INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Islam and Secularism in Singapore
Between Embracement and Belief
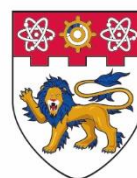
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INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

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Islam and Secularism in Singapore:
Between Embracement and Belief

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Abstract

Singaporean Muslims have always lived in a secular state and participated fully in its institutions even though many of them are sceptical towards the reconcilability of secularism with Islam. This study is being undertaken to ascertain if the embracement of the secular state ideology bears out of pragmatism rather than Islamic beliefs. Thirty-seven *asatizah* (Islamic preachers and teachers), who are traditionally the socio-religious influencers of religious life, were interviewed as part of the study. This paper captures their thoughts on secularism as a philosophy, their religious perspectives of living in a secular state, and their justification to suspend the application of a majority of *Sharīʿah* laws.

Muslims and Secularism in Singapore

Singapore's model of secularism is well described using N.J. Demerath's typology of secularism, in which he has differentiated it into four types, based on the interaction of two principles: the extent to which secularisation is an internal or external process, and the extent to which it is directed or non-directed.[1]

Singapore's secularism is internal and directed. Therefore, it is of the coercive type, given the unique historical experiences that Singapore went through in the 1950s and early 1960s (before its independence in 1965). Three historical events, arising from race- and religion-based politics have shaped the characteristics of the new state of Singapore.

The first event was the Maria Hertogh riots in 1950, which involved a tussle for the custody of Maria Hertogh between her Dutch Catholic biological parents and her Malay-Muslim adoptive mother. Eighteen people were killed and another 173 injured. This conflict was instigated by ethnic as well as religious factors and set against the backdrop of anti-colonial politics.[2] The second was the communal riots in July 1964, that occurred during the celebration of Prophet Muhammad's birthday. The riots were sparked when Chinese youth threw stones at Muslims involved in the procession. Subsequently, 22 people were killed and 454 suffered injuries. Indeed, religion was a significant factor, given the nature of the celebrations.[3] Third, the brief merger between Singapore and Malaysia, from 1963 to 1965, gave rise to irreconcilable differences between the leaders of both countries with regard to how race and religion should be managed as factors for governing society.[4]

These three tragic historical experiences drove home the point that ethnicity and religion were two factors that could destroy the social fabric of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. The ruling elite's painful experiences with the politics of race and religion before and during the brief political merger with Malaysia shaped their world-view as well as the ideology upon which the new state was established, resting on two pillars – multi-culturalism and secularism.[5] It was decided that religion must not feature in national life, although the Constitution of Singapore guarantees freedom of religion.[6]

While multiculturalism provides the space for communities to assert their cultural and religious identities, secularism moderates the situation and holds religions at bay by excluding them from both the public and the political domain.[7] Lee Kuan Yew (the founding leader of modern Singapore) re-affirmed his belief in secularism by saying that "Religion cannot be a force for national unity. Indeed, secularism is essential for inter-religious harmony for our multi-religious community".[8]

Singapore's model is a mild version of secularism in which the state acknowledged the importance of religion to society.[9] It is akin to the accommodative Anglo-American model as compared to the assertive French

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[1] N.J. Demerath III, "Secularization and Sacralization Deconstructed and Reconstructed," in *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, eds, J.A. Beckford and N.J. Demerath III, London: Sage, 2007: 71-5.

[2] Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, *Colonialism, Violence and Muslims in Southeast Asia - The Maria Hertogh Controversy and its aftermath,* London: Routledge, 2009, 15-24.

[3] Adeline Low Hwee Cheng, "The Past in the Present: Memories of the 1964 'Racial Riots' in Singapore", *Asian Journal of Social Science* 29 (2001): 431-55.

[4] National Archives of Singapore, "Speech by Singapore's Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, during the debate in the Federal Parliament on 27th May, 1965, on the motion of thanks to the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong for his speech from the throne," *Singapore Government Press Release* (1965). The merger was the result of security considerations to counter the communist threat; economic reasons due to the draw of a bigger market to sustain the economy and political reasons as both countries had historically been part of a single entity.

[5] Stanley Sanders Bedlington, *The Singapore Malay Community: The Politics of State Integration,* New York, NY: Cornell University Press,1974, 72-3, 81-4.

[6] Hussin Mutalib, *Singapore Malays: Being ethnic minority and Muslim in a global city-state,* London: Routledge, 2012, *121-23, 139-40.*

[7] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "International Religious Freedom Report," *U.S. Department of State* (2009), available at: www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2009/.

[8] Lee Kuan Yew, *The Wit and Wisdom of Lee Kuan Yew*, Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2013, 90.

