

The Religio-Political Issue: Religion and the Secular State

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Sorting out what lies behind the apparent consensus demanding a ‘Muslim State’ and the loud castigation of the notion of ‘secularism’, contemporary Muslim thought has come hard up against the religio-political question. Our thesis here is that the notions of ‘Muslim State’ and of ‘secularism’ mask a wide disparity of views on the religio-political question whether we come at it from an analytical-historical approach or look at it through the nature of the current state, the form of its legitimacy, and the manner in which one gets to be part of it.

It is not our intention to lay down fine theoretical definitions for these two terms. We will come at it through the ambiguous way the

terms have been used to gather together the strands of the question as it is currently articulated through the currently fierce confrontation between fundamentalism and secularism. Within contemporary Muslim thought we can identify three very different ways of addressing the question:

— One approach defines the ideal Muslim state by the forms it has historically taken — from the days of the Caliphate down to the modern secular state — making liberal reference to religious scholarly sources of the middle Islamic period.

— Another way is to work at ‘Islamizing’ the modern nation state. This involves endowing its bureaucratic institutional structures with religious legitimacy, and making corrective adjustments to its legislative scale of values.

— The third way is to adopt the modern state and the political rationale upon which it is based on the basis that its executive function and the way it performs its services do not

essentially conflict with Islamic authority. This view also accepts all similar value systems.

On two obvious grounds the difference between these three approaches is very great indeed. **The first issue** is how the state itself is characterized. Is it a legitimate Imâmate [‘constitutional monarchy’ of sorts]? Is it a pragmatic organizing instrument? Or is it the embodiment of shared communal values? **The second issue** involves the relationship between this state and religion. Does religion define the state’s constitutional essence; is it the pivotal element in its identity? Or is the state a human institution governed by religious values? Or is the state an organizing instrument for society that has its own internal rationale and takes issue with no religious or doctrinal outlook?

FIRST: A Doctrinal State or a State for the Muslim Commonwealth?

Was the historical model of the Muslim state that of a doctrinal state like many other ancient and not-so-ancient states known to posterity, or was it a state representing the Muslim

consensus (*al-jamâ'ah al-muslimah*) having, in itself, no particular religious agenda?

This question has absorbed modern Arab and Muslim thought more than any other. Without getting tangled in details, we observe in overview that most contemporary Muslim thought, although it states explicitly and clearly that Islam established no religious state, nonetheless, with rare exceptions, does not see government departing from one of two models: The first model is that of the Caliphate or the Sultanate as the Islamic middle ages conceived its legitimacy. The second model is 'the rule of God', a state ruled by divine law, the sovereignty and legitimacy of which are governed by the revealed text and not by a commonwealth that legislates.

Going back to the foundational documents of contemporary Islamist thought (produced by the first generation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) that deal with the question of religion and politics, we observe that for the first time they expressed their political program (the cliché was, 'Islam is both

religion and state’). But, in fact, they did not really get beyond the period of the Sultanates.

In his writings Hasan al-Bannâ (founder of the Muslim Brotherhood) rarely dealt with political topics. All that survives is a brief article on the three pillars of government. Government, he says, is responsible for the oversight of the populace, the unity of the commonwealth (*al-ummah*), and respecting the will of the people. Al-Bannâ was content to publish ideas that focused upon general principles and slogans dealing with justice and the need for consultation. He never did define a position on the nature of the liberal nation state that was beginning to take shape in his day. He did not speak of its legal ambiguities, the political order, and society’s relationship to it.

Furthermore, it is clear that the intellectual sources al-Bannâ used were limited to the ordering of the classic Sultanate. It was these sources that shaped his understanding of a state whose etiology and nature were actually very different. If he did examine the nature of

the representational constitutional system of the new state, generally speaking he saw nothing in it that clashed with Islam. He cast these modern changes in the 11th century terms of al-Mâwardî — ‘the ministry of implementation’, ‘the ministry of delegation’, and ‘the consultation of the folk of loosening and binding’.

