

## An Imaginative Debate between Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Imam Hassan al-Banna on The Role of Religion in Governance, the Boundaries of Cultural Identity, and the Path to Modernization



Mustafa Kemal Atatürk



Hasan Al Banna

Envision a debate of profound significance, a clash of two historical iconic figures. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938), the visionary advocate of secular nationalism in the 20th century, and Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), the revered Imam, Islamic thinker, and founder of the Muslim Brotherhood from the early 20th century. Today, these two figures come together in an imaginative AI-supported simulation, thanks to the incredible human mind, a heavenly gift endowed by our Only Creator, Almighty Allah, and modern technology, to engage in some of the most profound debates on the role of religion in the state. This debate, of monumental importance, will take the readers on a journey that spans two iconic cities, each steeped in rich historical context. Istanbul at the Hagia Sophia, a hub where diverse philosophies and cultures thrived. And Cairo at Al-Azhar mosque, where Islamic thought and scholarship flourished for centuries. In these dialogs, Atatürk and al-Banna will dispute three fundamental questions: the role of religion in governance, the boundaries of cultural identity, and the path to modernization. Interested readers can visit [www.youtube.com/@AtticBooks](http://www.youtube.com/@AtticBooks) for further details.

Atatürk's vision for a secular state, as articulated in his work "Atatürk's Diary" - "Notebook," stands in stark contrast to al-Banna's advocacy for an Islamic framework and his most sincere call of the Muslim leaders "Towards the Light." These distinct and compelling ideologies invite humankind to explore a timeless debate that transcends generations: the role of religion in the state. The tension is palpable as we begin this crucial discourse on the role of religion in governance, a topic of immense significance and relevance with the potential to profoundly shape our understanding of governance and society in this land.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: Hassan Effendi, engaging in this discussion is an honor. I firmly believe that the foundation of a progressive society lies in separating religion from the affairs of the state. Only through a secular framework can governance remain impartial and genuinely serve the well-being of all citizens, regardless of their faith.

Imam Hassan al-Banna: Wa 'Alaikum as Salam Mustafa Effendi! With all due respect, I must disagree. Religion is not merely a private matter. It's a comprehensive system encompassing all life aspects, including governance. Islam, for example, has historically guided societies toward prosperity, justice, and moral development. Look at the golden age of the Abbasid Caliphate. Science, philosophy, and social progress thrived under Islamic governance.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: Hassan Effendi. I acknowledge the accomplishments of past Islamic societies. But we must not confuse correlation with causation. The advancements during that period were driven by individuals who embraced reason, inquiry, and free thought. Traits that are hindered when religion is imposed upon the state. I aim to liberate the people from dogma, allowing them to think, question, and innovate freely without the constraint of religious authority.

Imam Hassan al-Banna: On the contrary, Mustafa Effendi, those very individuals you speak of, such as al Kindi, ibn Sina, al-Farabi, ibn Rushd, al Ghazali, ibn Tufail, and ibn Khaldun, were devout Muslims who found no conflict between faith and reason. We risk losing the moral and spiritual foundation that fosters individual and societal growth. Islam's justice and governance system has proven to benefit humanity.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: Hassan Effendi. Their scientific contributions and advancements were guided by Islamic principles that encouraged seeking knowledge by excluding religion from governance. While it's true that many scholars of the Islamic Golden Age were believers, their breakthroughs occurred not because of religious governance but despite it. History shows us that when religion dominates the state, it often results in oppression and intellectual stagnation. My vision for a modern nation is one where laws are based on reason, fairness, and equality, where every citizen, regardless of belief, is free to pursue progress without the constraints of religious orthodoxy.

Imam Hassan al-Banna: But Mustafa Effendi! Can reason alone sustain a just and ethical society without a higher moral framework provided by religion? Societies can easily fall into moral relativism, where the lines between right and wrong are blurred. Islam offers a clear and comprehensive guide for governance that ensures justice, compassion, and welfare. Removing that from the public sphere risks leaving society adrift without a moral compass.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: I believe justice should stem from universal principles, not adherence to a particular religious doctrine. The state's laws must apply equally to all without privileging one faith over another. Secularism allows for the freedom of belief while preventing the imposition of any particular religious system on the people. It creates a space where all individuals, Muslim, Christian, and atheist, can coexist without fear of discrimination.