[9] Lee Hsien Loong, "Speech at the opening ceremony of MUIS 50 International Conference 2018," Prime Minister's Office Singapore (7 November 2018), available at: www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/pm-lee-hsien-loong-opening-ceremony-muis-50-international-conference-2018.

Republican model.[10] Singapore's secularism is not hostile towards religion.[11] It does not exclusively demarcate public space to be off limits for religion.[12] After more than five decades of nationhood, Singaporean Muslims have been acquainted with the imperatives of living within a secular state and a multi-cultural society.[13]

Muslims comprise about 14 per cent of Singapore's population. They form the third-largest religious community, after Buddhists (31 per cent) and Christians (18 per cent). The Muslim community has been an integral part of Singapore since its early history. Muslims in Singapore, who are mostly Malays, believe they are the indigenous people of the country, who have embraced Islam since the 12th century CE.

Singaporean Muslims are largely religiously homogeneous with respect to creed and school of Islamic law. Nearly all of them are Sunni Muslims, belong to the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah* creed and adopt the Shāfiʿī school of law. Nevertheless, the diversity with regard to understanding and practicing Islam in society has significantly increased in recent years due to the presence of new groups like the *salafi,* who assert their non-mainstream ideas; the on-line community which espouses independent religious views; new Muslims (converts to the faith); and Muslim arrivals from various parts of the world (migrants) who are culturally different from local Muslims. Tariq Ramadan's typology to describe European Muslims is applied to understand the growing diversity of Islamic orientations in Singapore.[14] Three of the orientations, among several others, are highlighted below.

The dominant orientation is of the Legalist-Traditionalist type. They are, by and large, conservative – resisting changes in the application of Islamic laws to respond to new issues that have emerged in society. This is because many of the *asatizah* (Arabic, *asātidhah*), who greatly influence their religious understanding, do not emphasise the importance of re-interpreting Islamic laws when the need arises[15].

One other significant group of Muslims is that with a Sufi orientation. Two such *tariqah*, or orders that have good influence within Singapore, are the *Al-Qādriyyah al-Naqshabandiyyah* and the ʿ*Alawiyyah* orders.[16] Both adopt an embracive attitude towards the secular state.

Another important orientation among Muslims is the Salafi-Literalist type. Their adherents prefer a literalist understanding of the Qurʾān and Prophetic traditions. They follow the practices and ways of Prophet Muhammad and the three generations after him as they believe Islamic teachings beyond this era lacked purity. As such, they tend to ignore the development of Islamic traditions that took place after early generations. They are therefore sceptical of evolving modern ideas, including secularism and a secular state ideology.

Muslims in Singapore learn about Islam primarily from *asatizah* who then have the opportunity to influence the thoughts and shape the religious behaviour of Muslims. *Asatizah* receive their foundational Islamic training in six *madrasahs* (Islamic schools) in Singapore. Students who complete their *madrasah* education will then leave Singapore to pursue higher Islamic education in traditional Islamic universities located in the Middle-East, Malaysia, and Indonesia. There, they receive an Islamic education from institutions that, in many cases reinforce a conservative, rigid and even austere religious outlook. Upon their return, many among them impart this traditional and conservative orientation of Islam to the local Muslim community. This explains the perpetuation of a dominant, conservative Legalist-Traditional orientation among Muslims living in Singapore.

Studying Islam and Secularism in Singapore

Contradictory Views– Cognitive Dissonance

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[10] Nader Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009, 4.

[11] Mohammad Alami Musa, "Islam, Politics and State," in *Islam in the Modern Secular State,* ed. Z. Ergeshov*,* Bishkek: Kyrgyzstan State Commission on Religious Affairs, 2017: 98-102, available at: http://islaminmodernstate.org.kg/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/book.pdf.

[12] Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square,* London: Bloomsbury, 2012, 2-3.

[13] Ministry of Community Development, Youth & Sports Singapore, "Paper on the Community Engagement Program in Singapore," unpublished paper presented at the 5[th]ASEM Interfaith Dialogue, Seoul, Korea (23-25 September 2009).

[14] Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 24-28.

[15] The term *asatizah,* is used throughout this article. It is the equivalent in the Malay language of the Arabic term *asatidhah.*

[16] Abdullah Alwi Haji Hassan, "Islam di Singapura: Satu Pengenalan," in *Islamika: Esei esei Sempena Abad ke-Hijrah,* ed. Lutpi Ibrahim, Kuala Lumpur: Sarjana Enterprise, 1981: 157-60.