Al-Bannâ’s disciple, ‘Abd-ul-Qâdir ‘Awdah, was perhaps the first to develop the Brotherhood’s theory concerning government in his famous book, *Islam and Our Political Circumstances* (*al-islâm wa awdâ‘u-nâ as-siyâsiyyah*), published in 1931. Even though ‘Awdah portrays the desired Islamic state using the model of the classic Sultanate (the caliphal state that protected religion and championed the interests of believers), nonetheless, in the context of the then-current political climate of the Brotherhood, he presents us with an approximation of what democracy means. That is to say, he focuses on those things that have to do with criminal laws and punishments, understanding these to

be the grounding for the legitimacy of the Muslim state.

‘Awdah writes, “Islam requires people to adhere to what God has revealed and imposed upon them. In their judgments they must stick to what God has sent, and exclusively on that ground they must implement government. This means nothing other than that government represents the consensus of Islam. That is Islam’s first line of defense. ... Islam is not only a system of doctrine; it is both doctrine and a system of order. It is not just a religion; it is both religion and state (*dîn wa dawlah*).”

Yûsuf al-Qaradâwî, in his *Absolutes* (*hatmiyyât*), published in the late 1960s, tried to further elaborate ‘Awdah’s thesis. He brought to bear upon this task his extensive acculturation as a legal scholar and his simplistic and contentious style. According to him, the Islamic enterprise would not be headed down the straight and narrow unless a state embraced it. This state would have to be governed under Islamic laws.

Al-Qaradâwî's earliest writings coincided with the works of two brothers, Sayyid Qubub and Muhammad Qutub. These latter differed from al-Qaradâwî's in that they did not focus upon legal and scholastic issues. Sayyid Qutub's vision of the Muslim enterprise was both radical and revolutionary. It proposed a radical discontinuity with 'deviant Muslim society' (the 'ignorant ones' of the 20th century) and with western modernism that he only saw to be an invasion through toddlers that must be rejected. "Islam knows nothing other than two kinds of society," he said, "Muslim society and the society of the ignorant (*al-jâhiliyyah*). ... Muslim society applies Islam doctrinally and devotionally, in terms of the *Sharî'ah* and public order, morally and in terms of deportment. ... The society of ignorance does not practice Islam, its doctrine and vision do not apply. It does not follow Islam's values, standards of judgment, discipline, laws, morality and patterns of behavior."

The political message of Islamist movements was expressed in two ways. In its 'open' guise it adopted a form of the Sultanate tradition but gave it a new twist. In accepting the representational system of the modern state it raised the process of consultation (*shûrâ*) to the level of a necessary and binding principle even though under a government that assessed Islam under the classification already noted. In its more secretive forms, it opted for radical and destructive fundamentalist terrorism (on the model of the alliance between the Talibân government in Afghanistan and the al-Qâ'idah organization).

What we want to note here is that contemporary Islamist thought, in its view of the state, swings back and forth in a vague manner between the standards of the Sultanate tradition (framed within the experience of the caliphal or sultanate states), on the one hand, and, on the other, the legal perception of the modern state. It does not define the dividing line between the two state models and what

this distinction implies both systemically and theoretically.

We see this vacillation clearly when we try to define Islam's political system. Is it an essential element of Islam's identity, a doctrinal foundation stone? Or is it simply a framework within which to organize the affairs of Muslim society, a political and social expedient, and not doctrinally essential or legally required?

Contemporary Islamists — for all that legal political writings make up the legalistic armory with which they arm themselves — rarely refer to it when defining the topic of the Imâmate. That literature, in fact, is short on saying anything about the Muslim state that is, for them, the Islamic patina of the modern nation state. And that ambiguity has something to do with the way the current perspective sees the historical model of the Muslim state that literature portrays.

Of course, it is not possible to separate the religio-political question from the doctrinal

and political environment of the fierce historical struggles that shattered the commonwealth following the days of the ‘Rightly Guided Caliphs’ [in the late 8th century]. This confrontational process blurred the distinction between religion and ideology in how the religious establishment viewed the issue of politics.

