



Secularism and Islam: The false appearances of incompatibility

Toufik Bouarfa

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Abstract

This article explores the question of the compatibility between Islam and secularism. It challenges the widely held belief that Islam is intrinsically incompatible with secular modernity. Through a historical and philosophical analysis, it highlights the diversity of Islamic interpretations regarding the relationship between religion and politics, emphasizing the contributions of thinkers such as Averroes, Al-Ghazali, and Ali Abdel Raziq. The article also examines the role of the Nahda and contemporary Arab revolutions in reinterpreting the relationship between Islam and secularism, suggesting that these two concepts can coexist harmoniously.

Keywords: Islam, religion, politics, secularism, freedom, the West, Nahda, democracy, citizenship, secularism, Al-Ghazali, Ali Abdel Raziq, Nasr Hâmid Abu Zayd, history, philosophy.

*Toufik Bouarfa, Territorial Civil Servant at the City of Reims, Senior Fellow at the European Foundation for Democracy (EFD), Co-author of *Secularism and Radicalization Prevention: A Practical Guide for Teachers and Field Professionals*, EFD, 2018. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Jean-Louis Auduc, Professor of History and member of the “Conseil des sages de laïcité”, and to Yves Manville, Government Diplomatic Adviser at the SG-CIPDR. Their support and advice were crucial in the preparation of this article.

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The assertion that secularism is incompatible with Islam is a presupposition shared by certain intellectual and political currents, both in the West and within the Muslim world. This discourse is based on the idea that the freedom to believe or not to believe, a fundamental principle of secularism, contradicts the precepts of Islam, which allegedly requires absolute submission to divine laws. This simplified view is fueled by a lack of understanding of religious traditions and political structures within the Muslim world. Moreover, it tends to reduce Islam to its most rigid interpretations, ignoring the diversity of schools of thought and the intellectual reforms undertaken over centuries.

This position neglects the exploration of perspectives that reconcile religious requirements with the values of individual freedom and secular governance. Thinkers such as Averroes and Al-Ghazali paved the way for deep reflections on the relationship between reason and faith, political and religious authority, placing justice and social balance at the heart of their work. Averroes, for example, defended the idea that reason and faith are not mutually exclusive but can coexist and complement each other to achieve a better understanding of the world. This reflection continued through the centuries, passing through the Nahda period in the 19th century, where Muslim intellectuals attempted to reconcile the contributions of modernity with their religious traditions.

By revisiting key moments in Islamic history, such as the era of the Caliphate of Córdoba or the Ottoman reforms, it becomes apparent that the separation of religious and political spheres was a historical reality, sometimes even encouraged by Muslim rulers seeking modernization and political stability. The implementation of secularism, as it is conceived in the French context, for example, is not an entirely foreign concept to Muslim societies. On the contrary, figures such as Ali Abdel Raziq, in the early 20th century, theorised that Islam, as a religion, does not require a political authority to be fully lived, and that the spiritual sphere can coexist with a secular political framework.

It is essential to clearly define what we mean by "secularism." This concept, with its many facets, varies according to cultural and political contexts. In its most well-known form, French secularism implies a strict separation between the state and religion, ensuring the neutrality of the state with respect to religious beliefs and the freedom of conscience of citizens. This leads to the freedom to express one's beliefs or convictions within the limits of respect for public order. In other words, secularism entails state neutrality and imposes equality before the law, without distinction of religion or belief. Anglo-Saxon secularism, on the other hand, often adopts a more flexible approach, allowing some cooperation between the state and religious institutions. In the context of this article, we will consider secularism as a political principle that, while respecting the freedom of belief, aims to separate political power from direct religious influence.

The argument of incompatibility is also based on a monolithic conception of Islam, often associated with its most rigid forms. In practice, however, the diversity of religious interpretations and historical experiences within the Muslim world offers a more nuanced perspective. The various schools of thought, from Sunni to Shia Islam, not to mention contemporary reformers such as Nasr Hâmid Abu Zayd, Chérif Ferjani, Abdelwahab Meddeb, and Rachid Benzine, show that Islam has always been in dialogue with the values of its time and is not fixed in absolute opposition to modernity or secularism.