A study conducted by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) in 2010 on the religious outlook of Singaporean Muslims showed that 95.5 per cent of respondents felt that they could not only live as good Muslims under civil laws but also fully participate in secular-modern institutions. However, the responses to questions regarding religious understanding appeared to contradict this notion. For example, nearly half of all respondents (48.5 per cent) opined that differences between state laws and Islamic laws were a hindrance to becoming good Muslims.[17] It appears that their religious understanding did not provide the basis for their positive social behaviour.

There are possibly two reasons to explain this contradiction between their embracement of secular laws and their religious thinking, as well as orientation towards secularism. The first is the cognitive dissonance of a majority of Singaporean Muslims in holding two opposing views at the same time about secularism, at the level of embracement and level of belief. The second reason is their quiet scepticism towards state ideology based on secularism. Such scepticism is not unusual among many Muslims in the Islamic world, as traditional Islamic thought has not substantively dealt with the notion of Islam's reconciliation with secularism. The renowned Islamic scholar Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas wrote that unlike Christianity, secularism cannot develop in Islam because there is the precedence of revealed law, as represented in the *Sharīʿah,* which shapes Islam as a self-sufficient system of belief. Furthermore, it is believed that the separation of Islam from the state is a project facilitated by the ruling elite who want to isolate Islamic scholars from preaching to the Muslim masses, hence eroding their influence over common people.[18]

An eminent historian of Islam, Marshall Hodgson, suggested that the modernisation of Muslims has been marked by a radical social and intellectual rupture with its past.[19] Furthermore, they have not reconciled their political "theologies" with the concept of a separation of religion and state. According to Nader Hashemi, a reformation of sorts in Islamic political thought that could make secularism become more organic with respect to the political life of Muslims, has not occurred.[20]

Understanding the Community's Views on Secularism

The conclusions of the 2010 study provide the motivation to embark on the present study comprising interviews, a field survey, and focus group discussions to establish whether cognitive dissonance and scepticism (mentioned above) really exist in the Singaporean Muslim community. If they do, the task is to identify the factors that have led to such a situation. This study will also attempt to investigate the absence or the extent of reconcilability (if it actually exists) of secularism with Islam, in the Singaporean context.

The first part of the study involved interviews with *asatizah*. Thirty-seven *asatizah* were interviewed over a period from July 2017 to August 2018. They came from four different sectors – the state establishment, the mosques, the private religious education sector, and missionary organisations – within which they performed specific roles. They were evenly distributed based on their age group and gender.

The questions for the interview were divided into four broad sections: (1) general views on secularism (2) secularism and politics, (3) secularism in Singapore, and (4) the idea of an Islamic state. They were formulated based on the report prepared by MUIS on the findings of the above-mentioned study on the religious outlook of Singaporean Muslims and their perceptions of living in a secular state. The questions were reviewed with regard to their intent and clarity. Trial interviews were then conducted. Several changes were made to the questions before they were finally adopted. The interviews were done in person in a language preferred by the interviewees. As they were open-ended, interviewees had the opportunity to express their thoughts comprehensively. The interviews were taped with the consent of participants and a code of ethics governing research interviews was explained to them. A report was then prepared for each interview, analysed and a scoring system was used to categorise interviewees according to their responses.

This paper presents the thoughts of the *asatizah* interviewed. It is divided into two sections – the first encapsulates the key thoughts shared by the majority of interviewees, while the second part categorises them

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[17] MUIS Academy, *Survey Report on Religious Outlook of the Singapore Muslim Community*, 2011.
[18] Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy,* 144-46.
[19] Marshall G.S Hodgson, *The Ventures of Islam Volume 3: The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times,* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1974, 417-18.
[20] Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy*, 134.

according to strands of thinking as explained below. A point to note is that the thoughts presented in this paper are majority views, unless otherwise stated.

Key Findings & Common Grounds

General

The positions of the *asatizah* on secularism, inferred from interviews, appear to have been influenced by three main factors: (1) their understanding of the concept of secularism (whether as an ideology or merely as a political technique), (2) the impact of secularism on their religious lives, and (3) Singapore's governance as a secular state when compared with other systems found in Muslim-majority countries which the interviewees were familiar with.

