one world – the secular world – and religion has to find its new place or factor itself in it.

<sup>46</sup> Mohammad Alami Musa, *Engaging Religion with Pragmatism: The Singapore State's Management of Social Issues and Religious Tensions in the 1980s*, RSIS Working Paper No 305 (21 August 2017), 3 and 7, available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/WP305.pdf>.

and that one cannot be exclusively religious or exclusively secular as secularity and religion are not mutually exclusive. Singapore's constructive relationship with religion is indeed a good manifestation of Peter Berger's thinking.<sup>47</sup>

Singapore's model of secularism was internally formed and directed by the founding generation of political leaders. Based on NJ Demerath's typology, Singapore's secularism model is of the coercive type.<sup>48</sup> Its experience in being self-determining in embracing secularism is unique due to special historical circumstances and past developments. Two major riots which had religious undertones occurred in Singapore in 1950 and 1964.<sup>49</sup> In more recent times, the discovery of the terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Singapore in 2001, and cases of self-radicalised individuals after ISIS was established in 2014, reinforced the fear of religion being divisive and used for violent ends.

Singapore's experience with secularism is a departure from the subtraction theory of secularisation which states that religion's role and presence will diminish as the state secularises when it embarks on modernisation. However, not only has religion not declined, but it is impossible, according to Charles Taylor, to remove something like religion which is a central dimension of culture. This has been his critique of the subtraction theory.<sup>50</sup> Religions continue to thrive in Singapore and religiosity has been on the ascent over the last five decades, since independence in 1965. Singaporean society remains religious, with 82% of Singaporeans embracing religion today.<sup>51</sup>

The above nuanced understanding of secularism in Singapore had made a majority of the *asatizah* involved in the study open to the idea of secularism and even embraced it as a political ideology. In the political context, these *asatizah* understood a secular country to be "neutral", "non-discriminatory" and which "does not favour any religion at the expense of another". A significant proportion of the *asatizah* interviewed thought that a secular country was beneficial, even necessary, for Muslims living as the minority community because their rights are better protected.

#### *Key Principles of Singapore's Secularism*

A majority of *asatizah* involved in the study were attracted to Singapore's secular state model because of the following unique features that they cited during the interviews:

- (a) *Singapore is neither an irreligious or an anti-religion state*: it is merely a non-religious state that desacralizes the management of state affairs and electoral politics, but it recognises the positive role of religion to buttress families and society.
- (b) *Singapore consciously embraces a "religion-friendly" model of secularism*: there are many manifestations of the state's accommodation to the needs of religions, which include provision of land for constructing places of worship, the setting up of religious advisory boards which act as the privileged interlocutors with the state, and special provisions in the Constitution as well as unique statutes for the Muslim community.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Peter L Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014, 53-54.

<sup>48</sup> N.J. Demerath III, "Secularization and Sacralization Deconstructed and Reconstructed," in *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, eds J.A. Beckford and N.J. Demerath III, London, Sage, 2007: 57-80, 71-5. Based on a matrix of two axes (imposed externally or emerged internally (as the first axis), and directed by leaders or self-directed by the people (as the second axis)), Demerath formulated four types of secularism. Singapore's model emerged internally and was directed by leaders – hence it is the coercive type based on Demerath's typology.

<sup>49</sup> The Maria Hertogh riots happened in 1950 while the communal riots during Prophet Muhammad's birthday occurred in July 1964.

<sup>50</sup> Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, "Introduction" in *Rethinking Secularism*, eds Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 8-9.

<sup>51</sup> Department of Statistics Singapore, *Highlights of General Household Survey 2015* (2015), available at: [https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/visualising\\_data/infographics/ghs/highlights-of-ghs2015.pdf](https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/visualising_data/infographics/ghs/highlights-of-ghs2015.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> The state acknowledges the indigenous status of the Malay/Muslim community by according the community certain privileges that are enshrined in the Constitution, namely a supplementary code of legislation enacted by Parliament termed the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA), the formation of special institutions like the Syariah Court to govern personal and family matters as well as the establishment of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) as a statutory board together with the appointment of a Minister-in-charge for Muslim Affairs. These special arrangements accorded by the state were generally well received by a majority of the *asatizah* interviewed.