Deconstructing dominant modes of thought will help challenge established perceptions about the relationship between religion and politics within Muslim societies. This approach aims to untangle the complex threads that make up the fabric of the relationship between Islam and secularism, examining their historical roots, philosophical developments, and contemporary manifestations.

Through a process of deconstruction, revisiting these pivotal periods, and drawing on the contributions of theologians, philosophers, and modern reformers, we can demonstrate that the idea of incompatibility between Islam and secularism is far from self-evident. On the contrary, it proves to be a simplified and often biased reading of religious texts and political realities. The methodical doubt highlighted and developed by René Descartes will nourish our reflection, particularly in questioning the perceptions of the relationship between religion and politics in Muslim societies from a historical and philosophical perspective.

1. The Nahda: Arab Renaissance and Reflection on Modernity

The term Nahda is polysemic, meaning "power," "strength," or "to rise," and also "renaissance." In the history of thought, the Nahda refers to an intellectual, social, and political movement that spread across the Arab world in the 19th century. In response to the growing influence of the West and the socio-political transformations brought about by colonial expansion, Muslim thinkers began to question the possibility of modernizing their societies while preserving the foundations of Islam. One of the key figures in this movement, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, played a fundamental role in introducing new ideas, particularly regarding freedom and secularism.

Thirty-seven years after the French Revolution of 1789, al-Tahtawi was sent to France in 1826 by the vice-king of Egypt, Mehmet Ali, to study French society and its institutions. Fascinated by the French model of the separation of powers, al-Tahtawi proposed a reinterpretation of Islamic society, taking into account European political advances. He offered a novel reflection on freedom: "Freedom is the ability to perform lawful work without unlawful hindrance or abusive opposition [...] the country is characterised by its social body being free [...], disposing as it wishes of its person, time, and affairs, with no other obstacles than those imposed by law or politics."¹ Al-Tahtawi also showed that ideas of freedom, so fundamental to secularism, are not necessarily opposed to Islam but can be adapted within the framework of a social reform compatible with religious values. As Albert Habib Hourani points out, the Nahda deeply marked the Arab world in the 19th century. He describes it as a turning point in Arab thought, where intellectuals began to engage in reflections on how to integrate modern ideas, particularly those of freedom, citizenship, and social and political reforms. Strongly influenced by Europe, they sought to reconcile necessary reforms with the preservation of their Islamic heritage².

To stay true to Albert Habib Hourani's idea, we quote here a passage from his original text: "In so far as these groups, priests, clerks, and merchants, acquired a European culture, it was mainly a theological culture. The literature of Catholic theology and devotion they accepted and read, but neither the polite literature of Europe nor its political ideas seem to have impinged on them until well on into the nineteenth century. But the new interest in the Arabic language had of course a profound influence on their mental life. It led first of all to a new stirring of historical self-consciousness."³

¹ Rifa'a Al-Tahtawi, *Talkhîs al-ibrîz fî talkhîs Bârîz*, (1834), traduit en français par Anouar Louca sous le titre *L'Or de Paris*, Éditions Sinbad, 2012, p. 342.

² Habib Albert Hourani, *La Pensée arabe et l'Occident*, Paris, Éditions Naufal, 1991, p. 415.

³ Albert Habib Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the liberal Age 1798-1939*, Oxford University Press, 1962, pp. 55-57.

This awakening of Arab consciousness can be summed up in the leitmotif embodied by Butrus al-Bustani's (1819–1883) question: *Limâdha nahnu muta'akhhirûn?* ("Why are we late?")⁴.

