A Novel Approach to the Relationship
Between Politics and Islam

In a very original thoughtful article, *Sa'ad Al-Din Al-'Uthmani*[1] uses a linguistic discourse on the meaning of the word "religion" and the significance of its dual purpose to explain the distinction between religion and politics in Islam and the role of secularism.

The Linguistic Approach

Al-'Uthmani suggests that technical linguistic differences in the use of words are what gave rise to conflicting interpretations of religious texts. Referring to the theory of the Austrian philosopher *Ludwig Wittgenstein* on the "specificity" of words and expressions, *Al-'Uthmani* blames the conflict over the relationship between politics and Islam on those who fail to understand the linguistic ambiguities in Arabic expressions. He emphasizes the importance of interpreting words in context rather than based on their meaning in the abstract. In *Al-'Uthmani's* view, both the word "religion" and the word "secularism" have different connotations, depending upon who is using them and in what context. From the outset, the reader gets the impression that he is trying to use less confrontational linguistic and semantic arguments to resolve the issue of religion and politics. It is interesting that *Al-'Uthmani* is careful to direct his criticism at the reader for misunderstanding the meaning of Arabic expressions rather than taking to task Arabic writers for lack of clarity, nor does he emphasize the morphological complexity of the Arabic language particularly when applied to religious writings. His deference to the language may reflect the fact that many Muslims consider the Arabic language a miracle in its own right.

Interpretation of the Word "Religion"

The author distinguishes between the personal and general applications of the word "religion" and focuses his article on the latter. He states that as a matter of general application, religion inspires all aspects of Muslim life, including political acts. *Al-'Uthmani* contends, however, that Islam has two roles. The first is the role of Islamic dogma, which is rigid and absolute, in governing spiritual worship and the afterlife. The second role is the influence of Islam on worldly (political) matters. The author suggests that, in this role, religion is inspirational and its application is subject to cultural relativism and human interpretation under the "Ijtihad[2]" notion of Islam.

The Distinction between the Religious and the Worldly

To explain this political attribute of Islam, *Al-'Uthmani* makes an interesting observation about the dual nature of the prophet Muhammad who is considered divinely inspired and therefore infallible on matters of dogma, but not so as the head of a country with political responsibilities. He explains that although Muhammad's role in relaying the divine scriptures of the *Quran* is beyond question, his political acts did not derive from divine inspiration but rather from his human nature which like

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[1] Dr. *Sa'ad Al-Din Al-'Uthmani* is the leader of the Moroccan Islamic party "Justice and Development" [PJD]. A psychiatrist by trade, he has written extensively on psychology and Islamic jurisprudence and is a parliamentarian representing the region of *Inezgane* in the southern region of Morocco.
[2] *Ijtihad* is a technical term in Islamic law which describes the process of making decisions by independent interpretations of the *Quran* and the *Sunnah*.

any other is subject to error.[3] The author also quoted several Muslim theologians to emphasize the distinction between the major elements of the faith, such as the five pillars of Islam, which are derived from dogma and the impact of time, culture and tradition on daily life (*i.e.*, cultural relativism).

Al-'Uthmani then proceeds to explain that although Islam has an inspirational role in politics, the political realm, when dealing with daily life, is secular in nature. Thus, to understand the role of Islam in politics is to understand the relationship between Islam and secularism. He acknowledges that this is a complex relationship.   In his view, however, the disagreement between those arguing for total separation of religion and politics and those who believe that Islam governs all actions, including political acts, stems from the lack of precision in the terminology used and misunderstanding of the concepts at the center of the debate. Opponents of "secularism" understand that term as detaching the political from any moral values, which they reject. In contrast, secularists fear that, absent total separation, all political decisions will be dictated by religion. In his view, neither of those understandings is correct.

Al-'Uthmani's Position

The author's contribution to the debate suggests that neither total separation nor total linkage of religion and politics in Islam is advisable. In formulating his views he emphasizes the following:

- Religious dogma addresses the spiritual and the afterlife while politics concerns our worldly welfare.
- It is impossible to totally separate religion from politics. Religious values are always present in one form or another, consciously or subconsciously, providing moral guidance. In matters of dogma, religion imposes itself on politics, but does not do so in other matters.
- While influenced by religion, the ruler of a country has a worldly position, without responsibilities in matters of religious dogma.[4]
- *Fatwas* or (pure religious interpretations) are in the domain of the *muftis*,[5] while worldly affairs are the responsibility of the political authorities or their delegates, including judges.
- *Fatwas* are advisory in nature, as they emanate from different entities and may be contradictory. In contrast, under the rule of law, judgments by civil authorities are binding.

Al-'Uthmani's approach to distinguishing between Islam and politics comes as close to acknowledging the role of a secular authority as it is possible for an Islamist to do. PI Online believes that, given the high degree of respect for the author among Muslims, his thesis is a serious effort at moving the debate away from the rigid *Salafis*, who have until now dominated the discussion, towards an approach which may allow for those relatively more moderate Islamic groups seeking accommodation with the government, like the Muslim Brotherhood, to initiate discussion of serious reform.

Source: Islam Online – Author: Dr. Sa'ad Al-Din Al-'Uthmani – Date 1/8/2008
URL:http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1199279254266&pagename=Zone-Arabic-Shariah%2FSRALayout#**1

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[3] In support of his argument, Al-'Uthmani presents various sayings by the prophet Muhammad himself, acknowledging this fact.

[4] It is interesting that the writer uses the word "Imam" to identify the ruler of a country responsible for the political domain only.

[5] A *mufti* is an Islamic scholar who interprets and expounds on Islamic Jurisprudence (the *Shari'a*)