THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF SECULARISM IN TRANSFORMING THE ISLAMIC POLITICAL WORLD

Rahmah Eka Saputri[1]

*Correspondence:
Email :
rahmah1991ekasaputri@gmail.com

Authors Affiliation:
[1]Imam Bonjol State Islamic University Padang, *Indonesia*

Abstrak

Perkembangan Islam sejak awal berdirinya hingga saat ini telah melahirkan berbagai macam ideologi, termasuk sekularisme. Ide ini sebelumnya tidak pernah terdengar dalam Islam karena Islam tidak mengakui polarisasi dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Islam adalah ajaran agama yang beraneka segi dengan ijtihad sebagai prinsip pedomannya. Kemunculan paham sekularisme Barat merupakan salah satu gagasan terbaru dan paling signifikan dalam Islam. Ada sebagian orang yang berpendapat bahwa sekularisme Islam tidak bertentangan (konstruktif). Namun banyak juga yang berpendapat bahwa Islam dan Sekularisme tidak sejalan karena sikap tentang spiritualitas dan agama (non-agama dan nonspiritualisme) sangat terkait dengan keyakinan Sekularisme. Dalam penelitian ini, penulis menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif (penelitian perpustakaan) dengan analisis deskriptif, yang melibatkan analisis data yang tersedia atau beberapa keterangan sebelum penulis menganalisisnya. Penulis menyimpulkan dengan mengatakan bahwa pandangan Islam dalam kitab Sekularisme sebenarnya tidak bertentangan dengan syarat-syarat tersebut di atas. Diantaranya, pengetahuan dan pemahaman dapat didasarkan secara bebas; Artinya, tidak dibatasi, termasuk perlunya berlandaskan agama. Namun setelah menjadi modifikasi atau amalan, maka menjadi syariat.

Keywords: Sekularisme, dunia Islam, eksistensi

Abstract

The development of Islam since its inception until today has given birth to various ideologies, including secularism. This idea was previously unheard of in Islam because Islam does not recognize polarization in everyday life. Islam is a multifaceted religious teaching with ijtihad as its guiding principle. The emergence of Western secularism is one of the newest and most significant ideas in Islam. There are some people who argue that Islamic secularism is not contradictory (constructive). But many also argue that Islam and Secularism are incompatible because attitudes about spirituality and religion (non-religion and nonspiritualism) are closely related to the beliefs of Secularism. In this research, the author uses a qualitative approach (library research) with descriptive analysis, which involves analyzing available data or some information before the author analyzes it. The author concludes by saying that the Islamic view in the book of Secularism does not actually contradict the conditions mentioned above. Among them, knowledge and understanding can be based freely; that is, not limited, including the need to be based on religion. However, once it becomes a modification or practice, it becomes Sharia.

Keywords: Secularism, Islamic World

INTRODUCTION

From the Renaissance in the 14th century to the 16th century, the West experienced an academic upswing. Western civilization seemed to be reborn, because of the increasing

autonomy of humans in thinking. The Renaissance became the basis for the rise of modern Western civilization.[1] The rise and modernization in the West has given birth to an understanding of secularism where the face of the West at that time was filled with rejection of religion in public spaces, so that the separation of religion and the state in its history in the West really happened. In its development, religion became a private matter and not a state matter, even to the stage where religion was finally abandoned by Western society.

In the Islamic world, through contact with the West, this understanding slowly began to enter and be recognized. However, it often raises pros and cons among Muslims. This is because for Islam, religion and the world are like a body with an inseparable spirit, separating the two means killing the body itself. [2]

However, there are also Islamic thinkers who in their arguments, although they do not mention secularism explicitly, support secularization as an understanding needed by Muslims. This is considered capable of reviving the decline of Islam with the spirit of renewal. There are two things that cause the decline of Muslims. *First, the* assumption that Muslims do not practice the pure teachings of Islam. *Second,* because of the West's prowess in various fields so that they dominate and control Islamic territories. [3] This paper will explain the various views of Muslim figures regarding secularism. Furthermore, the history of the emergence of secularism, which is historically the separation of the authority of the church and the state in the West and then also spread to the Islamic world, will also be explained.