2. Les contributions de penseurs musulmans

A. Al-Ghazali: Reconciliation of Opposites

Al-Ghazali, an 11th-century theologian and philosopher, is also important in this debate. In his work *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, he addresses the question of knowledge and doubt, asserting that reason must be used to strengthen faith rather than contradict it. According to Chérif Ferjani, Al-Ghazali sought to establish a balance between religious requirements and the rational concerns of his time, an approach that could inspire contemporary Islamic modernity. Al-Ghazali advocates for a vision of Islam that values knowledge and learning, opening the door to more secular interpretations of religion. For Chérif Ferjani, Al-Ghazali never rejected reason altogether. He criticised the excessive use of philosophy at the expense of religious faith. For him, rationality should serve faith, not the other way around. Al-Ghazali sought to reconcile faith with moderate rationality, accepting scientific discoveries and philosophical teachings as long as they did not contradict the fundamental principles of Islam. This approach is particularly interesting for contemporary debates on Islamic modernity, where there is often a search for balance between openness to reason and the preservation of religious values. «Al-Ghazali endeavoured to establish a balance between philosophy, influenced by Greek thought, and Islamic theology. Contrary to what some might assume, he did not reject reason; rather, he sought to delineate its role to ensure that it did not undermine religious truths. In doing so, he aimed to safeguard faith while acknowledging the significance of rational tools in the pursuit of understanding the world».⁵

B. Averroes: Reason and Faith

Averroes (Ibn Rushd), a 12th-century Andalusian philosopher, played a crucial role in reconciling Islamic faith with reason. His work had a significant influence on both Western and Islamic thought. In his *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, he argued that philosophy could serve as a guide to understanding religious truths. For Rachid Benzine, Averroes maintains the premise that reason and faith should not be set against each other, as they complement each other and can coexist⁶. This inclusive approach highlights that secularism does not involve rejecting religion but rather fostering an understanding in which faith can coexist with rational political structures.

⁴ Leyla Dakhli, *La Nahda (Notice pour le dictionnaire de l'Humanisme arabe)*, 2012, halshs-00747086.

⁵ Chérif Ferjani, *Islamisme, laïcité et droits de l'homme*, Paris, Éditions L'Harmattan, 1991, p. 126.

⁶ Rachid Benzine, *Les nouveaux penseurs de l'islam*, Paris, Éditions Albin Michel, 2004, p. 304.

In this work, the author explores the relationship between faith and reason through various Islamic thinkers, including Averroes, and examines the compatibility between faith and philosophical rationality.

C. Nasr Hâmid Abu Zayd: Towards a Modern Hermeneutics

Nasr Hâmid Abu Zayd, a contemporary theologian and literary critic, advocated for a hermeneutic approach to Islamic texts. In his book *Critique of Islamic Discourse*, he argues that interpretations of the texts must evolve with modern times, including the separation of religious and political spheres. Abu Zayd writes, "Islam can be a source of social justice and democracy, as long as its interpretations are not frozen in the past" (Abu Zayd, 1994). This strengthens the idea that secularism can be compatible with Islamic values, as long as the interpretations are adapted to the modern context.

As early as the Middle Ages, a current of thought emerged within the Muslim world, laying the foundational basis for a distinction between religious and non-religious authority. Sheikh Muhammad Abduh of Al-Azhar stated: "*One of the greatest and most noble principles that Islam has proclaimed is the abolition of religious authority... There is absolutely nothing in Islam that corresponds to what some call religious power.*"⁷

D. Feminist Perspectives on Islam and Secularism

Secularism is a tool for the emancipation of individuals and the inclusion of feminine voices within religions. The debate surrounding Islam and secularism brings a crucial dimension to our analysis. Muslim intellectuals have actively contributed to the reinterpretation of Islamic texts from a modern and egalitarian perspective.

Fatema Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist, explored the links between Islam, democracy, and women's rights. "*The misogynistic tradition in Islam does not stem from the Prophet, whose daily practice proves that he considered women as equal partners, but from the manipulation of sacred texts by a male elite.*"⁸ She challenges the traditional interpretations that justify the exclusion of women from the public sphere, arguing that these interpretations are more cultural than religious.