Here let us note that the middle Muslim period expressed three distinct schools of thought: political philosophy, the culture of government, and the protocols (*ahkâm*) of government:

The philosophical inquiry was basically what was known of Greek thought in its Platonic form. The ambiguity arose in depicting the ideal civil entity (*al-madînah al-fâdilâh*) that mated with the rational system of existence. Its purpose was to achieve both personal and communal happiness.

For its part the literature of governmental culture (*âdâb as-sultâniyyah*), in so far as it advised rulers how to rule, avoid dissension

and assure continuance of the regime, was largely inspired by the Persian precedents, and framed by examples of those who had ruled before.

The protocols of governing (*al-ahkâm as-sultâniyyah*) dealt with the Imâmate [the personified ruling institution], its provisions, its prohibitions and contradictions.

We will set the philosophical dimension to one side since it had negligible impact upon the historical experience of Muslim society. This had several causes having to do with the background of the rise and presence of the philosophical discussion in Islamic discourse. Legitimate politics or the protocols of governing, on the other hand, never got much beyond adding the dimension of legitimacy to radically different and contrasting experiences of how government was set up and how the governing authority related to the general populace. The ‘mirrors’ of the sultans and ‘advice’ to kings, actually, were not much concerned with discussing legitimacy; they

contented themselves purely with practical and pragmatic affairs.

The protocols of governing, therefore, uniquely describe the state's legitimacy — concerning the necessity of which there was no disagreement — as being, in the famous expression of al-Mâwardî, "... established to succeed the prophetic office in protecting religion and governing the world." We are not now going to get into the protocols of governing as these have been presented in books of religious law or the literature defining legitimate politics. We will content ourselves with the aspect related to describing the state. We have the following observations to make:

1. The scholars of Muslim law were of the opinion that the Imâmate was necessary, but they differed on the nature of this necessity. Was it a legal or a rational necessity, or was it a matter of both-and? Furthermore, they concurred that the Imâmate was 'accommodationally established' and was not a 'static' thing (*mawdû'ah tawfiqiyyah wa*

laysat tawqîfiyyah). Disagreeing with the Shî'ah, the Sunnî scholars noted that the Imâmate was not one of the doctrinal pillars. This portrayal grows out of a tacit awareness of the separation of the political realm from the religious with respect to identity and authority, and their correlation in terms of purpose and means. This contrasts with the view that makes politics one of the defining factors of religion itself.

This is where we can see how Bernard Lewis went wrong in his theory of how Islam sees government. The thrust of his theory is that Islam is a political religion; the state is a constituent Muslim institution. According to Lewis, Islam took from Judaism the idea that divine law organizes all human affairs, but Islam differs from Judaism in the matter of mission-driven *jihâd* (the requirement to spread the message of Islam throughout the world by forceful means if necessary). Lewis continues, Islam also differs from Christianity, in spite of its spiritual proximity to it, in that it established a state but did not succeed in

establishing its church. By this reading, Lewis concludes that, beginning with the time of the Prophet and down through history, Muslim society has always had a dual religio-political character; the two elements cannot be teased apart.

What Lewis has not grasped is that Islam's doctrinal and ethical framework did not, in and of itself, produce its characteristic political format even though, as afterthoughts, there were complex speculations denying that religion and politics were to be confused. (We will refer to some of these speculations hereafter.) The upshot is that the literature of political legitimacy itself, even though it spoke of the Imâmate as a general obligation (*fard kafâyah*) for the Muslim commonwealth, saw the state as being inherently coercive and dominating, and *that* could not be reconciled with the intrinsic character of religion. For this critical reason, throughout Muslim history, there has been a separation of the religious from the political establishment. They have never been integrated the one with the other.

And for this reason it is quite preposterous to suggest that the present-day separation between religion and state is a modern innovation produced by the influence of western secularism.