Imam Hassan al-Banna: And yet, Mustafa Effendi, by removing religion from governance, we risk alienating the very people whose values are rooted in faith. Islam is not a burden. It is the foundation of our communal and moral strength. It guided societies like Andalusia and the Abbasid

Caliphate to unprecedented levels of achievement and unity. Faith should not be seen as an obstacle to progress but as a vital component.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: The world has changed. Hasan Effendi! We live in an era of science, reason, and technological advancement. The model of governance you describe may have worked in the past, but today, it risks holding us back. We must honor our heritage by building a modern, robust, independent nation that thrives on equality and freedom. Religion can guide individuals, but the state must remain neutral to ensure liberty for all.

Imam Hassan al-Banna: The world has changed, but the essence of human values remains the same. Mustafa Effendi! We may not see eye to eye, but perhaps this discussion is just the beginning. There are still many questions left unanswered. How do we ensure justice for all without imposing on people's beliefs? How do we build a society that embraces progress while respecting the traditions that define us? These are not easy questions; maybe neither of us has all the answers. But it is through continuing this dialog, challenging each other, and learning from our differences that we might find a path that honors our heritage and future.

This segment of the debate expands on cultural identity and the path to modernization:

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: The role of education is not just about imparting knowledge but shaping the future of a nation. In a globalized world, we must prepare our youth to compete internationally, not just to preserve our traditions. Secularism in education is crucial because it provides an unbiased, objective framework that allows students to explore all fields of knowledge without the constraints of religious doctrine. Separating religion from education can encourage a broader perspective where science and rational thought take precedence. This is not to deny the importance of personal beliefs, but those beliefs should remain in the personal sphere, not dictated by state institutions. If we are to advance as a modern nation, our education system must be free to foster innovation and creativity, not bound by the traditions of the past.

Imam Hassan al-Banna: While I respect your desire for progress, Mustafa Effendi! I cannot agree that secularism is the key to success. Education is not merely about teaching facts and figures. It is about cultivating the human soul and guiding individuals toward a life of purpose and morality. Looking back at the great civilizations of the past, we see that they excelled not only in science and philosophy but also in their deep connection to spiritual and ethical values. As a comprehensive way of life, Islam offers guidance in all fields, including education. By incorporating Islamic principles, we can create individuals who are not only knowledgeable but also compassionate, ethical, and responsible. A purely secular education may produce brilliant minds, but without a moral compass, those minds can be led astray. In the rush to modernize, I fear we forget the values that have sustained our society for centuries.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: I understand your point about ethics and morality, but we must consider the role of religion in a pluralistic society. The danger of intertwining education with religion is that it may privilege one set of beliefs over others, leading to exclusion and discrimination. Secular education creates a neutral ground where students from all backgrounds, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or atheist, can learn without bias. It promotes equality and ensures that no child feels alienated because of their religious background. Moreover, morality is not the sole domain of religion. Secular philosophies such as humanism have shown that ethical behavior can be cultivated through rational

thought and empathy. We must teach our youth to think critically, challenge established norms, and contribute to a progressive and inclusive society.

Imam Hassan al-Banna: I see your concerns about pluralism and agree that inclusion is essential. However, I believe you underestimate the role of Islam in promoting unity and justice. The teachings of Islam are not exclusionary. They offer principles that transcend religious boundaries. Compassion. Fairness. Solidarity. Values that all human beings can embrace. A purely secular system, in my view, risks creating a generation disconnected from its roots. Unsure of their identity in a rapidly changing world, we do not need to abandon modern education, but we must integrate it with the spiritual and moral teachings that have shaped our civilization. By doing so, we nurture both the mind and the soul, creating individuals who are equipped not only to succeed in the world but also to contribute positively to the moral fabric of society.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: While I appreciate your value on spiritual guidance, my educational vision is rooted in preparing individuals for the realities of a globalized, modern world. Our nation cannot thrive by looking backward, clinging solely to tradition. We must adopt a forward-thinking approach that embraces scientific inquiry, technological advancement, and progressive values. In my view, identity should be dynamic based on universal human values like freedom, equality, and justice. These values transcend any religion or culture and are the foundation of a truly modern society. We should empower our youth to question, explore, and innovate rather than confining them within the boundaries of a religious framework that may limit their potential. Our future depends on adaptability and the courage to redefine ourselves in light of new challenges.