Asma Lamrabet, a Moroccan physician and essayist, advocates for a reform of Islamic thought that would reconcile Islamic principles with universal human rights values. She states, "*Islam is not incompatible with modernity; it is our reading of Islam that is. A re-reading of the Qur'anic message in light of universal values and from a perspective of justice and equality is not only possible but necessary.*"⁹

We can also cite the approach of Amina Wadud, an American theologian who developed a feminist Qur'anic exegesis. In her book *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, she proposes a reading of the Qur'an that supports gender equality and social justice, principles fundamental to a secular and equitable society.

⁷ Muhammad Abduh, *al-Islâm wa 'l-Nazrâniya ma'a 'l-ilm wa 'l-Madâniya (L'islam et le christianisme face à la science et à la civilisation)*, le Caire, 1375 H/1960, pp. 60-62.

⁸ Fatima Mernissi, *Le Harem politique : Le Prophète et les femmes*, Paris, Éditions Albin Michel, 1987, p. 27.

⁹ Asma Lamrabet, *Femmes et hommes dans le Coran : quelle égalité ?*, p. 15, Editions Al-Bouraq, 2012, p. 15.

These women's voices demonstrate that the debate on the compatibility between Islam and secularism is dynamic and plural, involving diverse perspectives that enrich our understanding of this complex issue.

3. Ali Abdel Raziq: Separation of the Spiritual and the Temporal

In the early 20th century, the Egyptian theologian Ali Abdel Raziq questioned the idea of the caliphate. In his work *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power*, he argued that Islam, as a religion, does not require a religious political authority to guide believers. He states: "*The Prophet is a spiritual guide, not a worldly king. No religious principle prescribes that Muslims must establish a state based on religious laws.*"¹⁰ This revolutionary statement for his time had significant repercussions as it reinterpreted the concept of *din wa dawla* (religion and state). This concept, although popular, is not universally accepted in Islamic thought, and intellectuals such as Ali Abdel Raziq demonstrated that the Prophet was primarily a spiritual guide, and that the form of government was not dictated by religion.

Abdel Raziq thus maintains that the political sphere must be autonomous from the religious sphere, a separation that can be found in the very principles of secularism. His work, though controversial and condemned by religious authorities of his time, opened the way for reformist thinking. As Bernard Lewis notes, Abdel Raziq was a pioneer in reinterpreting the respective roles of religion and the state in the Islamic world¹¹. He shows that the institution of the caliphate, far from being a religious necessity, is a political construct that could be questioned in favour of a modern system that respects the separation of powers.

Abdel Raziq was not alone in conceptualizing this separation. Muhammad Abduh, before him, defended the idea that Sharia, far from being a fixed legal code, is a set of ethical principles subject to interpretation. For them, political governance is not prescribed in detail by Islam and can, therefore, adapt to modern contexts.

4. Muhammad Iqbal and Muhammad Ali Jinnah: Islam as a Dynamic and Modernist Force

A. Muhammad Iqbal and modernity

Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), an Indo-Muslim philosopher and poet, is often regarded as one of the leading thinkers of modern Islamic reform. Contrary to those who viewed Islam as a stagnant tradition, Iqbal defended a dynamic and evolving vision of religion, compatible with modernity and democratic institutions.

¹⁰ Ali Abdel Raziq, *L'Islam et les fondements du pouvoir*, Éditions La Découverte, 1994, p. 123.

¹¹ Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 240.

In *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1930), he states that Islam does not prescribe a unique form of government but encourages a political order based on *ijtihad* (effort of interpretation) and adaptation to contemporary realities. He argues that secularism, if understood as the strict separation of religion and the state in the Western sense, does not necessarily align with the Islamic spirit. However, he advocates for a reinterpretation of Islamic law in line with principles of justice and democracy.

Iqbal thus played a fundamental role in rehabilitating critical thought within Islam, showing that Qur'anic ethics can coexist with modern and democratic governance.