Ridwân as-Sayyid, in his in-depth 1997 study of Muslim political thought in the middle Islamic period and the experience of the Sultanate state, concludes that the history of the Islamic Sultanate with the *Sharî'ah* "... was a history of struggle and contestation that resulted in separating politics from religious scholarship (*infisâl-us-siyâsah 'an il-fiqh*) and even, at times, from the *Sharî'ah* itself, and defined two domains, the one political and the other legislative/religious. Each side came to recognize the other's domain. On the margins there remained contestation whose fortunes were dictated by the balance of power and other circumstances."

The clash between the two establishments usually reached its peak during times of crisis. But always the delicate balance was maintained between the general reliance upon

the authority of religion (from the side of the ruler) and the religious scholars' accepting the legitimacy of the ruler if only in the interest of keeping the peace and of preventing political chaos (*fitnah*).

When the Caliphate was falling apart the religious scholars recognized that the legitimate political authority was the one that applied justice and assured the public good even though, in so doing, it might violate the letter of the *Sharî'ah*. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (died 751 AH), explicitly recognizing that the logic of government differed from that of the *Sharî'ah*, rationalized the departure from the holy texts on the basis that it preserved the essential interests of the public. He did so on the grounds of the opinions and experience of the Prophet's Companions, saying, "If you want no political process except what the law articulates, then you are wrong and you declare the Companions to be in the wrong. ... If principalities manifestly do justice and do it in

whatever manner, then *there* is God's law evident and his religion!"

Even though the legal scholars said that the ruler should be directed by the *Shari'ah*, and defined legitimate political authority in those terms, at the same time they recognized that the regime dominated and had coercive power. They saw that the caliphal state was an ideal that could not be realized except by a divine miracle. It was a sort of divine beatific state, a higher ideal, and not a pragmatically available option in the here-and-now.

'Abd-Allâh al-'Arawî, in his *The Notion of the State (mafhum-ud-dawlah)*, has shown that the religious scholars combined a beatifically moralistic approach with a pragmatic excuse-laden tendency and saw no contradiction in their having done so. They were aware that "... practical analysis shows that the Caliphate really means transcending the state and therefore the animal dimensions of human nature. ... Their pragmatism is rooted in a hidden beatification: Given the fact that the Caliphate requires that the human being

become something more than human, then we must live in hope, awaiting a miracle within a legitimate state, in other words, a state that applies law in a general sense without getting picky about what particular kind of law that might be.”

2. Any talk about a link between the Sultanate state and the hoped-for Muslim state (as contemporary Islamists envision it) cannot make sense without showing the fundamental disconnect between the nature of the Sultanate state itself — its logic, structure, and relation to civil society — and the modern state. The modern state, beyond its doctrinal or cultural identity, shapes a very different political model that expresses a field of historical vision quite distinct.

The Muslim state of the middle period, so far as the structure of government was concerned, did not differ from the empire model of the Persians and the Romans that it inherited and adapted in fulfilling its practical functions. This model that Michel Foucault (2001) has dubbed the ‘pastoral’ model (that is, one that

rests upon the ruler borrowing the cloak of a shepherd responsible for his flock) rests upon a personalized notion of governmental functions. In it the ruler retains absolute authority over a pyramidal hierarchical structure that has no outside check or balance.

‘Abd-Allâh al-‘Arawî sees the Muslim state of the middle period as standing on three legs — Arab fatalism, Muslim ethics, and Asian organizational precedents. For his part Al-Jâbirî, in his *The Arab Political Mind* (*al-‘aql as-siyâsî al-‘arabî*) published in 2004, sees a different tripod — tribalism, doctrine and war booty. These very different analyses notwithstanding, there is no argument between them over the Muslim state’s being historically modeled upon the pastoral paradigm whose ideal was absolutist government rationalized as a personal and direct relationship between the ruler and each element of his ‘flock’, and that required submission of the subject to the ruler who, in turn, was responsible to guide and to protect the interests of each individual member of the flock.