This research is a qualitative research that seeks to explain reality by using descriptive writing techniques, and with language that is easy to understand. Not only that, this research also seeks to explore the background of the issues raised in order to obtain the results as stated in the research objectives, namely by referring to literature sources. This method intends to describe (describe) the problem being discussed in an organized manner regarding all conceptions raised in this research. The descriptive method also aims to capture and photograph information that can describe certain circumstances and discourses.[4] So, in qualitative research the data produced is very different from the results of quantitative research which produces numbers. While here it will produce an expression or explanation in the form of writing.[5]

DISCUSSION

Historical Roots of Secularism

The word secularism comes from the Latin word *Saeculum*, which has two connotations: time and *location*. Time refers to the present, while *location* refers to the *world*.[6] In general, secularism is understood as an understanding that considers religion and the world to have no relationship at all. Religion does not take care of the political

---

[1] Ahmad Khoirul Fata and Siti Mahmudah Noorhayati, "Typology of Contemporary Islamic Thought," *Contemporary Islamic Thought* 20, no. 2 (2016): xv－xxvi.

[2] Mohamad Salik, "Thoughts of Egyptian Scholars on Secularism," *Al-Fitrah* 6, no. 1 (2011): 1－14.

[3] Salik.

[4] Consuelo G. Sevilla, Introduction to Research Methodology (Jakarta: Ui－Press, 1993), p. 73

[5] Sugiyono, *Educational Research Methods: Quantitative, Qualitative Approaches,* (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2013).

[6] Syukri Ismail. Criticism of Secularism (Views of Yusuf Qaradhawi). Journal of Kontekstualita, Vol, 29, no 1 2014. H 102

and socio－cultural issues of a society. Religion only teaches about rituals of worship without interfering with worldly affairs.[7]

The term secularism was first introduced by liberal freethinkers to avoid accusations of atheism that were considered immoral in a society that was still religious. It was George Jacob Holyoake, a social reformer and working－class activist, who first coined the term in 1851. In its history, secularism was first experienced by Christians, but in its development this understanding infiltrated secretly into Muslim circles.[8]

Quoting from the English dictionary compiled by Samuel Jhonson published in 1755, it is stated that secularism at that time in English history was translated as worldliness, attention to the things of this life and changing from spiritual possession to worldly use.[9]

To clarify the meaning of secularism, it can be related to three social science disciplines: philosophy, sociology and political science. Philosophically, secularism refers to the rejection of the transcendent and the metaphysical by focusing on the existential and the empirical. This is what Harvey Cox means when he calls secularism an ideology that contains binding precepts. Secularism can also be transformed into a new religion which culminates in the practice of atheism. If secularism is defined as an ideology, then secularization is a process. The process of separating world affairs from religion. Which can lead to the formation of a secular state.[10]

Sociologically, secularism is related to modernization, a gradual process leading to the decline of religious influence in social institutions, public life, and human relations. This is the most commonly used understanding of secularism in popular discussions on the topic and it is also what Peter Berger refers to as the process by which parts of society and culture are removed from the dominance of religious institutions and symbols.

In politics, secularism is about the separation of public and private spheres, especially the separation between religion and the state. This division is in line with Charkes Taylor's tripartite categorization of secularism:

˙Secularity 1 means the retreat of religion from the public sphere.

˙Secularity 2 is the decline in religious belief and practice that can be seen in liberal democracies, in the form of declining levels of public attendance to places of worship (churches).

˙Secularity 3 is the place for our self－understanding of religion and the recognition that something has faded with the rise of alternative belief systems.[11]

Thus secularism can be defined as the separation of religious values from the life of an individual or communal, which in a broader scope, this understanding can be organized in a state order by keeping the public or society away from religious matters.

Amin Rais in his introduction to Jhon Donohue's Islam and Reform mentions very briefly the history of secularism. He says that secularism first emerged in Europe along with the *renaissance* and reformation era where the foundations of Western traditionalism that rested on the institution of the church were finally destroyed. Whereas the church in medieval times had functioned as the spokesperson and had the final word for all human beings in their capacity as Christians, the post－renaissance church represented only a

---

[7] Tomo. Parangrangi, "Secularism in the Development of Islam," *Shautut Tarbiyah* 16, no. 1 (2010): 12－18.

