# What Interpretation of Islam is Consistent with Secular Democracy?

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Ända sedan jag började mitt skriftställeri om religiös och kulturell mångfald, för tio år sedan, har jag hoppats hitta någon tolkning av islam som kan vara förenlig med västerländsk demokrati, inte bara på ett abstrakt plan, utan också i sin tillämpning. Jag har nu funnit en möjlig sådan, nämligen i professor Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naims arbete, särskilt som han visar i sin bok 'Islam and the Secular State' som han publicerade 2010.

I den här artikeln ska jag försöka beskriva hans ansats främst för svenska läsare, och på ett sätt som visar dess relevans från ett svenskt perspektiv. Artikeln är dock skriven på engelska för att kunna inhämta kommentarer från fler. En svensk översättning bör komma så småningom.

*Ever since I started my writings about religious and cultural diversity, ten years ago, I have hoped to find a coherent interpretation of Islam that may be compatible with Western, liberal democracy, not just on an abstract level, but also in its application. Now I may have found what I was looking for, viz. in the work of Professor Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim, as presented in particular in his book 'Islam and the Secular State' that was published in 2010.*

*In this article I shall try to describe his approach for a Swedish audience, and in a way that shows its relevance from a Swedish point of view. The article has first been written in English, so that a wider range of comments can be obtained. A Swedish version should appear in due time.*

## On Secular Democracy in a Muslim Country

The organization of our planet in terms of sovereign nation-states is often called the Westphalian system, with reference to the peace treaties in Westphalia that ended the Thirty-Years War in Europe, in 1648. This system of governance was consolidated during the following two centuries, while also amending it with the concept of a secular state, instead of a monoreligious one. This nation-state model is now taken for granted, not only in Europe but in large parts of the world, with

some significant exceptions. In particular, although it has been adopted (or imposed) in Muslim countries as well, this has caused a variety of problems because of deep differences with the traditional forms of religion-based governance there.

This intrinsic conflict between the traditional Islamic view of governance and the secular nation-state one, is the main topic of Professor An-Naim's book. The adoption of the nation-state model has passed well beyond the point of no return and must be accepted as a matter of necessity, in his view, which makes it necessary to consider its consequences for Muslim countries. He goes on to propose that the concept of Human Rights should then be adopted as well, since it is an appropriate and necessary complement to the nation-state model itself. In particular, it provides a credible set of constraints on the powers of governments, constraints that are in the best interests of the citizens and that have almost universal support.

From these premises, he proceeds to identify issues where traditional interpretations of the Shari'a seem to be incompatible with current views of human rights and of democracy itself, in particular:
  – The Status of Women
  – The Dhimma System versus the Human-Rights view of Citizenship
  – Freedom of Religion and Belief
  – Freedom of Expression and the Question of Apostacy
Prof. An-Naim also discusses the differences between the principles of representative democracy and the traditional Islamic concept of *shura,* which is the obligation for the ruler to seek advise in matters of government. Several scholars have argued that the recommendation of *shura* should be seen as an authorization of democracy, but An-Naim rejects this argument. He argues instead that since the Quran does not prescribe any particular style of governance, Muslims are free to decide themselves in this matter. In particular, a democratic system is as well suited for the current situation in Muslim countries as it is elsewhere.

Returning now to the prescriptions in the traditional Shari'a that were listed above, An-Naim observes that they are not being strictly enforced, in most Muslim countries, and that human-rights-related views are gradually being adopted there. This process started a long time ago, sometimes as an effect of colonialism, but sometimes because of internal development in the area in question, for example in the late years of the Ottoman empire.

But even so, traditional practices and attitudes remain among the people, which leads to a kind of uncertainty with respect to what values are to be respected. An-Naim's proposal for how to deal with this problem comes in three parts:

(1) Muslim societies should reject the traditional interpretations of the Shari'a in these respects, and adopt principles that are based on Constitutionalism and Human Rights.

(2) However, the exact interpretations of Human Rights shall be made with due consideration of the local culture.

(3) Moreover, the proposed reforms must be solidly based on readings of the Quran and the Scriptures. It will not be sufficient to select and quote some verses from the Quran that arguably support a proposed reinterpretation, since consensus can only be obtained if other quotations that may support the opposite standpoint are also taken into account.

The term 'constitutionalism' refers to the view that governance shall be based on a system of laws that have been enacted in accordance with the will of the citizens.

The third item is the crucial one, of course, due to the size and complexity of the religious texts that have to be taken into account. An-Naim proposes an approach that would seem to answer to the third requirement, namely, to recognize the primacy of the verses from the Mecca period in the Quran, over the verses from the Medina period.

