

Secularism, Islamisation and Humanism: Which Permutation for Religious Tolerance and Harmony?

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Abstract

In multiethnic, multireligious, and multicultural Singapore, Singapore's brand of secularism that guarantees freedom of religious belief, practice, and expression, alongside the government's policies of fostering social cohesion, have been key contributors to Singapore's burgeoning religious pluralism, tolerance, mutual understanding, care, and concern. However, a growing and influential episteme that might challenge Singaporean Muslims' acceptance of Singapore's brand of secularism is the Islamisation of knowledge discourse, which was a response to Islamic revivalism which spread globally since the 1970s. This episteme has even influenced local asatizah, who have misgivings about Singapore's secularism despite living in a secular country. For Singapore and Malaysia, there are two relevant and dominant perspectives on the Islamisation of knowledge - one by Ismail Farugi and the other by Syed Naquib Al-Attas. Farugi's perspective is positivistic and only addresses the Islamisation of knowledge of subjects in terms of their forms, and not the substantive essence of the subjects. For Al-Attas, what matters is the Islamisation of epistemology and metaphysics of knowledge rooted in the Sufi-inspired Islamisation of the mind, worldview, and perspective. As a result of the possibility of interpreting the works of Al-Attas from a revivalist and Islamist orientation, many Muslims from Singapore and Malaysia who follow the works of Al-Attas, especially his more ideological work “Islam and Secularism”, are antagonistic towards secularism and this is very problematic for a secular context like Singapore. The ideological work “Islam and Secularism”, interpreted by actors and Malaysian elites who engage with this work of Al-Attas' through their Islamic revivalist orientation and paradigm, had already resulted in the mobilisation of the Malaysian government and civil society actors to Islamise the public sphere, including the policies, laws, and institutions of the state. However, it is also Al-Attas' perspective that offers a possible viable interpretation leading to the Islamisation of the mind and not the Islamisation of the external public sphere without superficially Islamising knowledge, if we refer to his metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological works. To foster religious tolerance and harmony while maintaining an Islamised mind in a secularised public environment, the discussions by Al-Attas on metaphysics, ontology and epistemology, barring his more ideological writings like “Islam and Secularism”, can be combined with the Islamic humanistic tradition, historically captured by “Tai Us-Salatin”, a literary work written in Aceh in the early 17th century. This important treatise is a kind of advice for al-Muluk or advice and reflection for Malay rulers, which contains universal humanistic elements like equality before the rule of law and social justice, that when harnessed, will foster religious tolerance and harmony, especially in multireligious countries and cities like Singapore. The combination of the Islamisation of the mind privately, and not an Islamisation of the public sphere, with the tradition and orientation of Islamic humanism, will lead to an increase in religious harmony and tolerance in multireligious societies and enable Muslims to remain rooted in the Islamic humanistic tradition dynamically and creatively in a publicly secular environment.