Generally speaking, the early encounters of the *asatizah* with secularism, when they were young students in local *madrasahs*, were negative. This was the situation in the early years till the *madrasah* undertook efforts to review their curriculum and approach to teaching Islam. Before this review, secular subjects taught were viewed as being "inferior" to the Islamic subjects or, even worse, as "anti-religion". *Madrasah* students were not adequately introduced to the idea of secularism and their instinct was to perceive the secular as hostile to the religious. Similarly, the *asatizah* had a negative perception of secularism during their undergraduate studies, due to its projection as atheistic, anti-religion and a Western ideology that was imposed on Muslims to weaken Islam. Almost all *asatizah* had minimal exposure to contemporary Islamic discourses on secularism by progressive-minded scholars.[21]

However, the *asatizah* interviewed realised, over time, that their initial views as mentioned above were not true. Their experiences of living and performing their roles in a secular state like Singapore led them to recognise that there were multiple models of the secular state, ranging from an extreme form that was anti-religion (and which completely relegated religion to the private sphere) to a more "liberal" understanding of a secular state that still acknowledged the role of religion in public life and minimally intervened in religious matters. Generally, the interviewees had no issue with the specific form of secularism that was not anti-religion, if it was applied in a fair and just manner to govern a state where no one religion was oppressed or marginalised at the expense of another. An *asatizah* interviewed opined that secularism had no "theology" and hence, there was no question about it going against the Islamic faith.

Less than half of the *asatizah* interviewed (14 out of 37) could cite religious arguments found in the Qur'ān, Ḥadīth or the *ijmāʿ* (consensus) of classical scholars, to substantiate their stand in the debate on secularism. When asked for terms that can best describe secularism, they could not identify any suitable terms except the term '*ilmāniyyah*, which derives its etymology from the root word *ʿilm* that means knowledge. However, there is also an opinion from a respondent that the term *ʿilmāniyyah* failed to capture the essence of secularism and it had been coined by Western scholars to push forward a positive image of secularism.[22] As such, according to the respondent, Muslim scholars have countered this image by terming secularism as *"lādīniyyah"*, which means the absence of God. The difficulty in coming up with terms that can aptly describe secularism showed that Islamic scholarship has not been able to develop an appropriate vocabulary for its discourse about secularism.

All *asatizah* interviewed immediately linked secularism to the separation of religion from worldly life, as well as the separation of religion from state. The former description of secularism perhaps indicates a broader understanding of the concept, while the latter comprises a narrow definition of secularism. The a*satizah's* interpretation of Islamic history, with regard to political governance during the time of the Prophet and the Rightly

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[21] For examples, see Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy*, and Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.
[22] Scholars have noted that there is indeed no equivalent translation of the term 'secularism' in Arabic. In Arabic, the common term for secularism is '*almāniyyah* (this-wordly) or '*ilmāniyyah* (from the word '*ilm*, or science). Etymologically, there is no Arabic verb root for '*almāniyyah* – the term was derived from the word '*ālam* which means 'world'.

Guided Caliphs, was not uniform. In fact, the differences of interpretation gave rise to divergent views on the issue of the fusion of political and religious authority during this formative period of Islamic political life.

One group of *asatizah* interviewees acknowledged there was no separation between religious and political authority during the time of the Prophet, as well as the four Rightly Guided Caliphs who succeeded him. They considered Madinah to be the first Islamic state set up by the Prophet and identified the "Madinah Charter" as its Constitution. However, they acknowledged that the context of governance at that time was unique and could not be replicated beyond that period of Islamic history, given the special status of the Prophet and the special position of the Caliphs. Furthermore, these *asatizah* felt that only when the community achieved a high level of piety and understanding of Islam, there could be concomitant approximation of Madinah to fulfil the conditions for the establishment of the Islamic state. This would, however, be an extremely challenging goal to achieve.

A diametrically opposite view by another group of *asatizah* interviewees was that there was separation of religion from worldly matters even during the time of the Prophet. The indications were as follows:

(i) The principle of *"ahl al-balad adrā bi mā fīhi"*, which translates to mean that the people of a country are more knowledgeable about its matters, is employed as a reliable method in interpreting *ḥadīth*.[23]

(ii) The narration of the *ḥadīth* that speaks about the Prophet's advice against cross-pollination of a date tree. The dates appeared bad when harvested and the Prophet questioned why it was so. Upon hearing that it was due to his advice, the Prophet said the people were more learned about the matter of the world and he lacked knowledge of it.[24]

These *asatizah* who supported the separation of Islam from state claimed that the Prophet's governance of society in Madinah contained the essential characteristics of a secular model. This was because the Prophet did not force other religious communities to convert to Islam or govern their lives according to Islamic laws. Additionally, the Prophet never declared Madinah as a "Dawlah Islāmiyyah" (political entity with defined territorial borders and ruled according to Islamic laws), and did not issue a binding rule on how to govern a country. The *asatizah* felt that the fusion of political and religious authority within the Prophet was unique; this must not be used to legitimise such an arrangement beyond him. They also held the view that historically, the separation between political authority and religious authority had already occurred soon after the Prophet.[25] They noted that in the past, the political rulers of Muslim empires had to rely on religious authority to legitimise their rule, proving that religious and political power were not vested in one individual or an authoritative body. The separation of power between the political and religious authorities, as a reality of life, was accepted by Muslims in the past.