This individual relationship, although it implanted a closed absolutist hierarchical system, still and all harbored an area of self-government outside the embrace of the political authority. It provided wide scope for civil society to nurture significant areas of economic and cultural life (skilled trades, guilds, the institutions of benevolence, the educational institutions, the Sûfî orders, and others). The political institution, absorbed as it was in the administration of violence and public works, had little impact upon the realms of civil society, especially those areas were dominated by the religious institution. In that light, as Wajîh al-Khawtharanî has phrased it in his 1995 essay, we can talk about the disjunction between the Muslim commonwealth and the state in Muslim history. That is, “We can distinguish the broader commonwealth, as a framework of doctrinal, ideological and moral belonging, from the sense of belonging integrally to any given state.”

The upshot is that two things defined the relationship between religion and the governing authority in the Muslim state of the middle period: From its perspective, the ‘evangelical’ state embraced the doctrinal legitimacy of the Muslim commonwealth that emerged during the middle period in all Asian provinces. But from another perspective, the political and religious institutions had been separated, and, through a series of interactive and conflicting coincidences, the commonwealth separated from the state in so far as the structure of society was concerned. These became significant moments for the history of Muslim politics.

Second: Is It the Separation of Religion and State or the Separation of Politics from Religion?

We have noted that contemporary Islamist thought has accustomed itself to speak about the legitimacy of the modern state and, from the perspective of the Sultanist state and the literature of political legitimacy, its relationship to religion. Usually this discussion

characterizes the modern state as secularist and, from the current Islamist perspective, that means the state discards religion and banishes it from the public sphere. Given the heated Arab intellectual and political debate on the issue of secularism and how it relates to religion, what happens most often is that the real issue posed by the role of religion in the modern state is actually obfuscated.

What are we talking about? Does secularism mean separating religion from the state, or does it mean separating religion from *politics*? Or does it mean banishing religion altogether from the public sphere? How do we, then, look at this relationship in fine, bearing in mind the disparities and variety that secular systems have introduced? There is no indication that these ambiguities have received any serious attention from Arab intellectuals. Among them, the ideological struggle has been most intense with respect to how the relationship between the religious sphere and the political should be managed in the way government is actually done.

If we set to one side the extreme propagandistic secularist writings that began circulating in late 19th century in two versions — the one a simplistic call to cast off religion in favor of rational pragmatism, and the other an Enlightenment perspective that saw religion as a transient intellectual stage that clashed with the values of freedom and the social contract — and if we go back to writings that have more equilibrium and depth, we can perceive two strands in Arab secular thought. The one is confrontational. It sees a fundamental discontinuity between religion as a system of doctrine and political power and the state as an institution for organizing the common interests of human beings. But the other looks to reconcile this discontinuity in the ability of Islam as a religion to embrace secularism within its own system as other religions have done.

The first strand is most forcefully represented by ‘Azîz al-‘Udhmah who brings to bear several intricate and well-grounded

arguments in defense of banishing religion from all public life and not just from politics.

His most important book is *Secularism From a Different Point of View* (*al-‘ilmâniyya min mandhûr mukhtalif*) published in Beirut in 1992. In it he defines secularism, observes contexts in which it has been applied, and traces how it began and how it has evolved. He concludes that secularism is broader than just being the opposite of religion and authority. It has many aspects. Among these are: scientific epistemology (the denial of causation external to natural and historical phenomena); positivist historicism (the affirmation of the process of history without obscuring veils of mythology); legislative institutionalism (the complete separation of the political institution from the religious); and aspects having to do with ethics and values (tie ethics to history; its check is the human conscience instead of obligation and the intimidation of punishment in the hereafter).

Al-‘Udhmah concludes by passionately advocating for the choice for secularism as the

only path to democracy. He writes, “The foundation of democracy cannot be recovered save through liberating thought and life from the bondage of the absolute, and from the ‘other world’, the most absolute of all absolutes. I mean, there is no recovering the foundation of democracy except through secularism.”

The second strand is best represented by Muhammad as-Sharafî in his book *Islam and Freedom: The Historical Conundrum (al-islâm w-al-hurriyyah: al-iltibâs at-târîkhî)* published in 2000. The political idea as-Sharafî puts forward is that Islam has always distinguished between the set-in-cement devotional and doctrinal aspect, on the one hand, and, on the other, the aspect of institutional legislation that was historically changeful and that sought precedents. This latter had no particular holy glow about it and was not intrinsically bonded to the Muslim mission (*da‘wah*).