[8] Rodhatul Jennah, et al, Contemporary Islamic World Issues, K.Media, Jogjakarta, 2021, p. 56

[9] Nader Hasyemi, Islam Secularism and Liberal Democracy, Gramedia Pustaka Utam, Jakarta, 2010, pp. 174

[10] Salik, "Egyptian Scholars' Thoughts on Secularism."

[11] Nader Hashemi.

part of the population and not the entire population. The state then replaced the church by claiming the allegiance of the entire population in their capacity as citizens and the state became the representative of the entire people.

Since man lives in a material realm where the fulfillment of his material needs is felt to be more immediate and pressing than his non-material needs, the secularization thesis suggests that religion should be distanced from the life of the state and vice versa.[12] The concept of secularism is based on the assumption that with the blossoming of modernization and political development, religion loses its appeal and influence over modern man.

Initially, it was heavily influenced by the rule of Emperor Constantine who ruled from 280 BC to BC. British Columbia had a very close relationship with these provinces. In addition, when they became leaders of the country, the religious leaders (priests) automatically owned all the wealth. But in that year everything was taken back by the state, and this liberation was secularization. Liberalism, which called for the separation of church and state, was born. In this case, family matters and the church became the business of religion, while hospitals and schools and all matters relating to state administration became the business of the state. But in reality, all of this is not in accordance with the above concept. State law continues to be linked to religion. The state is responsible for the welfare of its people while religion is more about spiritual matters. This led to the secularization politics in Europe that demanded the separation of religion and state.[13] Not only that, in primitive society, everything about human life is governed by religion. It was at this time that science tried to fight for its autonomy, which led to many conflicts in the middle of people's lives.

Like the discovery of the heliocentric theory by Copernicus and Galileo Galilei, they were called heretical by church scientists because their findings contradicted the geocentric theory in their holy book. Finally they were both punished until they breathed their last breath in suffering. Actually there are still many scientists who are treated the same as the two figures above, they are punished not because of his actions but because of his thoughts and discoveries that are considered against the church. But in the end, in 1992 AD, the church recognized their mistake over Galileo Galilei. And by Pope Benedict XVI, the Catholic church named him the greatest contributor to modern science on December 21, 2008. Of course, it didn't stop there.[14]

The culmination of secular thinking was seen when Darwin's theory of human evolution emerged. In simple terms, he stated that humans emerged through a process of evolution and came from a different species. Meanwhile, in the teachings of the church, humans are considered to be the image or likeness of God Himself, their creator. With the advancement of science, there needs to be recognition from the church, which means that science is not prohibited or contradictory to church teachings. Scientists felt neglected by the church, so they began to develop independently of church dogma. Of course, this was a big concern for the church, as their scientific truths were empirically proven through research, in contrast to God's revelation. In a way, this process became the impetus for the advancement of science, as the sacred culture of the time turned secular.[15]

---

[12] Donohue, John, Islam and Renewal, Rajawali Pers, Jakarta 1994, p. xvii

[13] Haikal Al Fiqri, "Secularization and Secularism in Islam," *TADAYYUN: Journal of Religion, Social and Humanities Studies* 2, no. 1 (2024): 103−12.

[14] Fiqri.

[15] Fiqri.

Mohammad Albahie, an Egyptian Islamic thinker, divides secularism into two: radical secularism and moderate secularism. Moderate secularism sees religion as a private matter relating to human spiritual matters and that arena should not interfere with public affairs that are political and concern the material world. Radical secularism, on the other hand, is hostile to religion, which is seen as an obstacle to progress.[16]

Infiltration of Secularism into the Islamic World

Furthermore, what is secularism in the view of Islam? Amin Rais said that moderate or radical secularism has no place in Islam. This is why Amin said why any attempt to launch secularization in the Muslim world can never succeed because it is impossible for secularization to have strong roots in Muslim society. In the Muslim world, forced secularization may temporarily succeed on the surface, but history shows that a larger wave that is more rooted in Muslim society will beat back the secularization effectively.