B. Muhammad Ali Jinnah was in favour of a Muslim state, but not an Islamic state

Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876-1948), the founder of Pakistan, adopted an even more explicit position on the separation of religion and state.

*“You are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. [...] You will find that with time, Hindus will cease to be Hindus, Muslims will cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense because that is a matter for each person’s faith, but in the political sense, as citizens of a state”.*¹²

This statement shows that Jinnah envisioned Pakistan as a country where faith would remain a personal matter, distinct from political functioning. His approach, therefore, differs from the theocratic model and is closer to a conception of secularism where the state guarantees equality for all citizens, regardless of religion.

5. Turkey: A Laboratory for Reformist Ideas

A. Between Nahda, the French Revolution, and Secular Reforms

Early 20th-century Turkey emerged as a crossroads for modernity, influenced both by the ideals of Nahda in Egypt and those of the French Revolution. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, orchestrated a series of radical reforms aimed at secularizing the state and liberating Turkish society from religious tutelage. The Turkish model of secularism, based on a strict separation of the spiritual and the temporal, echoed the reforms advocated in the 19th century by Nahda thinkers, for whom emancipation involved reconciling Islam with modernity.

Atatürk, while marked by the specific Turkish context, drew from this Arab-Muslim intellectual ferment and, at the same time, from Western revolutions, to lay the foundations of an independent and secular nation. In this sense, Turkey served as an open laboratory where reformist ideas found fertile ground to be realised on a large scale. The overhaul of the legal system, the introduction of the Latin alphabet, and compulsory education are just a few examples that reflect this drive for modernization through the institutionalization of secularism.

¹² Speech of August 11, 1947, before the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan.

B. The Boomerang Effect: From the Turkish Laboratory to Egyptian Pan-Arabism

This Turkish reformist momentum produced a "boomerang effect" that contributed to the rise of pan-Arabism, a movement aimed at unifying and modernizing Arab societies. Egypt, in particular, was heavily influenced by these reforms, and Nasser, one of the most influential figures of pan-Arabism, adapted some of the ideas developed in Turkey to his own national project.

Pan-Arabism, embodied in Egypt by the Ba'ath Party and later by figures like Nasser, drew heavily from the reformist heritage of Nahda and Turkish achievements. This movement, inspired by socialism and non-alignment during the Cold War, embraced a deeply secular vision, breaking from a theocratic view of the state. Secularism was no longer seen merely as a Western model but as an eminently Arab and modern project, grounded in the intellectual history of the Islamic world.

By linking these two poles – Turkey and Egypt – we see that the entire Arab-Muslim world became a stage for reciprocal influences, where reformist ideas spread, transformed, and were reappropriated according to national contexts. The Nahda, as a moment of intellectual renewal, has continuously fuelled this exchange between different countries, contributing to the emergence of secular and republican projects across the region.

C. Nationalism and Decolonization: The Nation Before Religion

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the question of nationalism and decolonization profoundly influenced the relationship between Islam and state power. Figures such as Atatürk in Turkey, Nasser in Egypt, as well as Bourguiba in Tunisia and Messali Hadj in Algeria, emphasised the idea of "The Nation before Religion." This approach was explicitly adopted by the Ba'ath Party, which advocated for secular Arab nationalism.

In their struggle for the independence of their countries and peoples, these leaders clearly understood that secularism was the most powerful tool for emancipation and freedom. *"The Algerian nation should not be divided over religious issues, for it is, above all, a national issue, a question of liberation and dignity. Algeria must be free and independent, and this struggle must be carried out by all Algerians, regardless of belief."*¹³

French colonialism refused to apply secularism in its colonies, fearing it would support indigenous nationalism. This policy led to artificial distinctions, such as the refusal to recognise the term "Algerian" for indigenous people in Algeria, who were officially called "Muslims of North Africa."

Jean-Louis Auduc perfectly explores this dynamic by describing the role of colonialism in shaping national and religious identities¹⁴.

¹³ Messali Hadj, *Le Mouvement National Algérien*, Speech of July 14, 1937, at the founding of the Algerian People's Party (APP).