As-Sharafî, after his overview of the Islamic experience of the Caliphate and the state system, concludes that Islam’s notion of

government can make room for secularism, it being understood that secularism means nothing more than separating the two functions — the religious and the political. He writes, “We have only said what is clearly apparent. Freedom and democracy cannot be realized without separating political from religious affairs. The Muslim state — noted as such neither in the *Qur’ân* nor the *Sunnah* — is a human construct that used religion for political ends.”

Nonetheless he notes that were the state to renege on its duty to nurture and prosper religion, Islam would find that quite unacceptable. As-Sharafî, therefore, proposes establishing a constitutionally recognized ‘fourth estate’ for the oversight of religion, it being clearly understood that, within the structure of the state itself, there is to be maintained a clear distinction between matters religious and political.

Clearly Arab secularism vacillates between a ‘soft’ approach that limits secularism to the separation of religion and state and depends

for this upon the thesis first put forward by ‘Alî ‘Abd-ur-Râziq. He argues that the state is not a religious necessity or legal requirement(**). Then there is the ‘hard’ approach that broadly applies secularism so that it embraces the total separation of the religious from the political.

We see the same pendulum-like vacillation in what Islamists are saying about Arab secularism. It swings back and forth between seeing secularism as an entirely unacceptable division between religion and the state that cannot be reconciled with the totalist conception of Islam, and seeing it as an inclusive understanding of creation founded upon a rational and material appreciation of nature and society.

The first conceptual tendency is typical of most Islamist writers. For them, secularism emerged during the confrontation between church and state in the Christian West. It was the best solution to that clash. But there was no such clash in the Muslim world. So far as these writers are concerned, there is a fundamental

discontinuity between secularism and the principle of totalist Islam that integrates religion with the issues of this world. The religious *Sharî‘ah* cannot be rendered provincial. Al-Qaradâwî expressed this view in 1994: “From a religious perspective, secularism is to be rejected. It calls for government on the model of the age of ignorance (*al-jâhiliyyah*). That is to say, it is government that people contrive and not one that God reveals.”

Some so-called ‘revivalist’ Islamist thought (that is open to modernism) has distinguished between ‘pagan secularism’ and ‘Islamic secularism’. Its devotion to Islamic totalism that includes the state and matters political, however, has made it unable to parse religion from state even though it has tried to limit the political role of Islam.

The second conceptual tendency may be appreciated in the writing of ‘Abd-Allâh al-Masîrî. His two-volume work entitled, *Partial and Comprehensive Secularism* (*al-‘ilmâniyyah al-juz’iyyah wa al-‘ilmâniyyah as-*

shâmilah) published in 2005, is the most important Islamist intellectual treatment of secularism published thus far. In it he distinguishes between ‘partial secularism’ that contents itself with separating religion from state, and ‘comprehensive secularism’ that broadly embraces all expressions of western modernism in its mode of ‘rational materialism’ (opening things up, probing analytically, insisting on evidence, seeking distance and perspective, and classifying what is observed) and in its various intellectual political manifestations (Marxism, Existentialism, Nazism, Zionism, Anarchism and so on).

In his discussion of the process of globalization, al-Masîrî concludes, “The secularist intellectual models rest upon a base and a final authority that are latent in the notion of matter (nature or the human element or history). Matter [positivism], therefore, is the final substantive authority, the absolute center or the center that shapes the sense of belonging to creation and to the social order,

endowing secularism with purpose and direction, and forming the foundation of its unity.”

If al-Qaradâwî’s somewhat lightweight articulation led to denying secularism in the name of the all-embracing nature of religion, al-Masîrî’s more rigorous approach denies secularism because of *secularism’s* all-embracing pretensions (its not being content with simply separating religion and state, but rather insisting upon breaking with religion altogether, substituting an ever-changeful and this-worldly vision).