Keyword : Secularism, Humanism, Tolerance

Introduction

In multireligious and multicultural Singapore, Singapore's secularism that is fundamental to Singapore's policies fostering social cohesion, has been key to Singapore's burgeoning religious pluralism, tolerance, mutual understanding, care and concern. Tan (2010) describes Singapore's secularism as the differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms, "where the state and politics are insulated from religious institutions and norms, whose de-politicized forms are allowed and at times even encouraged to flourishing the community life of a multi-religious society as long as inter-religious harmony and public order are maintained", with no apparent significant decline in religious beliefs and practices¹. Wee (2005) elucidates the secular Singapore state's relationship with religion as Cartesian scientific rationalism. Laws governing the mind/will and matter are separate and do not mutually interact, "appropriating territory from the religious domain, by defining all matter as a mindless, spiritless, passive, and divisible object for "scientistic" manipulation"(Wee 2005)². However, there are some caveats - the Singapore state is obliged by the Constitution to protect religious and racial minorities and to safeguard the special position of the indigenous Malays, which includes promoting their religious interests, in this case, Islam. Singapore's brand of secularism has relatively promoted a safe haven for the flourishing of a multireligious society. It is common to see temples, mosques and churches in short distances of one another, and inter-religious relations are manifest amongst neighbours, friends, and the citizens at large. Although there have been critiques of Singapore's brand of secularism, by and large, Singapore has safeguarded its political and public spheres and institutions from the influences of politically motivated exclusivist and parochial religious influences and actors. The previous Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, declared, "Churchmen, lay preachers, priests, monks, Muslim theologians, all those who claim divine sanctions or holy insights, take off your clerical robes before you take on anything economic or political³." This has had positive ramifications on multireligious Singapore, especially on its economic growth and stability, as it is able to attract investors, global MNCs, professionals and other economic entities from all around the world due to the security and peace in Singapore in terms of its harmonious multireligious and multiethnic relations. However, a growing and influential episteme that might challenge Singaporean Muslims' acceptance of Singapore's brand of secularism is the Islamisation of knowledge discourse, in tandem with Islamic revivalism spread globally since the 1970s. This episteme has influenced many local *asatizah* who have misgivings about secularism despite growing up in Singapore's secularism. Alami and Nursheila (2020) found through their qualitative research that almost all of the *asatizah* they interviewed accepted

¹ Tan, Kenneth Paul. "Pragmatic secularism, civil religion, and political legitimacy in Singapore." In *State and secularism: Perspectives from Asia*, pp. 339-357. 2010.

² Wee, Vivienne. 2005. " Secular State, Multi-Religious Society: The Patterning of Religion in Singapore " Paper presented at the Conference on Religion and Authority in East and Southeast Asia

³ Zakir Hussain. "Religious Harmony: 20 Years of Keeping the Peace." *The Straits Times*, July 24, 2009.

secularism as the country's political ideology but only because of pragmatism and utilitarianism, and the majority of those who accepted secularism were hesitant to accept the compatibility of Singapore's secularism with Islam, and many asatizah were exposed to the Islamisation of knowledge discourse⁴. Apprehension towards Singapore's brand of secularism by Muslim political elites has also been observed in parliament. In a parliamentary sitting in 2019, Faisal Manap, an opposition member of parliament from the Workers' Party, received flak from Minister Shanmugam from the ruling People's Action Party for Faisal's comments on the impossibility of the separation of religion from politics. In his speech delivered in Malay, Faisal Manap said that: “I do not quite agree with this principle. As a Muslim, Islam is understood as a way of life. Islam encompasses all aspects of life, including politics and the way to practise politics. And I understand that Christianity also believes that it is unlikely that religion can be separated from politics.” Minister Shanmugam remarked: “I was so surprised. I asked for a confirmation that that is indeed what he said and my people say that is indeed what he said. It's a very surprising statement. It's a very serious statement, and a statement with serious implications. And it contradicts everything that we hold as central and important in Singapore and it's a fundamental value⁵.” The signaling from the Muslim opposition member of parliament clearly indicates that the episteme of Islamisation and a certain distancing, to say the least, from Singapore's brand of secularism, are also present among at least the opposition Muslim political elites in Singapore. As evidenced from the above, a significant number of religious and political elites in Singapore are increasingly influenced by this growing episteme of a type of Islamisation that might be antagonistic towards Singapore's brand of secularism that has maintained its harmonious multireligious relations and relative political impartiality without curving the right to practice and believe in religions, or not, in Singapore, even in the public sphere, as long as it is not detrimental to the interreligious relations in Singapore. To investigate this Islamisation episteme, we have to turn towards the epistemological foundations of the Islamisation project, which is rooted in the Islamisation of knowledge movement. Over the past decades, the epistemology, methodology, philosophy and theory of the Islamization of knowledge, which enables, galvanizes and supports the socio-political movements that seek to promote and entrench the Islamization of society, politics and economy, have become more and more prominent in Malaysia and, to a certain extent, Singapore. The Islamization of knowledge has to be viewed in tandem with Islamic revivalism which has taken root and deepened its reach in

⁴ “Interreligious Relations (IRR) Issue 15 – Secularism in Singapore: Asatizah's Perspectives on Its Reconcilability with Islam by Mohammad Alami Musa and Nursheila Muez – RSIS, 6 April 2020.” Accessed November 25, 2022. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/srp/issue-15-interreligious-relations-irr-secularism-in-singapore-asatizahs-perspectives-on-its-reconcilability-with-islam-by-mohammad-alam-musa-and-nursheila-muez-interfaith-relations-by/#.Y4At6nYza3B>.