The background for this proposal is as follows. Muhammed started to preach his peaceful creed while he lived in the city in Mecca, and his teachings there were the basis for the earliest parts of the Quran. Later on, he was invited to come to the neighboring city of Medina, in order to help resolving a number of conflicts there. While doing so, the character of his teachings changed and became much more strict, normative, and sometimes belligerent. When there are inconsistencies between different verses in the Quran, Muslim scholars have traditionally given priority to the Medina verses, for example because a later statement should take precedence over an earlier one.

An-Naim observes that the prescriptions mentioned above have been obtained during the Medina period, which was a period of strife. The Mecca period was peaceful, and therefore much more similar to our contemporary situation, and An-Naim argues that today it must be natural for the believers to give priority to the verses from the Mecca period. If this is done, then many parts of the traditional Shari'a will be set aside as not being relevant for the present situation in the world. This would include the contentious rules about the status of women, the dhimma system, apostacy, and the freedom of belief that were mentioned above.

This brief summary has only described some key points in An-Naim's proposal, and it can in no way substitute for a reading of his full text. I believe however that it can be sufficient as the basis for a discussion of what consequences its adoption would have in places where the Muslim part of the population is a relatively small minority, as is the case in our own country. This topic is not addressed in Prof. An-Naim's book, since it focuses on the situations in Muslim countries. In order to comment on this topic, I must first briefly review the current situation for a Muslim minority.

## Current Issues in the Reception of Islam in Sweden

When a refugee or an immigrant arrives in a country, the reception that he or she is met with is very often determined by preconceptions which may be positive, negative, or neutral. The newcomer is preconceived as a member of a group, often an ethnic group, and the host country's beliefs about that group are likely to determine whether the newcomer is met with welcome or with suspicion.

The reception of Muslim migrants in our country is a case in point. The first arrivals of a significant number of Muslims occurred in the 1980's, as a result of the wars in the Balkans and the regime change in Iran. Generally speaking, these migrants were usually not thought of as Muslims, but as Bosnians, Iranians, and so forth: we were used to thinking of foreigners according to their nationality, and not in terms of religion. Moreover, and at that time, very few people here saw these migrants as being a problem, any more than had been the case for the refugees from Viet Nam or from Chile some years earlier.

There were actually some odd voices that proclaimed that Muslims were of a different culture which was incompatible with our own, but these did not get much attention. Things changed around 2005 to 2010, however, and since then the controversy about Islam and its place in our society has arguably been the most difficult question to handle in our national debate. It was a major factor behind the formation and the ascent of a new political party, the Sweden Democrats, which has radically changed both the party structure and the tone of the political debate.

Without assigning any blame to anyone or anything for what has happened, one may still identify some issues that have agitated large swaths of the popular opinion as well as having had a strong impact on the debate in public media. The Muslim dress code for women is an obvious point. The Muslim code for greetings between individuals, whereby some Muslim men have refused to shake hands with native Swedish women, is another issue that has generated strong reactions. On another topic, already during the first years of the millenium there were several high-profile cases where a young Muslim woman was murdered by her relatives for having had a relation with a non-Muslim and Swedish man, and since then we read from time to time about incidents where a young woman falls to her death from an open window or from a balcony. Teenage immigrant girls sometimes do not come back to school after their summer vacations, and it is understood that they may have been sent to their country of origin for the purpose of an arranged marriage.

These are now widespread beliefs, rather than first-hand knowledge for major parts of the population. But even so it is a substantial problem in two ways at least: it is a problem because of the mutual suspicions and lack of trust that is generated in this way, and it is also an objective problem in those cases where someone's life or integrity is actually being violated.

These problems are generally viewed as being due to Islamic doctrines, and this is no doubt correct with respect to some of them, such as the dress codes. The same is less clear with respect to the restrictions on the behavior of women, since these seem to occur mostly among migrants from the Middle East, regardless of their religious affiliation, but this detail is not always recognized.

There is a variety of opinions about how to understand the background, the causes, and the nature of these problems. They do not attract as much attention now as they did a few years ago. It is not clear whether they have actually gone away during the last few years, or whether they remain under the surface but out of sight. There is also a considerable disagreement about whether and how they can be solved. However, given that Islamic doctrine is one important component in this problem, a possible way ahead may be to ask whether there is some variety of Islam – some interpretation of it – which, if widely accepted, would reduce these problems and cause them to melt away. This is where An-Naim's proposals may be relevant as a way of neutralizing current conflicts and irritants.

If this is so, then the propagation, discussion, and possible acceptance of his proposals must of course be an issue for the Swedish Muslim community internally. The rest of us, as non-muslims had better not be proactive in such a discussion. However, the problem that I describe is a problem for our society as a whole, not merely for our Muslim citizens, and therefore the rest of us have valid reasons for observing, and trying to understand what happens in this area, as well as its various ramifications.