- (c) *Singapore's embrace of secularism is neither doctrinal nor aggressive*: unlike in the French experience, Singapore adopts a pragmatic approach, where practices are dominated by managerial as well as instrumental considerations. The state's intention is not to deliver society from religion or metaphysical control to reason or break sacred symbols. In short, it is what Rowan Williams terms "procedural secularism" rather than "programmatically secularism."<sup>53</sup>
- (d) *Singapore judiciously applies the principle of equidistance in managing the differing needs and interests of the diverse religious communities*: the state gives space to religions in the public square which signifies that there is no "hard and fast" rule to strictly define common space. In practising the principle of equidistance, the state either accords equal treatment or equitable treatment to each religion.<sup>54</sup> For example, there is equal absence of religion from media space.<sup>55</sup> It is by law that religious groups are not allowed to proselytise or spread religious messages on official media and broadcast channels. Air time for churches, which used to be allowed to broadcast their worship services over national radio, was removed by the state as it adopted an equalising downwards approach so that it would be seen to accord equal treatment to all religious groups.

Nonetheless, the state's management of religion is not without its criticisms. All the *asatizah* interviewed raised the issue of state "intrusion" into certain religious matters seen as not under the purview of the secular state. Regulating religious preachers, and regulating the use of the headscarf (*tudung*) for Muslim female uniformed officers and nurses were popular issues which the respondents raised. Here, it is important to note that criticisms against the secular state are not exclusive or unique to the Muslim community. Rather, scholars have shown that other religious communities also deem the state's embracement of secularism as a challenge to them carrying out certain religious obligations.<sup>56</sup>

All *asatizah* recognised the dominant role of the state in Singapore. Nevertheless, the state deems active intervention in religious matters as necessary only when needed. One of the ways the secular state intervenes in religion is by delineating the boundaries between the secular and the religious. It also decides what religion is, and the content of the religious domain.<sup>57</sup> Talal Asad calls this political secularism which refers to the modern state's sovereign power to re-organise the substantive features of religion, stipulating what religion is and what it ought to be, and assigning its proper content and disseminating its ethical framework.<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, the state wants to see its citizens redirect their loyalty from religion to the state.<sup>59</sup> In the Singapore context, the state justifies its control over religion and religious expression for the purposes of maintaining social harmony and managing the projects of state- and nation-building.<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

The understanding of the nature of Muhammad's prophethood (with regard to the fusion of his political and religious roles); the perception that the Rightly Guided Caliphs exercised both political as well as religious

<sup>53</sup> See Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, London: Bloomsbury, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Mohammad Alami Musa, "Enhancing Singapore's secularism," *The Straits Times* (4 February 2016), available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/enhancing-singapores-secularism>.

<sup>55</sup> Eugene K.B. Tan, "Keeping God in Place: The Management of Religion in Singapore," in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and the Institute of Policy Studies, 2008: 55-82.

<sup>56</sup> See for instance, Daniel Goh, "State and Social Christianity in Post-colonial Singapore," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 25.1 (April 2010): 54-89, and George Radics and Vineeta Sinha, "Regulation of Religion and Granting of Public Holidays: The Case of Tai Pucam in Singapore," *Asian Journal of Social Sciences* 46 (2018): 524-548.

<sup>57</sup> This is exemplified during the introduction of Religious Knowledge in the national education syllabus. See Musa, *Engaging Religions with Pragmatism*. Another example is when distinguishing a cultural event from a religious event, see Wong Pei Ting, "Police grants permit of 'secular, cultural' St Patrick's Day celebrations," *TODAY Online* (16 March 2018), available at: <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/police-grants-permits-secular-cultural-st-patricks-day-celebrations>.

<sup>58</sup> Talal Asad, "Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism," in *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech*, eds Talal Asad et. al, New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2013: 14-57.

<sup>59</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016, 11-12.

<sup>60</sup> Wee Kim Wee, "President's Address to Parliament on Monday, 9 January 1989," Ministry of Communications and Information (9 January 1989), para 34, available at: <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/70b8a9f6-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>.

authorities; and the historical experiences of governing empires applying Shari‘a laws have made many Muslims sceptical about the reconcilability between Islam and secularism as the ideology of the state in Singapore. There is, however, ample room in Islamic thought to provide alternative perspectives to the above-mentioned understanding of doctrine and history. Contemporary Islamic scholars are reviewing the idea of the need for governing a state based on the implementation of Shari‘a laws and are providing theological, legal, and textual sources to support the permissibility of Muslims to embrace secularism as an ideology of the state without compromising their Islamic faith.

Furthermore, the model of secularism that is religion-friendly in the Singapore context has enabled the majority of *asatizah* involved in the study to dispel many negative notions that they have about it, even though there is disquiet regarding the interventions of the state in several aspects of religious life. By and large, they agree that the secular ideology is most ideal to govern a plural society. The secular system is also beneficial for Muslims in Singapore who live as the minority in the country as their freedom to practise Islam is protected. Nonetheless, there is a minority of the *asatizah* who idealise a polity governed by a Muslim leader and under Islamic laws. Again, there are ample resources within the tradition, as this paper has presented, to rebut the view that such an establishment is necessary for Muslims to conduct their religious lives.

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