The only Muslim country to have launched a major secularization drive was Turkey during the time of Kemal Attaturk. But as is well known, the political edifice that Attaturk had painstakingly erected has now collapsed and the process of Islamization is hitting back at the results of Turkey's secularization.[17] Islam has no place for secularization because this religion of revelation does not recognize a strict dichotomy between the life of this world and the hereafter, between the immanent and the transcendental. The universality and centrality of Islam for Muslims in their lives is the most important and non－negotiable doctrine.

Regarding the emergence of secularism in the Islamic world, Yusuf Qaradhawi states that it happened because there was a conflict between Islamic thought, secular thought and atheist thought. This conflict occurred due to colonialism that gripped the Islamic world and the colonizers intended to uproot Islam to its roots. Thus, what Yusuf Qaradhawi calls Jughfari Muslims emerge, i.e. people who live in the Islamic world but their thinking is un－Islamic.[18]

Early modern Muslims did not feel any conflict regarding the application of the new science. However, over time, some scholars began to question this 'feeling' due to the compatibility of elements of Western science with the foundations of Islamic belief. One of the issues that received the most attention was Darwin's theory of evolution. The debate over Western science is still being felt today. Zainal Abidin Bagir identifies at least four trends in Muslim scholars' responses to Western science, namely: First, a group of Muslim scholars and scientists who fully accept science as a neutral activity, and invite Muslims to utilize it to overcome backwardness.[19]

If there is debate over some issues related to science, according to this group, it is only a problem in the area of science application. For them, science is considered like a neutral knife; it can be used for good or bad. The guarantee for using the knife for good is by applying ethical criteria. Zainal Abidin labeled this group as "Instrumentalists" because of its simplistic view that science is a tool that depends on who uses it. Second, the group that wants to assert the superiority of Islam through its Quran, often in comparison to other religions. They try to link Quranic verses to every new scientific discovery. This group is similar to the Hindus who built the concept of "Vedic/Hindu science". The third group is highly critical of other groups. For them, science is not *value-*

---

[16] Ibid, p xvii

[17] Ibid, p xxi

[18] Ismail, Syukri. *Criticism of Secularism (Views of Yusuf Qaradhawi)*. (Journal of Contextuality. Vol. 29. No. 1, 2014)

[19] Ahmad Khoirul Fata and Siti Mahmudah Noorhayati, "Secularism and the Challenge of Contemporary Islamic Thought," *Madina* 20, no. 2 (2016): 215－28.

free; modern science is colored with Western secular values; therefore, Muslims need to integrate Islamic values into the science so that it can become "Islamic Science" or alternatively "Islamization of science" should be implemented. In general, this group of people is associated with "theistic science" which is taught intensely by American Christian groups with the help of Alvin Platinga, a philosopher and analyst.[20]

The fourth was the group led by Harun Yahya. The focus of this group was to conduct critical research into the theory of evolution. Harun Yahya strongly opposed the anti−science doctrine, and limited it to the materialistic and secularistic science that was the main paradigm of Darwin's theory of evolution. Another explanation is the Big Bang theory, which can be generally interpreted as an extension of the God theory. In terms of arguments, goals and strategies, Zainal Abidin identifies this group as the American Intelligent Design movement.

Azam Tamimi says that the term secularism is a concept that entered the Islamic world along with other terms such as modernity, westernization, modernization that entered the Islamic world through Western colonialism. Secularism then has an impact on political liberation from religious authority, but also in other contexts is described as a process that aims to marginalize Islam.

Dr. Ghalib Ibn Awajiy said that secularism emerged in the Islamic world because of the shallowness of Muslims' knowledge of their religion, so that with the influence of the West, groups of thought emerged that only relied on their intellect because of their shallowness in understanding Islam.

Understanding the discourse of secularism has attracted the attention of a number of modern Muslim intellectuals, such as Mohammed Arkoun. In an analysis, Arkoun states that secularism is often associated with ideas that undermine the capacity for divine acceptance and guidance, or rather as a cultural and political program of emancipation from theological thinking and elective domination, as a manifestation of natural domination to enlarge human power by replacing the public education system with a private education system. In France, the term secularism is more commonly known as laпcitй or laпcism, which is the expression of an aggressive stance against a religious view of the world. It emphasizes conservative human values and religion: that religion is merely a dynamic transcendental inheritance, requiring a progressive−active attitude to reinterpret it in every aspect of human life. However, it also highlights the practices of liberalism in the context of its thinking which ultimately ends up in an attempt to 'negate' religious identity.[21]

Thus, it can be concluded that the process of secularism entering the Islamic world is largely inseparable from the contact between the Islamic world and the West in the form of colonization or colonialism. In the process of its engagement with society, the colonization has succeeded in transferring the values of secularism to the society it left behind.

