

**Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a
Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies**

Nader Hashemi

New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 280 pages.

Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy analyzes the theoretical relationship between religion and democracy, specifically Islam's relationship with liberal democracy. It discusses the relationship between Islam, Muslim-majority societies (viz., Iran, Turkey, and Indonesia), and liberal democracy in a way that advances theory and practice regarding their relations and this relationship is the immediate focus of this study, and the conclusions have a much broader applicability in illuminating the theoretical relationship between religion, secularism, and democracy in general, and in contributing to the development of a liberal-democratic theory for Muslim societies in particular.

The author's primary methodological approach is historical and comparative. Drawing on insights and lessons from western political theory and history, he examines the relationship between liberal-democratic development and religion both theoretically and in the context of the Muslim world. The three countries mentioned above are presented as case studies as a means to reinforce the theoretical claims. The book consists of four chapters followed by a conclusion, endnotes, a bibliography, and an index.

Chapter 1, "Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies: The Historical Background," looks at the relationship among Islam, modernization, and political development as well as Islamic fundamentalism's relationship to political development. Focusing on Islamic fundamentalism's sociological impact (rather than its ideological content) and comparing it with the rise of English Puritanism, Hashemi contends that radical religious protest movements often emerge in the context of rapidly modernizing societies and that social upheaval accompanies the traditional order's breakdown. He seeks to rethink the relationship between religion and political development by advancing three separate but related assertions: (1) liberal philosophers and social scientists interested in developing societies have been slow to recognize the connection between religion and political development, (2) the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is a far more complicated social phenomenon than has generally been supposed, and (3) radical religious protest movements have a proto-modern character (pp. 63-64).

Chapter 2, "Dueling Scriptures: The Political Theology of John Locke and the Democratization of Muslim Societies," examines the relationship between religious reformation and liberal democracy via John Locke's political theology. An analysis of this exemplary political philosopher's writings shows how one can find theoretical space within religion to argue for popular sovereignty and human rights. The chapter's second part attempts to apply Locke's political theology to the contemporary Muslim world by examining his two seminal political texts: *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) and *The Two Treatises of Government* (1689). While political and religious debates in Iran form the immediate basis of comparison, the underlying political lessons are transferable to other Muslim societies. The author concludes that societies under the sway of illiberal and undemocratic religio-political doctrines can advance liberal democracy by reinterpreting religious ideas with respect to government. The core thesis is that reinterpreting religious norms, rather than rejecting or marginalizing religion, is a precondition for liberal-democratic development (p. 69).

Chapter 3, "A Concise Anatomy of Secularism: Examining Its Linkages to Liberal Democracy," tackles secularism by seeking to clarify the theoretical relationship among religion, secularism, and liberal democracy. Today, "secularism" is bandied about with an imprecision that comes at the expense of understanding. What are its historical roots? What problems does it seek to overcome? What values does it promote? This chapter examines the point at which religion and liberal democracy come into conflict and then outlines why some form of secularism is an essential condition for liberal democracy. Along with exploring secularism's history and relationship with politics, Hashemi attempts to define the precise relationship between secularism and liberal democracy by contrasting the perspectives of Alexis de Tocqueville and Richard Rorty, both of whom agree that liberal democracy requires secularism. A deeper analysis of the precise relationship and tension among secularism, religion, and liberal democracy is sought in the writings of Alfred Stepan.

Chapter 4, "Secularism and Its Discontents in Muslim Societies: Indigenizing the Separation between Religion and State," offers an alternative explanation of the theoretical obstacles and prospects for political secularism in Muslim societies by analyzing them in terms of secularism itself in Muslim societies. In short, it claims that developing an indigenous theory of Islamic secularism will significantly increase the prospects for liberal democracy. The crisis of secularism in Muslim societies today is attributed to several historical, political, and psychological factors, most of them byproducts of western colonialism and imperialism (p.169).

Islamic intellectuals and mass-based Muslim political parties have played a leading role in advancing democratization and liberalization via reconciliation and embracing a home-grown version of Muslim secularism. This process of the growth and cultivation of Muslim secularism provides a potential model for other Muslim societies grappling with the difficult and emotionally charged relationship among religion, secularism, and liberal democracy (p. 170). Hashemi locates the solution to the crisis of secularism in Muslim societies as follows: (1) understanding Europe's and the Islamic world's different historical experiences in terms of the relationship between a religious reformulation and political secularization, and (2) learning lessons from recent political gains for democracy in Turkey and Indonesia (p. 134).

In his conclusion, the author argues that he has attempted to rethink the historical, theoretical, and practical relationship among religion, secularism, and liberal democracy by analyzing contemporary politics in Iran, Turkey, and Indonesia. The central problematic that he sought to explicate is that lib-

eral democracy, as a modern political regime, requires a form of secularism to sustain itself. At the same time, however, the primary intellectual, political, and cultural resources that Muslim democrats can draw on are largely religious. Hashemi has also highlighted the critical interpretive point that “religion is a key and often ignored variable in the long and torturous struggle for liberal democracy that social scientists ignore at their own analytical peril” (p.177).

A timely and insightful contribution to a debate of great consequence for the Muslim world and the West, the book represents a weighty contribution to the question of Islam and democracy.

Tauseef Ahmad Parray
Ph.D. Research Candidate/Scholar, Department of Islamic Studies
Aligarh Muslim University, India