



A Level

Religious Studies

Islam: Theme 1B | The role of shari'a and its importance for Muslims

Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im

Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im is a Sudanese-born Islamic and human rights scholar, who lives in the USA and works at Emory University as the Charles Howard Candler Professor of Law.

He was influenced by Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, a Sudanese Islamic reformer who advocated for progressive interpretations of Islam. After Taha's execution in 1985, he fled Sudan due to political persecution.



What are his views on shari'a?

He doesn't view shari'a as a fixed code of state law. Shari'a should guide Muslims personally and socially, but not be imposed as legislation.

He believes that Islamic faith and practice (including shari'a) must be voluntary and not enforced by the state. 'Shari'a provides moral guidance for Muslim individuals. State and religion should be clearly separated. For me, as a Muslim, I need the state to be secular so that I can practice Islam through conviction and choice.'

He argues that a secular state – neutral toward all religions – is essential for Muslims to live their faith freely and sincerely. He calls for freedom of belief and a pluralist political system, where Muslims practise shari'a as a personal moral code rather than an enforced state law.

'I am convinced that ideas of human rights and citizenship are more consistent with Islamic principles than with claims of a supposedly Islamic state to enforce shari'a.'

[UNESCO Courier](#), 2019

'The notion of an Islamic state is conceptually incoherent, historically unprecedented, and practically unworkable.'

Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a (2008)

Shari'a, he maintains, developed in specific historical contexts and must be reinterpreted for modern contexts.

'Shari'a, as a moral and ethical framework, must evolve to remain relevant in the modern world, aligning with universal human rights and democratic principles.'

Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a (2008)

He prioritises earlier Makkan verses that stress freedom, equality and justice. He emphasises the importance of justice and freedom of religion in society. He argues that shari'a-based law reform should be inclusive and democratic, and that the community should be actively involved in determining laws and policies.

He sees shari'a as a moral and ethical framework derived from the Qur'an and sunna. He believes it should guide Muslims personally and socially and not be imposed as legislation. An-Na'im has led several research projects aimed at reforming Islamic law and promoting human rights through internal cultural transformation.



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Major publications

Islamic Family Law in a Changing World: A Global Resource Book (2002)

Women and Land in Africa: Culture, Religion and Realizing Women's Rights (2003)

Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a (2008)

Muslims and Global Justice (2010)

What is an American Muslim? Embracing Faith and Citizenship (2014)

Decolonizing Human Rights (2021)



Website

<https://evolutionofsharia.org/>



Summary

An-Na'im frames shari'a as a personal ethical system which is evolving. It is best achieved in a secular, constitutional state that ensures freedom, equality, and justice for all. He attempts to combine Islamic scholarship with modern legal and human rights theory. He offers a model for Muslim societies seeking democracy and faithfulness without coercion.