These *asatizah* did not believe the polity that existed during the Prophet's time or even during the Rightly Guided Caliphs' time, took the form of a nation-state which is a creation of the modern era, in the 19th century CE. Rather, the emphasis during the Prophet's time was on the establishment of a strong and cohesive society comprising various religious communities and tribes which were to be treated as one *Ummah*. The Prophet reminded Muslims not to discriminate against non-Muslims and instead accord them religious freedom. This message of freedom is expressed in the Qur'ān (109:6).[26] The *asatizah* interviewed recognised that freedom to believe is also a central plank of secularism. This constitutes common ground between Islam and secularism. Furthermore, a few of the *asatizah* believed the Prophet separated religion from matters of daily governance. This is evident from another verse of the Qur'ān (4:59) in which certain scholars had interpreted the phrase "those in authority among you" in the verse as referring to two groups of people – non-religious leaders (*umarā'*) and religious scholars (*'ulamā'*). This strengthens the indication that there was, in fact, a separation between state affairs and religious affairs, as well as between political authority and religious authority.

All the *asatizah* interviewed believed the secular state can unite diverse communities by reducing conflicts, as the principle of neutrality in secularism dictated that the state had to be impartial towards all religions. No one religion in a secular state, irrespective of its following, could dominate the others – they deemed that the

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[23] This is a principle within one of the branches of *ḥadīth* sciences, *al-jarḥ wa al-taʿdīl* (disparaging and declaring trustworthy) which deals with identifying if the narrators of *ḥadīth* are reliable.

[24] In *Sahih Muslim*, 2364.

[25] An-Naʿim, *Islam and the Secular State*.

Muslim minority community in Singapore could be better protected against discrimination. Additionally, they contrasted life experiences in a secular country with that in a theocracy. Referring to real examples, the *asatizah* acknowledged that theocracy would favour the religion of the majority community at the expense of minorities whose freedom to practice their religion would be inevitably affected.

The *asatizah*, however, were not consistent in their position. When asked whether a secular system would remain the preferred system when Muslims formed the majority, most *asatizah* felt that ideally, an Islamic state (political entity with defined territorial borders and ruled according to Islamic laws) should be established, especially if the leader of the country is also Muslim. However, they emphasised that the form of governance and laws must ensure the well-being of all, including non-Muslims. If this condition is met, then it will be acceptable to implement such a system.

About the applicability of *ḥudūd* laws (prescribed punishments in Islamic law) in today's world, there was consensus that *ḥudūd* laws are part of "God's laws" and, therefore, Muslims must not deny them despite their inability to achieve just implementation. However, their implementation could be postponed till society (containing both Muslims and non-Muslims) fully accepted and understood their aims. Even if a complete understanding was achieved, there was still the issue of just implementation. Most interviewees in fact opined that the focus on *ḥudūd* as a large part of *Sharīʿah* was somewhat misplaced and unproductive.

The bottom-line was that the *asatizah* strongly felt that religion was still needed in a secular state, especially in addressing social ills. Hence, there was a need to bring the religious and the secular realms together in order to solve the challenges faced by society at present. An interviewee said that if there was to be an Islamic state (in the world), it should be based on secularism because secularism promotes positive values.

These thoughts were shared by the majority of the *asatizah* interviewed. The interviews also revealed divergences in thinking. Three strands of thinking on secularism have been found to exist among the *asatizah* who were interviewed. They are as follows: (1) a strong embracement of secularism and the secular state ideology founded on their Islamic belief; (2) an embracement of secularism which is not as strong, characterised by a degree of scepticism but a strong recognition of its utility (based on pragmatic thinking) as a tool that can be used to manage society and govern the state; and (3) a rejection of secularism both as an ideology and in practice. Most of the *asatizah* who were interviewed embraced secularism (strands 1 and 2), but only a few among them managed to reconcile it with their Islamic belief (strand 1). The remaining small minority rejected secularism as well as the secular state ideology (strand 3).

The following section summarises the key ideas of the *asatizah* according to each strand of thought.

