

Secular Nation-State vs. Islamic Nation-State

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The difference indicated in the heading is not defined by whether the leaders of the state happen to be personally committed to Islam, or whether the citizens happen to be sincere Muslims. Rather, it is defined in terms of the ultimate authority used for deciding public policy within the state, as follows:

In the *secular* state's approach to social problems, such as crime or poverty, individual citizens or governmental leaders might be motivated by their religious commitments, or they might not. But the choice of strategies is not necessarily tied to any one particular religion. Here are some typical secular approaches to solving the problems of crime in society:

1. promote business climate, or job opportunities
2. better lighting in the streets at night
3. more parks and playgrounds, after school activities
4. improved educational systems
5. stricter law enforcement, more jails, harsher sentences
6. handgun control
7. drug busts
8. welfare payments
9. business incentives to invest in poor areas

To decide what strategies to follow, a secular person thinks about the empirical evidence and social theories that support one strategy over another, and brings their personal values into play. Even in a secular state, a citizen or governmental leader may not be a wholly secular person, and may therefore bring in religious motivations or insights to help decide on a course of action. The presence of these religious motivations in the governmental and social leaders does not make the nation-state into a religious state, unless perhaps the religious motivations of most of the leaders become overwhelming and intrusive, and arise out of just one religious tradition. In this latter case, we might indeed be approaching the creation of an official religion for the state, even if there is no official pronouncement or anything on paper that says everyone in the state should be guided by the same religious outlook in making public policy decisions.

The same goes for choice of strategies relating to economic structure in a secular nation-state. The secular nation-state decides on banking laws, minimum wage, labor contract law, etc., based on practical considerations about what seems to be just, or what will work to solve particular problems. Maybe they will set up unemployment insurance, disability coverage, etc. Maybe there will be an income tax system. Maybe restrict the interest rates that can be charged, or establish a minimum wage.

Again, the decision-making process is not directly and formally tied to any particular religious commitments, although ideas of individual politically active people or leaders about these matters might be shaped by their religious values. (E.g., the traditional worry over disparity between rich and poor that is found in many expressions of Islam might prompt political calls for doing something in the law to solve this perceived problem.)

In US and other Western countries there is a largely secular approach now. In the past, it was probably less secular than it has become in the last century. But the approach never was fully secular and is not wholly secular even now. In the US, there once were public presumptions that a vaguely Protestant form of Christianity would guide the political process to at least some extent, even though the Constitution expressly requires that the Congress not establish any particular religious outlook in the national law, and the writers of the Constitution were deliberately trying to avoid the atmosphere created in Europe where there were state churches. Gradually, those public presumptions have weakened. We have now had one Roman Catholic President (John Kennedy), and those who oppose the idea that the US is to some degree a Christian nation have become more outspoken.

Careful here. When dealing with moral issues of controversy, such as gay rights or abortion, religious arguments often get thrown into the mix in a very public way, and might well make a difference to the outcome, through the normal exercise of political clout from a large group of citizens. This makes the distinction between religious and secular government in a representative democracy a little messy. Let me make a stab at describing the distinction: I think that even if the use of religious arguments in public debates happens frequently, the democratic state could still be quite *secular*, provided that the religiously-based opinions are treated as representing the democratic expression of individual or religious group thinking, worthy of being counted just like the opinions of any other individual or group. In other words, the fact that these opinions are coming from a particular religious group doesn't *automatically* make them win; what makes them win is the strength of the argument or the number of people supporting them. This is especially true if there is some sort of constitutional guarantee that protects the rights of religious or other groups that are not in the majority. (So, even if the majority of Texas voters want the Southern Baptist Church to write prayers that every school child must recite out loud in public school every day, the Constitution stands in the way. As long as the Constitution is obeyed, the rights of those who don't favor those prayers are protected, and the nation-state maintains a measure of secularism.)

Contrast the imagined situation in Texas with what happens when you have a political society in which the constitution officially and openly belongs to a particular religious tradition. Then, if it can be determined by religious leaders or the religious public that a particular law or practice is required by that religion, it must be put in place. If a particular law or practice is forbidden by that religion, then it must be abolished. No alternatives to those outcomes are legally permitted. The only room for optional laws and practices is when the religion leaves it optional. In these optional cases, secular considerations of practicality or cost or effectiveness are allowed to count. When one finds a nation-state that tries to operate according to such principles, one has found a religious state.

The current prime example of a serious attempt to create an Islamic nation-state is Iran. (Somalia tried this as well, but at present Somalia is dysfunctional as a state.) Iran has an elected parliament and in that respect looks like a secular democracy, but it is not

in fact a secular democracy because there is a Guardian Council appointed by the Ayatollahs to ensure that all policies are Islamic. The Guardian Council can overturn any law passed by the legislature, if the Council determines the law is not Islamic. The Guardian Council once removed the names of most of the candidates running for parliament in the national elections, on the ground that those candidates were not good enough Muslims. The most powerful person in Iran is not the President, but the leading Grand Ayatollah, who remains in charge of the military and has much to say about the Council's actions. In theory, all this makes Iran a theocracy – a nation ruled by God.