⁵ TODAY. “Workers' Party Backs Religious Harmony Law, Raises Questions on Keeping Politics, Religion Separate.” Accessed August 31, 2022. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/workers-party-backs-religious-harmony-law-raises-questions-keeping-politics-religion>.

the region from the 1970s. In recent times, there have been a good number of people from the Muslim communities in Singapore and Malaysia who have harbored negative thoughts and feelings towards secularism in general arising from a revivalist interpretation of the relationship between secularism and the Islamization of knowledge, as well as Islamisation in general.

Islamization and Islamic Revivalism

Forty years ago, Islamic revivalism began to take root and spread in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Islamic revivalism is a social phenomenon that can also be defined as a religious orientation that opposes and dislikes the social order that exists today. Although the champions of Islamic revivalism might have grown up in a relatively secular multireligious social order, the relatively secular social order they grew up in was taken as not in line with Islamic teachings or not Islamic. Muslim revivalists want to replace an un-Islamic social order with an order that is considered to be in line with their version of a pure and authentic Islam. In fact, Islamic revivalism can be considered as a utopian movement that yearns to subvert the social order and replace it with a new Islamic order that is in line with revivalists' exclusivist religious orientation. Revivalists are hostile towards secularism and do not use “complex social science theories and concepts that expound and provide insights into meanings of secularism and its compatibility with Islam” that are employed by other Muslim scholars and demonstrate apathy and indifference to the field of the humanities and social sciences (Aisha, 2020)⁶. Concepts such as humanism, modernism, and relativism are vehemently, antoagonistically and stereotypically labelled as un-Islamic based on a scant understanding of the complex socio-historical and philosophical underpinnings of the concepts. For the vast majority of Muslim revivalists, their revivalist interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah is held as the only viable and religiously sanctioned source of solutions to modern day problems, and are wholly sufficient as a resource and guide to tackle contemporary issues, without recourse to other modern forms of knowledge such as scientific knowledge, or the humanities. Islamic revivalism as a religious orientation is different from the traditionalist religious orientation, the latter of which is also dominant in Malaysia and Singapore. Traditionalism, instead of being utopian like Islamic revivalism, is ideological, and is only interested in matters of establishing and maintaining the present and established social order - in this case, the perpetuation of rigidity in their approach to Islamic traditions when faced with socio-religious problems and issues. Traditionalists have traits such as approaching traditions as static and unchanging, adhering to the past, undisputed beliefs, security from taklid beliefs, resisting change, and avoiding and rejecting questions. Traditionalism here of course, is neither the traditionalism of organisations like Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia which approaches tradition with a dynamic attitude, nor the rigorously

⁶ Noor Aisha. 2020. “Religious Resurgence Amongst the Malays and its Impact: The Case of Singapore”. In *Alternative Voices in Muslim Southeast Asia*, edited by Norshahril Saat and Azhar Ibrahim, pp. 33-66. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

critical and creative traditionalism of scholars like Syed Naquib al-Attas who refers to traditions in his philosophical engagements, while referring to philosophical concepts of Greek origin. What is meant here is traditionalism that ossifies traditions that are supposed to be dynamically, critically and creatively appraised. Due to the rise of Islamic revivalism, many Islamic revivalists endeavoured to nourish the Islamist ideology of establishing an Islamic State. They strive to Islamise policies, the government, the third sector and both public and private spheres. Islamisation at once became the goal, value and measure of worldly and non-worldly success for Islamic revivalists. As a result, the brand of secularism as practiced in Singapore has been rejected by certain quarters in Singapore in favour of Islamic revivalism. Islamic revivalists tend to interpret the Islamisation of knowledge project through the lens of Islamic revivalism, which then results in them seeking to Islamise institutions, politics, the legal system and the public sphere based on the revivalist orientation, while being antagonistic towards secularism.