Strong Embracement and Reconciliation with Islam (Strand 1)

Only a small minority of *asatizah* interviewees (4 out of 37) fall under this category. What differentiated them was that they appreciated the meaning of secularism, understood its genesis and had reconciled secularism with their Islamic beliefs to a large extent. They were also able to trace the roots of secularism to Western history, particularly its eminence during the Enlightenment period.

Based on their view that Islam was a perfect religion, they believed it could thrive in any situation. There was also an opinion that the label "secular" was unnecessary because many aspects of this word originated from God. One verse of the Qur'ān they cited to support the view that secularism was compatible with Islam, was a verse that states "there is no compulsion in religion" Qu'ran (2:256). This verse acknowledged there was no religion that could impose its beliefs or values on others – a principle that secularism similarly promoted. The freedom to believe and worship in diverse forms was a central precept in the notion of secularism.

Notably, another significant point was that these *asatizah* strongly believed that living in a secular state did not make one a lesser Muslim. There was a view that a good number of moral values are universal (that is, not faith-exclusive) and need not originate from religion. They did not see secularism as devoid of moral values. Nevertheless, they felt Muslims living in a secular state had to try and practise Islam to the best of their abilities, in accordance with what God had ordained, and exemplified by the Prophet. In some cases, all the *asatizah* in this category felt that a secular country could, in fact, be more Islamic than a self-declared Islamic country, if the former was able to govern its citizens fairly and justly as well as provide equal opportunities for all citizens.

The form of governance was not crucial, according to those who were in this category. What mattered were the values of good governance such as equality, justice, transparency, and accountability towards citizens.

The Prophet did not prescribe any form of political system or governance. The command was for Muslims to live in peace, and not necessarily to live in an exclusively Islamic state. The *asatizah* quoted an instance where the Prophet asked Muslims to migrate to Abyssinia (the historical name for present day Ethiopia) which was ruled by a Christian king called Najasyi, to escape persecution in Mecca. This was evidence that there was no obligation for Muslims to live in a country ruled by Muslims. There was no divine rule which stated that a Muslim leader was needed to govern Muslims. This position was based on the following verse: "Yet if only the people of the faithless towns had believed and feared God, We most surely would have opened forth upon them blessings from the sky and the earth. But they denied faith. So We seized them, suddenly for what they had duly earned" Qu'ran (7:96). The verse is interpreted to mean that God would send blessings to a country as long as its citizens were good, and that a Muslim leadership was not a pre-requisite for the prosperity of a country. An interesting opinion was expressed during one of the interviews, that based on a *ḥadīth*, people who were thought to have *taqwa* (mentioned in the verse above) included even non-Muslims who were pious and steadfast in their faith based on their own conception of God.[27]

Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328 CE) was quoted by the some of the interviewees as saying that God would help and bless a country that practised justice, and would destroy a country that was ruthless, irrespective of whether it was run by Muslims.[28] Additionally, an interviewee quoted a *ḥadīth* which illustrated there was no compulsion to *hijrah* or live under a Muslim government.[29]

These *asatizah* were of the view that Muslims should not strive for an Islamic state but instead, a state of Islam, where the most fundamental values of Islam, such as justice and stability, were met. It was not obligatory for Muslims to live under the *Sharīʿah,* but what was important was for Muslims to strive to uphold the *Sharīʿah* in their lives.

These *asatizah* also recognised that Islam did not forbid Muslims from coming up with their own laws using reason, if there were laws ordained by Islam that could not be implemented in a context that was different from the context during the time of the Prophet. Furthermore, they felt *Sharīʿah* laws, as understood today, could be inadequate to address many issues within modern society.

Pragmatic Embracement but Irreconcilability with Islamic Belief (Strand 2)

Most of the *asatizah* in this group were not aware of the genesis of secularism, especially how it's growth was spurred on by the advent of the modern era.

These interviewees perceived secularism pragmatically, as a practical tool that was necessary in governing public life. They differentiated this utilitarian value of secularism from the understanding of secularism as a philosophy and worldview. They did not see any problem in separating religion and state as long as the state did not interfere with the religious rights and practices of Muslims and other religious communities. These *asatizah* agreed that Singapore's secularism was not hostile to religion, but actually supported religious life in Singapore. The state recognised the positive role of religion, especially the goodness of religious values that provide guidance to people. Most *asatizah* felt that Singapore's system of governance is in fact Islamic because values promoted in Singapore, such as the rejection of all forms of corruption, are in tandem with Islam. Additionally, under Singapore's secular system, Muslims also benefit from special privileges like the state's establishment of the Sharīʿah Court and the enactment of the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) for many aspects of Islamic life. This highlights the legal pluralism that is an integral characteristic of Singapore's secular political system.