¹⁴ Jean Louis Auduc, *Laïcité, que de trahisons on commet en ton nom !*, Éditions Rue de Seine, 2023, p. 135.

D. Comparative Perspectives on the Issue of Secularization in the West

This part alone is a research field in its own right. However, in our endeavour to better understand the specificity and challenges of the relationship between Islam and secularism, it is useful to briefly compare it with the experiences of other religious traditions.

In the Christian context, the process of secularization in post-revolutionary France provides an interesting parallel. The separation of Church and State, enshrined by the 1905 law, was the result of a long historical process marked by conflicts and negotiations. This model influenced many countries, including those in the Muslim world.

The Protestant tradition, especially in the United States, developed a different approach to the separation of Church and State. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees both religious freedom and the absence of the establishment of a state religion, creating a model of coexistence between religion and politics distinct from French secularism.

These examples show that the negotiation between religion and secularism is not unique to Islam but is a complex process that various religious traditions have had to face in their encounter with political modernity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the presumed incompatibility between Islam and secularism appears to be a simplification of a much more complex reality. The debates surrounding these two concepts are not new and show a wealth of interpretations and perspectives that go far beyond the restrictive interpretations propagated by certain currents of thought. Islamic history and thought, marked by deep reflections on the coexistence of faith and reason, show that the idea of secularism can be adapted to Muslim societies without betraying the foundations of their religious heritage. Contemporary debates, particularly those arising from the Arab revolutions, reveal the aspiration of Muslim societies to find a balance between religious tradition and modernity.

The future of this coexistence largely depends on the ability of Muslim societies to reconcile their aspirations for freedom, democracy, and social justice with their religious roots.

It is interesting to note that some countries in the Maghreb are at the forefront of this reflection. Since the 2011 revolution, Tunisia has been striving to reconcile its Muslim identity with

democratic and secular principles. The 2014 and 2022 constitutions recognise Islam as the state religion¹⁵ while guaranteeing freedom of worship and conscience¹⁶.

Morocco is putting forward a genuine agenda, and the ongoing debates about reforming the family code (Moudawana) illustrate the efforts to reconcile Islamic principles with modern human rights, particularly in the area of gender equality. For example, in January 2024, the Moroccan parliament held consultations with various stakeholders, including jurists, religious leaders, and civil society representatives, to discuss potential amendments to the Moudawana.

In February 2024, the National Council for Human Rights (CNDH) published a report advocating major reforms, including equality in inheritance and the abolition of marital guardianship for adult women.

In April 2024, a national televised debate was held, highlighting the different positions on polygamy and its potential abolition.

As reforms multiply across the Arab world and beyond, a deep reflection on the role of secularism could well reshape the socio-political landscape of these societies. Far from distortions and misinformation, younger generations—particularly in Europe, and especially in France—will have a key role to play in this reinvention, by reclaiming this history while drawing upon a rich intellectual heritage that remains open to universal values.

¹⁵ Constitution tunisienne de 2014, article 1^{er} «*La Tunisie est un État libre, indépendant et souverain, l'Islam est sa religion, l'arabe sa langue et la République son régime*».

Constitution tunisienne de 2022, article 5 «*La Tunisie constitue une partie de la nation islamique. Seul l'État doit œuvrer, dans un régime démocratique, à la réalisation des vocations de l'Islam authentique qui consistent à préserver la vie, l'honneur, les biens, la religion et la liberté*» .

¹⁶ Constitution tunisienne de 2014, article 6 «*L'État est le gardien de la religion. Il garantit la liberté de croyance et de conscience et le libre exercice des cultes ; il est le garant de la neutralité des mosquées et lieux de culte par rapport à toute instrumentalisation partisane*».

Constitution tunisienne de 2022, article 27 «*L'État garantit la liberté de croyance et de conscience.*» ; article 28 «*L'État protège le libre exercice des cultes tant qu'il ne porte atteinte à la sécurité publique*».

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