Context of Islamisation

The Islamisation movement in Malaysia and Singapore was adopted by some followers of the Islamisation of Knowledge perspective pioneered in the region by Professor Syed Naquib Al-Attas, a prolific and great scholar of Islam in Malaysia. Students of Professor Syed Naquib Al-Attas and his traditions have become influential individuals in the region. Al-Attas' students for instance, constituted a major driver of the Islamisation process sponsored by the Malaysian government - for example, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's administration gave a post to al-Attas's followers and students to formulate government policies, especially in the development of Islam Hadhari (Fazal, 2021)⁷. There is a second perspective of the Islamization of Knowledge, pioneered by Ismail Faruqi. This perspective is aimed at Islamising disciplines and establishing Islamic disciplines such as Islamic Sociology, Islamic Economics, Islamic Anthropology, Islamic Biology, Islamic Psychology, Islamic Physics and so on. This perspective is very positivistic, that is, it is a system that limits itself to information that comes from our experience and excludes metaphysical assumptions and assumptions. If we look at the Islamisation of Knowledge in terms of a broader context, it can be traced back to an increasing awareness of the problems that come from having western cultural roots as the foundation of social science and the humanities. For example, this awareness sparked an attempt to think of a new foundational epistemology, metaphysics and culture for social science and the humanities. These efforts include decolonisation, nationalisation and indigenisation of social sciences and the humanities. The Islamisation of Knowledge is a concerted but nativistic effort to make Islam as the foundation of social science and the humanities. But in reality, bifurcating knowledge into western and non-western origins is a false

⁷ Faizal Musa. “Naquib Al-Attas’ Islamization Of Knowledge Its Impact on Malay Religious Life, Literature, Language and Culture.” ISEAS, 2021.

dichotomy, because modern knowledge emerged from the interaction and combination of various civilizations and cultures.

The Philosophy and Metaphysics of Al-Attas

The Islamisation of knowledge from Ismail Faruqi's perspective is arguably very positivistic and only addresses the Islamization of the subjects concerned in terms of its form, and not their substantive essence. For example, the sociology practiced by Muslim and non-Muslim researchers is the same in terms of methods such as literature survey and the analyses of qualitative and quantitative datasets. What is different is the mind, perspective and worldview of the researcher. In a secular society, we can talk about a mind that has been partially secularised, or wholly secularised. The Islamisation of Knowledge propounded by Al-Attas, when viewed from a non-revivalist orientation, may be interpreted as an epistemological movement that seeks to Islamise the mind that might have been completely secularized or disenchanting, where, for example, the divine is removed from the personal values and worldview of the religious person and is fully secular, and concepts, epistemologies and ontologies that inform research are wholly secular, with no consideration to look at the Islamic tradition as a source of concepts, epistemologies and ontologies. If viewed from a non-revivalist and reformist or progressive orientation, Al-Attas's Islamisation of Knowledge might not be problematic and very valuable. However, the movements associated with the Islamization of Knowledge from al-Attas' perspective have mostly been viewed through the lens of Islamic revivalism. In my opinion, al-Attas's works such as "Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam" deals primarily with the Islamisation of the mind and not institutions or the state. This is continuous with Sufi tradition that undergirds his earlier works such as "Some Aspects of Sufism as Understood and Practised among the Malays" and "The Mysticism of Hamza Fansuri". From the lens of a progressive and ethico-moral Sufistic philosophy, Islamised epistemology, aside from secular experience and knowledge sources, would consider sacred sources of knowledge such as inspiration from God, intuition inspired by God and divine revelation mediated through human interpretation. Here, I wish to delineate the work "Islam and Secularism" which can be interpreted as Al-Attas' more ideological enterprise. Al-Attas' affiliation and orientation are more inclined to traditionalism than Islamic revivalism, and, as mentioned earlier, it is generally not the ossified kind of traditionalism, but the dynamic and critical kind. However, many followers of Al-Attas' Islamisation of Knowledge movements are Islamic revivalists. For them, secularism opposes and threatens the purity and authenticity of Islam, that is, Islam manifest through their revivalist paradigm, held as a holistic system or a way of life that can save them from the trappings and spiritual failures of modernity. To my knowledge, Al-Attas did not openly advocate for the establishment of a theocratic Islamic state in Malaysia. In fact, Al-Attas's ideas about the Islamisation of epistemology, ontology, philosophy, concepts and mind are epistemic, epistemological and metaphysical rather than political. In the meantime, Al-Attas has produced a lot of Sufistic philosophy and