Two Axes of Secularism Thought in the Islamic World

Responses in the form of criticism of this view have actually been delivered by many figures from among the ulama, scholars, Muslim thinkers and Islamic scholars. One of the figures who strongly criticized this secularism is Yusuf Qaradhawi. For Yusuf Qaradhawi, the secularism of the West is unknown in the Islamic heritage. Because the separation between religion and non−religion is a separation that has no roots in the Islamic

---

[20] Fata and Noorhayati.

[21] M. Bakir, "Tracing Secularism in the Context of Religion," *AT-TURAS: Journal of Islamic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2018): 82−96, https://doi.org/10.33650/at−turas.v5i1.325.

tradition. In the Islamic tradition there are no two powers, religious power and worldly power. For Islam, religion and the world are like the spirit and body that are united in one unit, so there is no separation between the two.

Furthermore, Yusuf Qaradhawi also emphasized that the incompatibility of secularism in the Islamic tradition is also due to the history of the church which is not the same as the history of Islam. It is known that the emergence of secularism in the West is inseparable from the frightening specter of the church in the form of oppression, murder, justification, and massacre. This has to do with science, thought and freedom.

In line with Yusuf Qaradhawi, Sayed Muhammad Naquib Alatas also aggressively criticized the understanding and application of secularism in the Islamic world. According to him, Islam totally rejects any application of the concepts of secularism, secularization, and secularism, because they do not belong to Islam and are alien to it in all aspects. Alatas further states that secularism and all its derivatives are only suitable for the Christian context and its history. In Islam we make religion the center of discussion, the basis of human life and existence.[22]

In his critique of secularism, Al−Attas asserts that the Muslim community's tendency towards this ideology is due to ignorance in understanding their own historical roots, thus falling into unwarranted support for secularism. The acceptance of secularism among the Muslim community has caused serious implications in the form of westernization in various aspects of human life, which unconsciously has slowly uprooted the identity of the Muslim community itself. Furthermore, Al−Alatas then offers a movement to counter this wave of secularization that leads to westernization, by promoting the re−Islamization or Islamization of all aspects of Muslim culture and knowledge. [23]Contrary to the rejection of the figures above, an incompatible view comes from Nurcholish Majid in Indonesia, who in his narrative supports this understanding. For Nurcholish Majid, the term secularization is something that is needed by Muslims. For him, the idea of secularization is not an idea that separates religion from the world, but it is intended for Muslims to globalize things that should be worldly and release the tendency to menghrawikan it.

In his article entitled Rationalization Not Westernization, Nurcholish states that modernization is rationalization in which it means progress and overhaul of an advanced mindset. According to him, the modernization process can be made possible on the condition of mastering science. In fact, Nurcholish also emphasized that for a Muslim, modernization is a must. Being modern for him means developing the ability to think given by God, namely dynamic thinking and also progressive.

Nurcholis' idea of modernization presupposes several things including the need for secularization. As he often explains, secularization is not the same as secularism as an ideology in the West. However, the meaning of secularization for Nurcholish is as a form of liberalization in the sense of human liberation from established false views. [24]

Thus secularization according to Nurcholish Majid is basically not the same as the concept of secularism. In this case secularization is intended as a form of *liberating development* and liberation process. According to him, this is needed by Muslims because in their development they are no longer able to distinguish which allegedly Islamic values are transcendent and which are temporal. Likewise, he always emphasizes that

---

[22] Syed Muhammad Naquib Al−Attas, Islam and Secularism, Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1991, pp. 17−21.
[23] Syed Muhammad Naquib Al−Attas, Islam and Secularism, Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1991.
[24] Hashemi, Nader. Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy. (Jakarta: Gramedia Pusttaka Utama, 2010)

secularization is not an application of secularism and turning Muslims into secularists. However, what he meant was to globalize the worldly and release Islam from its tendency to spiritualize it.

