ABSTRACT

Historical scholarship indicates that the institutional configurations of Islamic societies can be classified into two types, namely, differentiated social formations (societies in which religion and state occupy different space), and undifferentiated social formations (societies in which religion and state are integrated i.e., Islamic state). Using survey data from a comparative study of four Muslim societies, this paper examines the level of trust in religious institutions in these two types of Muslim social formations. The evidence reveals that the level of trust in religious institutions tends to be significantly higher in differentiated Muslim social formations. The paper discusses the possible sociological implications of this finding for Muslim societies and proposes an explanatory model to account for the finding. It concludes that an Islamic state may not always be in the best interests of Islamic institutions and religious elite. The empirical evidence also suggests that the trust in religious institutions in Muslim societies is positively associated with trust in key institutions of the state. Implications of this finding are also discussed.

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The relationship between politics and religion in Muslim societies has been a focus of debate among scholars of Islam for most of this century. A commonly stated view of many Western and Muslim scholars of Islam is that Islam is not only a religion but also a blue-print for social order and, therefore, encompasses all domains of life, including law and the state (Maududi 1960; Lewis 1993; Huntington 1993; Rahman 1982; Watt 1989; Pipes 1983; Esposito 1992; Weber 1978; Turner 1974; Gellner 1981). This view is reinforced by the fact that Islam does not have a church institution, although it does have the institutions of Ulema (religious scholars) who act as the guardians of the interpretations of the sacred texts, and Imam Masjid (leader of the mosque) who lead the mandatory daily prayers in the Muslim mosques. It is further argued that this characterization sets Islamic societies apart from western societies that are built on the separation of state and religious institutions.

Lapidus (1996) and Keddie (1994) have pointed out that, notwithstanding several examples of state control of religion in Western societies, these differences are commonly used to account for the different developmental trajectories of Western and Islamic societies. Western societies, with their separation of church and state, civil and religious law are said to have promoted an autonomous domain for secular culture and civil society, which form the bases of modernity. Islamic societies, lacking the differentiation of secular and sacred, have inhibited such development (Weber 1978; Crone 1980; Lewis 1993; Huntington 1993).

After reviewing the evidence about the separation of state and religion in Islamic history, Lapidus (1996) concludes that the history of the Muslim world reveals two main institutional configurations. The undifferentiated state-religious configuration characterizes a small number of Middle Eastern societies. This configuration is characteristic of lineage or tribal societies. Second, the historic norm for agro-urban Islamic societies was an institutional configuration that recognized the division between the state and religious spheres.

“Despite the common statement (and the Muslim ideal) that the institutions of state and religion are unified, and that Islam is a total way of life which defines political as well as social and family matters, most Muslim societies did not conform to this ideal, but were built around separate institutions of state and religion” (Lapidus 1996:24).

Keddie (1994) has described the supposed near-identity of religion and the state in Islam more as a “pious myth than reality for most of Islamic history” (p. 463). Similar views of Islamic history have also been advanced by others (Zubaida 1989; Sadowski 1997; Ayubi 1991; Sivan 1985).

The weight of historical scholarship indicates that the institutional configurations of Islamic societies can be classified into two types: (1) differentiated social formations are societies in which religion and state occupy different space and (2)