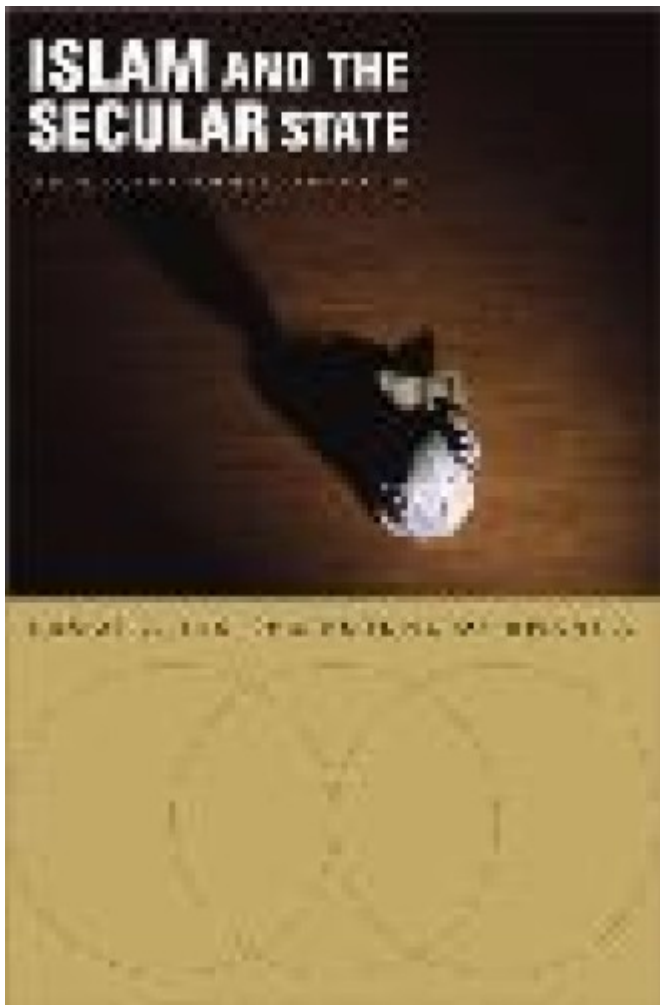


Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a

reviewed by [Mark Juergensmeyer](#) in the [September 9, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a

Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im
Harvard University Press

The Muslim world is not a monolith. It contains far more disagreement about the future of Islamic politics than is imagined by those who think that all Muslims are “Islamofascists.” Nothing illustrates this lively debate better than an arresting new book by Emory University’s Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im, who challenges the Muslim world to embrace the idea of the secular state—for the sake of Islam.

Writing in the *New Yorker*, George Packer reported in 2006 that An-Na’im referred to his book—then in manuscript form—as “a work of advocacy more than of scholarship.” For that reason it might seem odd that Harvard University Press is the publisher. After all, one would not think that the main thesis of the book—that Islamic ideas of law should not be mandated by a political state—is the sort of thing that would be disputed by most readers of books published by Harvard’s press.

Yet, as he explains in the introduction to his book, An-Na’im has two audiences in mind. One is the non-Muslim world, which needs to know that his religious tradition is more complex and tolerant than the jihadi extremists would have us believe. The other is his fellow religionists in the Muslim world who need to be reminded of the same message. An-Na’im is especially interested in reaching out to Muslims beyond the Arab heartland, such as those in North Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia, who he believes are receptive to alternative ways of conceiving of the role of shari’a in relation to the state.

For this reason, An-Na’im has created a Web site (<http://sharia.law.emory.edu>) where chapters of the book are available in a variety of languages—Urdu, Bengali, Bahasa Indonesia, Persian, Turkish, Swahili, Russian and French, in addition to Arabic and English. Moreover, as An-Na’im explains, a great many English-speaking Muslims, especially expatriate Pakistanis and Muslims of Middle Eastern origin in the UK and the United States, will read the English version of the book in print and on the Web site.

An-Na’im’s personal appearances in Egypt, Indonesia and elsewhere in the Muslim world have often been occasions for angry outbursts. But they have also elicited an appreciative response from a seemingly unlikely source—conservative clerics who are wary of the politicization of religion.

An-Na’im is unabashedly pro-Muslim and opposed to cultural and social forms of secularism. He affirms that religion in general—and Islam in particular—has a role to play in public life. He admires Shari’a and thinks that it should be embraced, but also

that it should be accepted voluntarily. In fact, An-Na'im believes that forcing Islamic principles on the public does a disservice to those principles. For the sake of Islam, then, he believes that the state should be neutral with regard to the enforcement of religious values and concepts—that the state should be secular. His position is not unlike that of the Iranian Shi'ite theologian Abdolkarim Soroush, who contends that Islam and politics should be separated for the sake of Islam. Soroush believes that in Iran clerics and Islamic ideas have become compromised by becoming an instrument of the state.

This pro-Muslim view of the separation of religion and state is a serious critique of some of the more militant forms of Muslim politics, and this is why it has been vociferously opposed in many quarters of the Muslim world. In the Sudan, the country of An-Na'im's birth, the response from the state has been hostile. An-Na'im's mentor, Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, was tried for apostasy and executed by the Sudanese government in 1985. Taha, whom some regard as the "Gandhi of Sudan," had earlier been jailed by the British for his role in Sudan's independence movement. His political party, the Republican Brothers, which was intended as an alternative to the Muslim Brotherhood, called for a secular constitution and political framework rather than ones based on strict Shari'a codes.

Like An-Na'im, Taha was a deeply religious man who regarded the separation of religion and state to be essential for the purity of the Islamic faith as well as vital for the protection of human rights. According to Packer's article on An-Na'im and Taha in the *New Yorker*, "The Moderate Martyr" (September 11, 2006), as a young law student at the University of Khartoum in the 1960s An-Na'im had been deadlocked between his love for Islam and his admiration of human rights. It was something of an epiphany for him to find in Taha the acceptance of both; indeed, Taha saw each as reinforcing the other.

Islam and the Secular State brings Taha's way of thinking to an English-speaking audience and, through multiple translations, to the wider Muslim world. In it, An-Na'im examines the relation of Islam and politics in history and concludes that most political authorities in Muslim societies have not forced their beliefs and principles down the throats of their subjects. At the same time, he shows that the relationship between Islam and secularism has been varied and sometimes problematic.

An-Na'im examines the cases of India, Indonesia and Turkey for insights into how the secular state can be embraced by Islam. He also critically analyzes the attempts

of some of the more strident Muslim activists to create Islamic states. An-Na'im regards the idea of an Islamic state as inappropriate to the historical tradition of Islam, for it tacitly accepts the Western construct of nationhood (and implicitly the modern Western definition of religion). For Islam to be true to itself, he argues, it must be free to play a positive public role unfettered by state control.

In this book An-Na'im has created a compelling argument that is both engaging and accessible. He offers an important perspective on Islamic politics, one that deserves wide discussion both within and outside the Muslim world. He also provides a fitting tribute to his martyred mentor. Some 20 years after the Sudanese regime attempted to silence Taha's thinking by putting him to death, it is impressive to see that in the writings and multilanguage Web site of his most articulate disciple, the Gandhi of Sudan continues to have a voice.