Since God does not openly and publicly speak to people on a daily basis, and God does not write memos to the President, there has to be some means for God's rule to be exercised in a theocracy. A sacred text, even one dictated by God, centuries ago, does not address the needs of the nation today, on a daily basis, for decisions about modern issues. How many police should there be? Can stores sell books on sex? Can people have dogs as pets? In practice, the only way to have a working theocracy is for certain people to say what God wants the nation to do. So, in practice, perhaps a theocracy is really never a theocracy; in practice, a supposed theocracy is a dictatorship of those who claim to speak for God and who thereby set national policy.

Some features that make a state count as an Islamic state:

1. The leadership of the government is required by the legal structure to be Muslim. It might even be that the state leadership must be from the ranks of the religious leadership, or chosen directly by the religious leadership. But the selection of leaders could take a more democratic form, where the people get to choose from “appropriate” candidates – that is, ones who have the correct religious connections. (Some less significant leaders of Iran are chosen this way. The most powerful political leaders in Iran are chosen by the religious leaders from amongst themselves.)
2. When there is a clear opinion within Islam as understood in that country, that a particular law or practice is required by Islam, it more or less automatically gets put into place. The only allowed way to argue against such a law or practice is by showing that there is some legitimate way to interpret Islam so that it is not required after all. (So, political debate often becomes religious or theological debate.) Similarly for abolishing any law or practice that is prohibited by Islam.
3. Members of other religions who live within the state may have rights to keep their religions, if Islam says it's allowed, but any opinions based on those religions about government necessarily have no weight whatsoever.
4. The goal is to create a system of laws and governmental practices that reflect Islamic ideas of what is proper. One might try to push this quite far, down to legislating many details of what is usually thought in Western democracies to be the province of private life. (E.g., what music one is allowed to listen to, what types of clothing one is allowed to wear, who one is allowed to marry, what kinds of occupations are allowed to women, etc.) Or, in a more moderate Islamic state, it would be possible to hold back on trying to legislate so many details, and instead focus on larger more public issues. (In Iran, there is controversy over how far the state should go in this

regard. For example, should Valentine's Day cards be permitted? Can one listen to Western television via satellite?)

5. Tax money might be used to financially support Islamic groups, and no other religious groups. These groups are free to use the money to support their religious agenda. (This feature seems to me not to be required in a religious state, but it is likely to happen.)
6. *Al-Quran* and associated Muslim religious/political traditions play the role of constitution for the state – the final authority on what is permitted or forbidden. So long as Muslim tradition continues to claim that there is no room for deep debate about the meaning of the *Quran*, the standard interpretation will hold sway, unquestioned, and unquestionable, as the divine source of truth for the state. In effect, this means that conservative religious leaders get to say what God wants for the state. (The latter point of view seems to be the point of the view of the conservatives in Iran today -- the so-called "hardliners".)
7. The state is viewed as a theocracy – i.e., ruled by God. This is of course seen as being much better than unconstrained democracy, in which ignorant and evil people are allowed an equal voice. Once one sees the state as being ruled by God, any opposition to required public policy is seen as opposition to God, and therefore is not only mistaken but evil. The state is therefore deeply anti-democratic on whatever points God requires. However, if the Islamic tradition were seen to hold that God allows considerable latitude in behavior, music, dress, and so on, then democracy can be allowed to hold sway as long as it is confined within those boundaries laid down by God. Another way in which even a theocracy can become somewhat less controlling is for the religious and political leaders to agree that God wants people to freely choose to live properly and to freely adopt the proper religious attitudes of worship and praise, rather than to be required by law to do so. (In Iran, some moderates argue that you can't make people into good Muslims by passing laws. It has to come from the heart. So, even though they agree that God's law requires X, they don't necessarily want to make X into a law of the nation. They would rather pick and choose which of God's laws should be made into national policy, leaving the rest to personal decision. I suppose this is a kind of limited theocracy, in which God allows people to make various choices for themselves.)
8. The proponents of the Islamic state will nevertheless be likely to think that the citizens of their state have the highest level of freedom, for they have the freedom to develop into the best that they can be. Their full potential can be realized, now that the forces of evil are held at bay by the religious state. If successful, this will produce a strong sense of community in the state, and crime may well be quite low. (Iran has not achieved this goal, with millions of young people chafing at what they see as harsh and unrealistic attempts on the part of the hardliners to control the details of everyone's lives. So, there is a lack of sense of community.)