In the midst of the two axes of thought about secularism in the Islamic world above, what continues to be a contemplation of Islamic thinkers is how to prevent the dominance of Western civilization from continuing to crystallize into inferiority in the psychology of Muslims to this day. Therefore, as a middle way in facing the challenges of a more dominant Western civilization, early modern Muslim intellectuals, such as Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan in Pakistan, as well as Jamaluddin al－Afghani and Muhammad Abduh in Egypt, invited Muslims to master science and technology in order to be equal to Western colonialists. For them, the West's superiority over the Islamic world was because they (the West) had a very advanced science even though this progress was achieved by taking religion away from the roots of Western culture. On the other hand, although secularism is a－historical in the Islamic world, the spirit of western progress is certainly worth emulating without also removing Islam as the main identity of Muslim society. It was within this framework that Ottoman Turkey once took concrete action by sending hundreds of students to Europe to learn the knowledge that had given Europe its power.

CONCLUSION

The contribution of Islamic thinkers in responding to this view of secularism is a treasure for the Muslim community itself. The pro and con views that adorn responses about this understanding make this discourse can be seen from various sides. Furthermore, readers can choose among the existing views, which are more appropriate to use and apply in life as religious beings. The rise of Western civilization brings great challenges to Islamic civilization. The secular character that arises from the basis of anthropocentric philosophy and the positivist scientific paradigm is fundamentally different and even contradictory to Islamic civilization which is rooted in Tawhid which respects divine values. The omission of God in the aspects of public life makes Western civilization appear dry from a sense of humanity and gives birth to the impact of the existential crisis of modern society.

This negative impact is clearly evident from various modern human tragedies. Conflicts and wars, drug abuse, the spread of HIV/AIDS, increasing poverty and suicide rates, and global warming due to ecological damage are clear evidence of this existential crisis. The different views on God essentially make the two civilizations different and difficult to unite. Therefore, taking everything from the West is not a wise move to catch up with Islamic civilization. However, being indifferent and carelessly rejecting it is also an unaccountable attitude. What is actually needed is a critical attitude in absorbing whatever comes from the West by utilizing the paradigm of tawhid as a filter.

Reference

Donohue, Jhon. (1994). Islam and Renewal, Encyclopedia of Problems. Jakarta: Raja Grafindo Persada.

Hashemi, Nader. (2010). Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy. (Jakarta: Gramedia Pusttaka Utama.

Ismail, Syukri. (2014). *Criticism of Secularism (Views of Yusuf Qaradhawi)*. (Journal of Contextuality. Vol. 29. No. 1.

Jennah, Rodhatul. (2021). *Contemporary Islamic Issues*. (Jogjakarta: K－Media.

Nulhakim, Lukman. (2020). *The Concept of Nurcholish Majid's Thought A Phenomenology of Religion.* (Journal of Risalah, Vol 6. No 2.

Ahmad Khoirul Fata and Siti Mahmudah, Noorhayati. (2016). "Typology of Contemporary Islamic Thought," *Contemporary Islamic Thought* 20, no. 2: xv−xxvi.

Salik, Muhammad. (2011). "Thoughts of Egyptian Scholars on Secularism," *Al-Fitrah* 6, no. 1: 1−14.

Consuelo G. Sevilla, Introduction to Research Methodology (Jakarta: Ui−Press, 1993), p. 73

Sugiyono. (2013). *Educational Research Methods: Quantitative, Qualitative Approaches.* (Bandung: Alfabeta)

Syukri Ismail. (2014). Criticism of Secularism (Views of Yusuf Qaradhawi). Journal of Contextualita, Vol, 29, no 1. pp. 102

Parangrangi, Tomo. (2010). "Secularism in the Development of Islam," *Shautut Tarbiyah* 16, no. 1: 12−18.

Jennah, Rodhatul. (2021). Contemporary Islamic World Issues, K.Media, Jogjakarta. p. 56

Haikal Al Fiqri, "Secularization and Secularism in Islam," *TADAYYUN: Journal of Religion, Social and   Humanities Studies* 2, no. 1 (2024): 103−12.

Ahmad Khoirul Fata and Siti Mahmudah Noorhayati, "Secularism and the Challenge of Contemporary Islamic Thought," *Madina* 20, no. 2 (2016): 215−28.