tasawwuf. From the point of view of Sufism, what matters is the Islamisation of epistemology and metaphysics rooted in the Islamisation of the mind, worldview and perspective, and not the Islamisation of subjects or institutions such as economics and politics. In Islam, there have been many forms of political institutions or economies that have been followed by its adherents, and this is a sign of blessing from Allah, so that we can adapt to the local context, even if the context follows the system of secularism, democracy, capitalism, socialism, monarchy and so on, as long as they do not conflict with the universal values of Islam. As a result of the possibility of interpreting the works of Al-Attas form a revivalist orientation, many of the followers of Al-Attas are antagonistic towards secularism and this is very problematic for a secular context such as Singapore, as it risks breeding revivalist Islamists, which could endanger the socio-political landscape of Singapore, and even Malaysia. Islamism is the notion that Islam, that is, the orientation and version of Islam that is professed by Islamists, should be dictate all aspects of human life including political, social, economic, cultural and personal life. Many followers of Al-Attas focused on a revivalist interpretation of Al-Attas’ ideological work “Islam and Secularism”, which had mobilised the Malaysian government, intelligentsia and civil society actors to Islamise the public sphere, including the policies, legal system and other public institutions. From the standpoint of the sociology of knowledge, many of Al-Attas’s followers do not acknowledge or are unaware of the Greek philosophy inherent in the philosophical writings of Al-Attas. Al-Attas discussed Imam Al-Ghazali as well as the Greek philosopher Aristotle. Al-Attas delves into the philosophical heritage of the non-Muslim Greek civilisation, and inter-civilisational philosophy and metaphysics. Many followers of Al-Attas did not deeply learn the intellectual foundations of Al-Attas, specialised in philosophy and metaphysics. Unaware of the intellectual foundations of Al-Attas, many of Al-Attas’ followers do not really appreciate the pluralistic origins of knowledge, which is born from the interaction of various civilisations, that of Muslims or non-Muslims.

Islamic Humanism

To maintain and Islamised mind in a secularised environment, the discussions by Al-Attas on metaphysics and epistemology, barring his more ideological writings like “Islam and Secularism”, can be combined with the Islamic humanistic tradition, historically captured by “Taj Us-Salatin”, a literary work written in Aceh in the early 17th century, which is an important treatise is a kind of advice for al-Muluk or advice and reflection for Malay rulers (Alatas, 2018).⁸ Islamic humanism, when harnessed, also contains elements that will foster religious tolerance and harmony, especially in multireligious countries and cities like Singapore. Islamic humanism espouses the expression of positive individualism, equality under the rule of law, the attainment of excellence, individual dignity, dignity in

⁸ Syed Farid Alatas, “Anti-Feudal Elements in Classical Malay Political theory: The Taj al-Salatin.” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* Volume 91, Part 1, No. 314, (2018), 30.

