The Islamic Secular

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The relationship between Islam and the state (or, more broadly, the place of religion in the modern, "secular" world) remains a vibrant topic in academic and public discourse. However, the central categories in this debate—notably, "religion/religious," "Islam/Islamic," and "the secular/secularism"—are often contested or insufficiently defined. Their usage is further shaped by scholars' interpretations of their historical origins or by assumptions about how these domains of thought and practice ought to function in modern societies.

The field of Religious Studies, for instance, has long debated the category of "religion." Scholars have considered whether "religion" in the modern sense—as a system of beliefs and practices that denotes a specific sphere of life—can be universally applied across all cultures. he prevalent narrative, articulated by pioneering scholars like Wilfred Cantwell Smith in *he Meaning and End of Religion* (1963), presents the reified category of "religion" as a modern Western construct. his framing has generated two primary responses among scholars of Islam, particularly within Western academia. One group argues for apply-ing Western categories of religion (and the secular) on Islam without

qualification, assuming the universality of these concepts (e.g., Sadik J. al-Azm, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im). Another group adopts a postcolonial or decolonial stance, thus presenting Islam as a counterexample to everything deemed "modern" or "Western." These scholars, like the late Shahab Ahmed, accept the narrative that the religious/secular distinction is a modern Western invention and frame the binary as alien to Islam and its history. While this approach aims to center Islam's distinctiveness, it often overlooks crucial features of Islamic thought. Its focus on presenting Islam as an antidote to the prevailing modern Western "religion" obscures crucial historical and conceptual nuances.

Most of this literature lacks a serious study of the equivalents of the modern concepts of "religion" and "the secular" in non-Western intellectual traditions. Consequently, the modalities of religion and secularity in Islamic thought and historical experience remain underexplored. Only recently have some scholars such as Rushain Abbasi (2019, 2020), Paul L. Heck (2023), Caner K. Dagli (2024), and others attempted to address this gap. Within this emerging research, Sherman Jackson's monograph, *The Islamic Secular*, makes a distinctive contribution. Jackson offers a long-overdue systematic examination of "Islam," *sharīʿa*, and "the secular" through the lens of Islamic thought. He critically engages with various academic views of Islam and the modern state, while remaining fully grounded in classical Islamic jurisprudence. Building on his 2017 article, also titled "The Islamic Secular," Jackson expands his argument across six chapters, organized into two main parts.

The first part, titled "The Conceptual Landscape," explores the semantic and jurisprudential distinctions within the Islamic tradition that underpin Jackson's argument. Chapter 1 traces the formation of "the secular" in the modern Western context, highlighting its association with anti-religious or non-religious connotations. This mutual exclusion is also imposed on modern Muslims, requiring them to inhabit either religious or worldly modes of being (pp. 33–35). This "macro-mode" of the secular, as Jackson dubs it, "targets religion as a whole […] seeking to extirpate it from human life" (p. 35). However, Jackson carefully amplifies a non-oppositional understanding of the secular in both Western and non-Western conceptual histories. This "micro-mode" of secularity

emphasizes human responsibility in managing worldly affairs while viewing religious matters as limited to commandments revealed in scripture (pp. 30–39). Jackson's approach then differentiates between realms of religion and secularity but refrains from sharply delineating them as mutually exclusive domains (pp. 39–42).

In Chapter 2, Jackson delves deeper into this framework by exploring the classical jurisprudential categories of *ḥukm sharʿī* (rulings revealed in scripture or extrapolated from it) and non-*sharʿī* (spheres outside *sharīʿa*'s direct supervision). Drawing on figures like the Shāfiʿī jurist and famous theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606 AH/1210 CE) and Mālikī renowned jurist Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī (d. 684AH/1285CE), Jackson demonstrates how these scholars had articulated nuanced distinctions between areas explicitly regulated by *sharīʿa* and those left to human reasoning and discretion. Building on this classical differentiation within Islamic thought, Chapter 3 advances the concept of the "Islamic Secular." The construct is based on Jackson's argument that Islam envisions two distinct but complementary realms: the realm of *sharīʿa*, rooted in revealed sources and jurisprudential reasoning, and the secular realm, which lies beyond *sharīʿa*'s jurisdiction yet remains under God's purview. Unlike the dominant Western secular, often framed as irreligious or antithetical to religion, Jackson's "Islamic Secular" is religious in that it does not exclude divine oversight in "secular" pursuits such as politics, economics, and science. This reframing of the secular challenges the binary opposition between religion and secularity which has prevailed in the Western thought. It also aims to reform the Muslim internalization of this sharp distinction between religious and secular spheres by reviving the Islamic jurisprudential differentiation of these domains of human endeavor.

The second part of the book, "The Islamic Secular, Modernity, and the Modern State," applies Jackson's framework to contemporary debates on Islam's compatibility with modern political structures. Chapter 4 revisits Wael Hallaq's critique of the modern nation-state, which he deems fundamentally incompatible with Islamic governance centered on *sharīʿa*. Chapter 5 engages with Abdullahi An-Na'im's argument that Islam must separate itself from the modern secular state to remain relevant, while

Chapter 6 evaluates Andrew March's proposal for rearticulating Islam-as-*sharīʿa* within liberal citizenship. Through critical engagement with these perspectives, Jackson demonstrates the vitality of the "Islamic Secular" as a framework for navigating the relationship between Islam and the modern state. His analysis underscores the inadequacy of the existing models, offering instead a vision where Muslims can participate in modern political life outside of *sharīʿa* while viewing their secular engagement as an Islamic practice under divine guidance.

Jackson's work is remarkable in its intellectual scope, bridging premodern Islamic jurisprudence with contemporary political theory and religious studies. His engagement with classical Muslim jurists grounds his argument in a robust jurisprudential tradition. Moreover, his critique of the Western secular as a universal model is both timely and persuasive, challenging Muslims and non-Muslims alike to rethink the relationship between religion and the state through the genealogies of these terms in Islamic intellectual history. To be sure, Jackson's use of "the Islamic Secular" might generate criticism, given the term's history and connotations. However, the book is not aimed at reconciling Islam with secularism. Rather, it consciously appropriates the widespread term "the secular" to rearticulate an established Islamic jurisprudential delineation between *sharīʿa* and non-*sharʿī* realms of governance and judgment. Certain marginal aspects of Jackson's argument might still warrant further research, such as his informative but limited engagement with the category of *dunyā* (worldly life) (pp. 37–38; 126–127). This limitation stems from his central focus on jurisprudence, which overlooks the broader conceptions of religion and secularity—particularly those expressed through the concept of *dunyā*—in non-juristic Islamic disciplines of learning.

Be that as it may, *The Islamic Secular* is indubitably a landmark contribution to Islamic Studies, Religious Studies, and beyond. It offers a compelling framework for reconsidering the interplay between religion, secularity, and the state from the perspective of Islamic thought. Jackson's decades of scholarship culminate in this seminal work, challenging prevailing assumptions and opening new avenues for research and dialogue on Islam and the modern state. By redefining the secular

through an Islamic normative lens, Jackson also encourages Muslim readers to move beyond simplistic appropriations of the religious/secular binary. This shift can help unlock their potential for both their religious and worldly contributions to the modern world. *The Islamic Secular* is essential reading for scholars, students of Islam, and anyone interested in the intersections of religion, Islam, law, and the modern state.

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