Furthermore, all the interviewees in this category consistently rejected the claim that Singapore's secular state system had made Muslim life more challenging, because the state did not explicitly prevent Muslims from carrying out their religious obligations. Some of these *asatizah* believed that constraints, for example, the prohibition of Muslim women in the uniformed services to don the headscarf must not be perceived

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[27] In *Musnad Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, 22978.

[28] Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Ḥisbah fi al-Islam aw Wazifat al-Ḥukūmah al-Islāmiyyah*, 1967.

[29] In this narration, Fudaik, a companion of the Prophet, lamented that other companions had been encouraging him to make *hijrah* to a Muslim country. However, when asked by the Prophet whether he could carry out his religious duties freely and without fear in his current country, Fudaik agreed and thus, the Prophet told him that *hijrah* was not necessary. In *Sahih ibn Hibban*, 4969.

as the state's act of hostility against religion because Muslims could still practise and believe freely without fear in all other aspects of their religious life. Furthermore, as long as the foundational requirements of the religion were met, the *asatizah* believed that challenges should not nullify the benefits of a secular state ideology.

Regarding their public roles, the *asatizah* generally felt that secularism has not inhibited their work as the secular structure of the country still allows them to preach and continue teaching in classes that even deal with sensitive religious topics.

Nevertheless, they felt separating religion from the state is more possible in theory than in practice, because the relationship between state and religion can be ambivalent. They made this observation when they were students in the Middle East and in other countries in Southeast Asia. They saw how countries which hosted them as students had politicised religion although they were secular states. This was done for political reasons and to solicit greater public support. At the same time, they were also familiar with how these secular states applied authoritarian rule upon religious groups to supress their political influence. In short, the *asatizah* in this group concluded that the state neither inherently supports nor rejects religion. The state will decide for it to be either friendly or hostile to religion depending on whether its decision will serve its interests. If separating religion from state serves its interest, it will do so On the contrary, if it integrates religion into state administration to serve its interests, the state will not hesitate to do so. Nevertheless, they claimed that both ideologies and forms of governance – secular or religious (Islamic) – could fall prey to extremism, be misused, and could thereby result in discrimination against or persecution of different groups of people. What mattered was whether the state delivered a good, just, and prosperous life to its people, regardless of the system or ideology of governance.

Rejection (Strand 3)

The interviewees who rejected secularism associated it with the following words: "anti-religion", "against Islam", "an alternative in a state of *darūrah* (situation of emergency that suspends need to comply with obligatory acts)", "short-sighted", "regressive", and "a state of defeat". They felt secularism was a new ideology that was short-sighted in its pursuit of material goals and did not place much emphasis on the other dimensions of mankind's development. They also believed it was an ideology that sought to undermine Islam and Muslims. These asatizah interviewed were of the view that secularism was an idea created to liberate man from the many restrictions imposed by religion in life. They strongly felt that these restrictions were defined for man to abide to achieve well-being in life.

Another reason for discontent among this group was its belief that secularism came about as a result of colonisation of Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. The secular state ideology was imposed on these countries upon de-colonisation. Therefore, the interviewees opined that Muslims in these liberated lands were living in a secular state as they were not presented with any other alternative political system. Today, the permissibility for Muslims to "temporarily" live in a secular state like Singapore, according to this rejectionist strand, is justified by a *ḥadīth* which prophesises that a system of governance will eventually emerge similar to the *khilafah* established by the Prophet.[30]

Furthermore, they stressed there was no mention of the dichotomy between public life and private life in the Qur'ān or the Prophet's Traditions. On the contrary, they believed that these primary sources in Islam provided guidance for Muslims to lead their lives in the public domain. They also emphasised that religion and politics were never separate during the Prophet's time. They saw the secular political system as limiting man's true purpose of living in this world, which was the pursuit of God's pleasure, and that secularism only concerned itself with the 'here' and 'now' without regard for the 'hereafter'. This, in their view, contradicted the Muslim worldview and largely stemmed from the belief that Islam was "*shumūl*" (holistic) and "*kāffah*" (perfect) as a religion. Therefore, Islam could provide guidance to every aspect of life, including politics and the administration of state affairs.

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[30] The narration is as follows: "The Prophet said: 'Prophethood will last among you for as long as Allah wills, then Allah will take it away. Then it will be (followed by) a Khilafah Rashidah (rightly guided) on the pattern of the Prophethood. It will remain for as long as Allah wills, then Allah will take it away. Afterwards there will be a hereditary leadership which will remain for as long as Allah wills, then He will lift it if He wishes. Afterwards, there will be biting oppression, and it will last for as long as Allah wishes, then He will lift it if He wishes. Then there will be a Khilafah Rashidah according to the ways of the Prophethood.' Then he kept silent." In *Musnad Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, 17680.

