

ABDULLAHI AHMED AN-NA`IM, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari`a*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2008). Pp.324. \$35.00

This book deals with a controversial and fascinating subject to scholars and researchers: the establishment of a secular state to a genuine religious life, for both Muslims and non-Muslims in the Arab and Islamic world. What lends special interest to this work is that it deals with the regulation of the connectedness of Islam and Politics, which is constitutionalism, human rights and citizenship; three preconditions to provide an environment of freedom and security in order for Muslims to be able to participate in the debate about the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna*. At the centre of the book is the problem of the separation of Islam and state, which can be understood through the role of *Shari'a* in public life and within a secular state -a desirable aim on public-policy grounds and justified on Islamic grounds. The book focuses on three case studies: India, Turkey and Indonesia, to assess respectively the role of religion in public life, the 'authoritarian secularism' and applicability of the *Shari'a* through the constitution. The cases are analyzed in a thorough and well-informed manner and have the purpose of highlighting that secularism does not necessarily mean the exclusion of religion from public life; promoting the need of institutional separation of Islam from State; understanding and explaining the relationship between Islam and politics; and assessing the limitations of *Shari'a* for Muslims and non-Muslims. What seems to be missing from them, however, is a mechanism for achieving a shared vision and respect for constitutionalism, human rights and citizenship, and a secular state that provides and ensures a field for public debate, because 'civic reason' and 'reasoning' are necessary but not sufficient conditions to achieve it.

The author is a liberal Muslim originally from Sudan, author of *Toward an Islamic Reformation* (1990) and Professor of Law at Emory University School of Law. He has written important works about the interdependence between religion, human rights and secularism, instead of a dichotomy and incompatibility between them. As a lawyer and human rights activist, his books often tend to 'the normative', to the dialogue and negotiation. His ideas are reformist and pacifist, possibly from the influence of the Islamic reform movement of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha in Sudan, a pacifist theologian who played a prominent role in the Sudanese struggle for independence from Britain and the reform of Islam. Although the book fails in legitimizing and justifying the principles of constitutionalism, human rights and citizenship in Islamic terms (because their impact would be effective only in a small elite of Muslims already converted and educated in some of these principles), the author's work succeeds in providing an 'interpretative framework' to build substantive arguments and analysis about the future of *Shari'a*, having the great merit of building theory and concepts and setting forth the concepts of context and content in relation to the *Shari'a* -something fundamental in his research design and communication, which provides the author with an important methodological sensitivity. Furthermore, the author -who speaks as a Muslim and not simply as an academic- uses arguments from their own religion and beyond academic arguments, in order to invite people around the world to read his work and participate in a debate on this issue. That is why the author's presentation style enables fluent

reading of his book, where each chapter presents carefully an introduction, a discussion of the issue and the conclusion, allowing each of them to be read as a separate body.

The author draws on other researchers to support their proposal of a secular state. For instance, Ira Lapidus, professor emeritus of History at the University of California, has written about the separation of state and religion and has traced a historical differentiation of state and religious institutions in the Islamic societies. His arguments support the basis of An-Na'im's proposal, who emphasizes that a secular state is more consistent with Islamic history, because of the ambiguities with regard to the distribution of authority, functions and relations among institutions within different Islamic models for states (P. 45). Thus, states were neither Islamic nor completely secular, in the sense that there has always existed a difference between the state and the religious institutions in Islamic societies – a point that supports the separation between Islam and state as a condition for a secular state. It is important to highlight that 'Islamic' means tradition, culture, language, territory and religion. Therefore, it is more than being Muslim. That is why the author speaks about 'Islamic' perspective and not 'Muslim' perspective.

In the 324 pages of the book, the author speaks as a Muslim and concludes his life's work, emphasizing the difficulty of resolving the paradox about "how to secure the religious neutrality of the state within the reality of the connectedness of Islam and politics" (p.267). For it, he insists on the followings aspects: 1) Proposing, supporting and legitimating a concept of a secular state which promotes interdependence and cooperation - from an Islamic perspective. 2) Need for a secular state for being a Muslim that can act from conviction and choice, instead of enforcing Islamic piety. 3) Proposing a process-based model of negotiated secularism to distinguish between secularism and secularization and for discussing how to rehabilitate the public role of religion. These and other assertions are supported with arguments and methodologies proposed by the author, who seeks to legitimize ways to reform the *Shari'a*, which must be accomplished in consensus within a framework where people -as a human agency- can participate freely. Overall, the book is a useful contribution to the understanding of the relationship between Islam, state and politics, and of the role of *Shari'a* in public life.

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