What we want to indicate in this rather terse summary of the secularist and Islamist contributions to the religio-political debate of our day is that the two opposing articulations actually agree that there are two fundamental rifts:

First, we isolate the relationship of religion to politics within the institutional aspect of the state — its mechanical operation and its

legislative and constitutional institutions (the ‘soft’ approach).

Second, we opt for watering down modernism and secularism and ignore the complex and contrasting conditional factors in the relationship between the religious and the political in modern societies (the ‘hard’ approach).

Let us resume here by noting that the unique character of the modern state lies in its having been founded upon a new understanding of political authority and of the relationship between the public sector and the social body. It is based upon a law-based understanding of the body politic as an expression of contractual relationships that derive their legitimacy from the internal arrangement of society itself.

Seen from this perspective, the state is only a tool for rationalizing conflicting individual positions. It is not the inclusive framework for legitimizing the values of moral excellence or achieving happiness (as Greek notions had it

and as was adopted during the middle Islamic period by Islamic political literature).

Nonetheless, this transition produced two results that may seem to be in conflict: it demolished the all-inclusive and absolutist character of the state by limiting the political organizational principle to the management of the horizontal contract, and, instead of religious absolutism that was the foundation for the legitimacy of the state of the middle Islamic period (in all its permutations), substituted the political absolute — loyalty to the Islamic commonwealth in both its national and symbolic meanings.

To deal with this disparity, the modern political mind had come up with pivotal ideas such as sovereignty, representation and identity. All of them express the objective need to provide the required mediation between units of the body politic that have been divided ever since the basic unity of the political institution with its religious pivot collapsed.

It is clear that the purely pragmatic character (understood as organizing relations between social forces with absolute neutrality toward all value-based ideas and tendencies) of the law-based model that produced these ideas has changed. It has now taken on a positive value-based character inspired by historical and situational ideologies upon which the prevalent secular ideas are grounded. From this perspective, religion is a 'banished' external factor because the principle of legitimacy draws its force from within the shape of civil society, and from a symbol-laden forward look whose existence is thinly veiled behind the new absolutism of the political institution.

Modern liberal thought has explained that the move from religious absolutism to political absolutism requires that the state be transmuted into a religion that provides all the doctrinal, inclusional and symbolic services once provided by the religions. Kant's notion was that, so far as reason was concerned, a citizen state based on freedom achieved the

ethical essentials of religion. Hobbes was of the opinion that the absolute authority of the state “assured the Lord’s sovereignty on earth and enforced the absolute divine laws.” Spinoza, meanwhile, integrated ‘true religion’ (that was indistinguishable from the order of creation) with ‘natural truth’, it being understood that the divine and nature were virtually one and the same. Rousseau, for his part, spoke of ‘universal civil religion’. Although it differed from conventional religious doctrine, the ‘religion’ of citizenship still had its sanctity. Hegel, for his part, thought that the modern liberal nation state was the historical embodiment of religious absolutism. It was the actual realization of the values of Christian freedom.

Looking at it from this perspective, Carl Schmidt, in his study on ‘political theology’ published in 1988, shows that secularism does not necessarily mean separating religion from the state. It is a shift in theological terminology to the message of political pragmatism where the ‘sovereign lord’ (the

state) becomes 'the absolute deity'. The relative standards of judgment do not necessarily contradict transcendent religious values. They translate them into a modern political idiom. In practice what we see are three main perspectives on secularism and they are not necessarily linked:

- * secularism understood as the institutional separation between the religious and temporal spheres.

- * secularism understood as the manifestation of the retreat and isolation of religious ideas and practices.

- * secularism understood as forcing the retreat of religion into the private sector.

These three perspectives, as we have said, are not necessarily bonded to each other. In fact they diverge depending upon the context and environment even within the western world and Europe in particular. Each of these perspectives has its own contextual limitations and conditioning factors. If distinguishing between the religious and political institutions

is generally practiced in all modern western countries, this circumstance does not necessarily imply that religious sensitivities or practices are declining or are being repressed. Nor does it mean that religion is confined only to an individual's own personal awareness.