Therefore, according to this group of *asatizah* interviewed, secularism was essentially problematic as a philosophy, one that was unsustainable and incompatible with Islam. It was perceived to have replaced God and religion as the core of an individual's life – this held true for all believers and not just Muslims, as was evident from the historical experience of the West. Furthermore, they feared that removing references to God in secular thinking may cause Muslims to lose their accountability to God when they go about their daily lives. Similarly, without the reference of God, political leaders might lack accountability and, as a result, may not carry out their responsibilities diligently. A state that governs without religion can ultimately transgress what God has explicitly ordained as unlawful (*ḥarām)* and doing so would incur a great punishment from God.

The *asatizah* stated there was a basis for the establishment of an Islamic state in the Qur'ān as well as in the Islamic *fiqh* tradition. The basis for this claim was the existence of verses explicitly spelling out specific punishments for certain crimes. Since a government was the only legitimate authority that could mete out punishments, the establishment of an Islamic state that applied *Sharīʿah* laws was deemed necessary so that the Islamic government in power could implement these divine commands. Some of the *asatizah,* if given a choice, would opt to live under an Islamic system with Muslims holding political authority. They would choose this system over a secular state, if a true form of the former was found to exist. If the criteria to establish an Islamic state had been met and yet no efforts were made to establish one, they would regard it as a sin. Alternatively, Muslims should perform the *hijrah* to a country that is governed by *Sharīʿah* laws and where a fusion of political and religious authority resides within Muslim leaders. Nevertheless, the *asatizah* interviewees were unable to name any place which allowed for this at present. The closest examples cited were Brunei and Turkey. However, they did not consider other nations, which claimed to be Islamic countries, to be better than Singapore in terms of allowing Muslims to practise *Sharīʿah.*

However, these *asatizah* viewed Singapore's secular state ideology as having "intruded" into the lives of Muslims. Consequently, the Muslims in Singapore, according to them, had to compromise their religious practices. An example is women not being permitted to don headscarves in the uniformed services. In this regard, they disagreed with the notion that Singapore was religion-neutral. This was because Singapore, according to them, preferred secularism over religions and they considered secularism to be a "religion" of its own. These *asatizah* believed a state governed by Islamic law would be better placed to nip social problems in the bud, as they viewed ethics as being immanent and derived from God. In short, the group felt religion plays an important role in introducing positive influences within society.

Moreover, the group's anxiety was exacerbated by the need to mutually recognise and respect all beliefs, a conduct expected from citizens of a secular state. These *asatizah* who rejected secularism felt they would be coerced to embrace pluralism and to believe that all religions are true, including those they perceived as being deviant.

Moving On

The interviews with the *asatizah* revealed that a majority of them (35 out of 37) believed that the secular state offered the best political arrangement for religious communities to co-exist peacefully. A small minority (two interviewees), however, resisted the idea of living in a secular state.

Nevertheless, the interviews showed that almost all the interviewees (33) faced difficulty in accommodating the idea of secularism into their worldview as Muslims. Several criticisms, doubts, and apprehensions were expressed in the course of the interviews. These included the interviewees' perception that the Prophet and the four Rightly Guided Caliphs exercised both political and religious authority at the same time. These perceptions, along with the understanding that Islam is a way of life encapsulating all dimensions of life (both temporal and spiritual) were justifications by the *asatizah* interviewed for the fusion of both religious and political authorities.

The embracement of the secular state model by a majority of interviewees was founded on a strong basis of pragmatism. There was a near-unanimous view citing secularism as being the best political arrangement to govern a highly plural society. They were able to gauge the advantage of equal respect and recognition of minority religious communities.

Nevertheless, only a small minority (four interviewees) could connect their embracement of secularism with their Islamic worldview. Similarly, a small minority (two interviewees) completely rejected secularism as they deemed it was contradictory with Islamic teachings. They concluded, by quoting the Qur'ān, that it was a religious obligation for Muslims to establish God's law on this earth and that a secular state would be an impediment to enforce these divine laws.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that the embrace of secularism has not been reconciled with Islamic beliefs. The interviews shed light on many issues that need further discussion. This paper just presents the ideas that surfaced during the interviews that were conducted – and there is a need to closely analyse the thoughts of the *asatizah* interviewed. A broader study, involving a field survey, will be undertaken to understand the issue of Islam and secularism in the context of Singapore.

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