## The Viability of An-Naim's Approach in a Non-Muslim Country

It is evident that many of the Muslims in Sweden take a pragmatic approach to the dissonances between Shari'a and the domestic culture. The contentious points that have been described are only an issue for some, therefore, although possibly as much as half of the Muslim population here. But it may be more relevant to ask whether An-Naim's proposal is likely to be accepted by the resident Imams, since this will be important for the practising members of the Muslim community. Their acceptance is not likely to happen easily, it seems, in particular since conservative governments in the Middle East provide large economic support for Muslim activities in Sweden, which also gives them some influence over what is being taught.

In principle one could imagine that some groups of Muslims would adopt an alternative approach, such as An-Naim's, and build their own congregations on this basis. This would be an entirely new development, however, and one can see how it might meet with obstacles of several kinds.

By these arguments, the reappraisal that An-Naim calls for is not likely to be embraced here in the near future. But if this were to happen, it would be likely

to have some tangible effects. Most importantly, it could stimulate and facilitate the interactions between Muslims and other parts of the population, as well as the mutual understanding that would likely be the result.

## Two Examples of Conflicting Attitudes

Some concrete examples may illustrate how a change of attitude could facilitate mutual understanding. The first example concerns an event, a few years ago, where a Swedish Muslim organization distributed a brochure to school teachers in our country, with advise about how they should relate to those of their students that were Muslims. The brochure stated that Muslims are not supposed to participate in the celebration of non-Muslim events, such as Christmas, or the Lucia celebration 11 days before Christmas Eve, so the teachers were advised not to engage Muslim students in any such activities. But at the same time, the same brochure emphasized that non-Muslims were always welcome to join Muslim events. This is easily seen as a separatist attitude where Muslims are supposed to stay apart from the society where they have arrived. It may also be interpreted as a manifestation of a policy where conversion to Islam is encouraged whereas conversion out of Islam is punished, which plays into the fears of a 'Muslim takeover'.

A second example concerns the attitude to the change of values with respect to family matters and gender matters, which have changed very much during the last 100 years in our society. These changes are criticized heavily by conservative groups (in several religions) as being signs of a moral deficit. In fact, however, these changes have not occurred as a way of abandoning morality; on the contrary, they have emerged from a critical discussion about our traditional attitudes and values, and of how they have in fact been inconsistent with more general moral principles. This is why these values have been revised.

In both of these examples, there is a conflict between the attitudes that are promoted by Muslim groups and those of the mainstream Swedish society. However, an adoption of human rights as a basis for peaceful co-existence would not seem to help with resolving those conflicts, and it is difficult to see how a revised reading of the Shari'a could help either. There seems to be a need for some additional principle for co-existence.

## Open-Mindedness and the Value Culture

Open-mindedness is an important principle in a liberal society: openness to new ideas, new knowledge, and new ways of thinking. This also includes an open attitude to values and morals: it must be possible to discuss current values in society, and to revise them in the light of new insights.

This ability of a society to question and to revise its own system of attitudes and values is an essential aspect of liberal democracy. But, it will only work in an atmosphere of open-mindedness, which means that separatist attitudes where some groups encapsulate themselves, must be resisted and avoided. This is particularly true if a separatist group adopts the 'defense of traditional values' as an important part of its group identity.

The appreciation of openness shall be expected from all members of society, of course, and in the present example is shall be expected from the majority population as well as from the Muslim minority.

It is natural that immigrants that have the same national origin or come from the same culture shall wish to organize themselves and benefit from each others' company. However, if this goes so far that a group isolates itself and refuses to interact socially with the surrounding society, then liberal democracy as we know it will be dysfunctional. If the tradition from Medina in Islam can alleviate such separatist tendencies among Muslim leaders in our country, and in some parts of our Muslim minority, then a reformation in line with the theses of Professor An-Naim would be beneficial for everyone in our society.

However, the principles of Constitutionalism and of Human Rights will not be sufficient for this purpose. In his book, Professor An-Naim proposes those two principles as the basis for a secular society that can be compatible with Islam, but they also seem to be compatible with a society where a number of communities lead completely separate lives. In order to provide a sound basis for a secular and liberal democracy, and in order to rule out separatism, there has to be an attitude of open-mindedness in the society.

Paraliberalism proposes that there must be a 'value culture' where such open-mindedness can be exercised. According to this point of view, An-Naim's proposal for an Islam-compatible secular state will only be applicable in states where Muslims are a minority if their Mecca-based interpretation of Islam entails a similar open-mindedness and willingness to reconsider traditional beliefs. Religious rules that restrict social interaction or intermarriage between Muslims and non-Muslims must not be acceptable there, for example.