career, freedom to choose between good and bad as well as social justice, while advocating for a critical and rational approach, and a prudent nature and attitude. Islamic humanism must be distinguished from secular humanism, which is based on non-religious foundations. Sufi ethico-moral philosophy can also be categorized as a form of Islamic humanism, premised on the identification with the full humanity of all human beings, where all members of the human race have the same intrinsic worth because each of us has the breath of God breathed into our being: *wa nafakhtu fihi min ruhi*⁹¹⁰(Safi, 2010)(Duderija, 2010). As Al-Attas also bases much of his epistemological and philosophical thought on Sufism, and has done intellectual works on regional Sufi thinkers such as Hamza Fansuri as well as historical works on Sufism in the Malay world, combining Sufi ethico-moral philosophy as a brand of Islamic humanism with Al-Attas’ tradition of Islamising the mind should not be problematic. Islamic humanism is embedded in Malay tradition. In Singapore and Malaysia, there are two competing traditions – the feudal tradition and the humanistic tradition.¹The humanistic tradition is the most progressive tradition for Singapore and Malaysia, bearing in mind that the region is largely multireligious and multiethnic. The feudal tradition inhibits positive development in the region. The combination of the Islamisation of the mind and not the public sphere, coupled with Islamic humanism will plant the roots for multireligious harmony and mutual understanding in multireligious societies, and for Muslims in Singapore and Malaysia, they can contribute by Islamising their minds based on the Islamic humanistic tradition.

The Humanistic Islamisation of Minds is Not Incompatible with Singapore’s Secularism

The Islamization of knowledge, when viewed from the paradigm of Islamic revivalism by many of Al-Attas’ followers, often leads to the Islamisation of institutions, public policy, economy and society, which might not be compatible for multireligious societies. This form of Islamisation strongly opposes the public and institutional brand of secularism that we find in Singapore that allows for religious beliefs, practices and expressions in public or the non-adherence to religion, so long as these are not inimical to Singapore’s multireligiosity. Singapore’s secularism, protects the pluralistic religions in Singapore and the religious rights of the public, as well as equality and equity between all religions – in general, no religion is treated better than the other in the eyes of the state. Many of the Islamic revivalists following Al-Attas’ ideas might have had an Islamist interpretation of the Islamization of Knowledge project, bringing it from the Islamisation of the mind, epistemology, ontology and metaphysics, to an Islamist project of Islamising the state, institutions and policies of multireligious societies. However, what is needed is also to ensure that the Islamisation of the mind is done through the paradigm of progressive and

⁹ Adis Duderija, “Progressive Muslims—Defining and Delineating Identities and Ways of Being Muslim.” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* (2010) 127-136.

¹⁰ Omid Safi “*What Is Progressive Islam*” (ISIM Newsletter 13 2010),48-49.

reformist orientations, based on the Islamic humanistic tradition in the Malay/Indonesian world. What should be avoided is the full secularisation of the mind for Muslims, where their values, philosophies, epistemologies, ontologies and worldviews become devoid of the divine. What is wanted is the Islamisation of the worldviews, metaphysics and minds among Muslims based on the humanistic tradition of Islam and not the Islamisation of the public, external and shared institutions of a multireligious country that is secular, such as what we have in Singapore. Anti-secularism in terms of antagonism towards institutional and political secularism should be eradicated in Singapore, in line with our secular context that guarantees freedom of religion and belief.

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ⁱ Shaharuddin Maaruf lists the traits of the tradition of feudalism as follows:

“(1) a servile attitude towards authority and the acceptance of arbitrary notions of power; (2) the undermining of the positive aspects of individualism, and, therefore, a lack of respect for the human personality; (3) a lack of respect for the rule of law; (4) no distinction between the public domain and personal domains of life; (5) an

emphasis on grandeur and an opulent lifestyle; (6) indifference to social justice; (7) acceptance of unfair privileges for those in position and power; (8) an obsession with power, authority and privilege for their own sake; (9) an undervaluing of rationalism and the philosophical spirit, and encouragement of myths that serve the interests of those in power; and (10) an emphasis on leisure and indulgence of the senses and the simultaneous undervaluing of work”