In some countries the church fought against cultural and political modernism. The upshot was the decline of religious presence in public life (as has been the case in Spain). In other countries the church took on a pivotal role in confronting tyranny and provided pioneer leadership for civil society, taking leadership in enlightening civil society, and those involved experienced a great religious awakening (as happened in Poland). There is also a marked contrast between the Protestant church that played a foundational role in support of secularism and, subsequently, lived quite contentedly with the modernism that followed, and the Catholic Church in southern Europe that faced agonizing problems when trying to accommodate the ideas and values of modernism.

What we can accurately confirm is that secularism, as it has been *institutionally* realized and embodied in the nation state, is thoroughly familiar with the roles that religion has historically played. It is particularly aware of those shared symbolic roles within the sacred social sphere that used to frame social integration, that, as we have shown, have been transferred from the religious institution to the state that now fulfills the same function. Now the ideologies have vested themselves with the doctrinal and ritual role of religion. They are trying to out-bid the religions doctrinally and in terms of commentary and exegesis. They want to capture the imagination of the people and their dreams.

The most obvious error to which most Islamist thought succumbs is its attempt to 'Islamize' the modern nation state. Islamists do not see that these states already adhere to conventional practices of religion. No great effort would be entailed in transferring all their religious baggage to one or another of the state's functioning ideological mechanisms

that are used to consecrate the doctrine of loyalty to the national entity.

Olivier Roy, in one of his latest works (2005), has shown that the new Islamist movements, far from denying, are actually affirming the developing trend to precipitate a radical break with the current political mind (with its hallmark of absolutism and all-inclusiveness as giving credibility to national belonging without clashing with religion), in favor of a range of specialized political and doctrinal associations one of whose manifestations is religious political awareness. Put another way, what we are now seeing is a shift of Islamist movements in the public eye toward becoming political groupings exercising their role in opposition and in ideological terms within the overall symbolic array of religious groupings. They do not, however, fall heir to the traditional Islamic religious institution — its legal decision-making (*iftâ'*), its conduct of benevolence (*waqf*), and its role in education. Together these composed the religious and cultural

pillar of the classic era of the Muslim commonwealth.

It is obvious that the Islamist groups, in demanding their right to participate in the political process, find themselves obliged to break with the Islamic monopoly on how religious legitimacy was defined, and to accept, at least tacitly and *a priori*, the legitimacy of the political system whose struggles are internal to itself.

We can, then, say that these groups, in the way they organize themselves and in their combative ideologies, advocate 'political secularism'. They have energetically entered into the logic of the political mindset, accepting that the existing modern nation state distinguishes between religious awareness and the public sphere.

References:

*) ‘Abd-Allâh Walad-Abâhu is a researcher and academic from Mauritania.

***) ‘Alî ‘Abd-ur-Râziq, *Islam and the Sources of Government (islâm wa usûl-ul-hukm)* referenced in this study to its republication in Beirut in 2000.

‘Abd-ur-Râziq’s study was first published in Egypt in 1965 and caused a furor of indignation and outrage among conservative Muslims. ‘Abd-ur-Râziq, a prominent Islamic scholar and professor of law, was stripped of his titles and positions, and the Egyptian government of the day ordered all copies of his book to be burned.

The author of *our* essay quotes perhaps the clearest and the most controversial of ‘Abd-ur-Râziq’s statements in his endnotes, and it is worth presenting here in full: “The truth is that the Muslim religion is innocent of complicity in that Caliphate that Muslims have known. It is innocent of complicity in all that with which they have surrounded it by way of nostalgia

and awe, pride and power. The Caliphate was not part of the religious program. Emphatically not! The same applies to the law courts and other offices and positions of government and state. All of that was part of a purely political program in which religion had no role to play. Religion neither recognized nor denied the Caliphate; it neither promoted nor proscribed it. It left that to us, our rational minds, our insight into the experience of nations, and to the political principles to which we hold.” (p. 182 in the 2000 edition) [TR]