Imam Hassan al-Banna: I respect your vision of progress, but we must not lose sight that actual progress is a balance of both material and spiritual development. A purely secular education may produce intellectually strong individuals, but without spiritual guidance, they may lack the wisdom to use that knowledge responsibly. Islam provides a moral foundation that inspires individual integrity and fosters a sense of collective responsibility. By teaching our youth modern science and our rich spiritual heritage; we can build a society that is not only advanced but also deeply rooted in ethical values. This is the kind of progress I envision. A harmonious balance between mind and spirit, where we do not have to sacrifice one for the sake of the other. Nationalism versus Pan Islamism.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: Hassan Effendi! I believe the foundation of progress lies in creating a strong national identity. Nationalism is not just a matter of cultural pride. It is about creating a cohesive society where all citizens share a common goal. In Turkey, we adopted a nationalist approach to modernize, to break free from the constraints of empire, and to build a secular, independent state that could stand on its own. This required a focus on Turkish identity, creating a sense of unity among people with different backgrounds. Nationalism allows a nation to thrive because it fosters loyalty and responsibility towards one's country. Pan-Islamism, on the other hand, may weaken this bond as it encourages allegiance to a broader, more abstract community in a modern world where nation-states are the primary actors. Nationalism remains the most practical way to ensure progress and stability.

Imam Hassan al-Banna: I understand your focus on national identity, Mustafa Effendi! But I believe that nationalism, especially in the Muslim world, has done more harm than good. It has divided Muslims into separate entities, creating an artificial border where there once was unity. Islam teaches us that we are part of one ummah transcending national borders.

Pan-Islamism is not just a romantic notion. It is a practical solution to the fragmentation that has weakened us by focusing solely on the nation-state. We allow external powers to exploit our divisions as they did during the colonial era. A unified Muslim world, guided by the principles of Islam, would be far more robust and more capable of addressing the challenges we face. This unity does not negate the need for governance or local leadership. Still, it reminds us that our ultimate allegiance is to our shared faith and values, which provide a foundation for cooperation and strength.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: While I respect your desire for unity, I believe the realities of the modern world require a more practical approach. The concept of a Ummah may have been relevant, but today, each nation faces unique challenges that require specific solutions. Nationalism gives people a sense of belonging, loyalty, and accountability to their country.

In Turkey, nationalism has allowed us to focus on our development, modernize our institutions, and build a secular state that can compete on the global stage. We cannot afford to dilute this sense of responsibility by focusing on a broad, undefined idea of Muslim unity. Each nation must take charge of its destiny, build its institutions, and develop its path to progress. Solidarity among Muslims is essential, but it cannot replace the need for each nation to be self-sufficient and resilient.

Imam Hassan al-Banna: Mustafa Effendi! I acknowledge the importance of addressing local challenges, but I believe you underestimate the potential power of a united Ummah. Islamism is not about erasing national identities but about creating a broader framework for cooperation and solidarity among Muslim nations. We can strengthen our position globally by pooling our resources, sharing knowledge, and supporting each other. Nationalism. While it may provide short-term unity, it ultimately divides us.

The colonial powers used nationalism to fragment the Muslim world, weakening us in the process. Islam offers a set of values and principles not confined to one nation. They are universal and provide a foundation for justice, cooperation, and shared progress. If we embrace pan-Islamism, we can stand stronger together, facing global challenges as a unified community while still respecting the governance structures of individual nations. Our faith unites us in a way that nationalism cannot. And this unity will allow us to overcome the challenges of the modern world. As our journey across Istanbul and Cairo ends, we reflect on the robust exchange between two influential figures whose visions for society could not be more different.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's firm commitment to secular nationalism and Imam Hassan al-Banna's unwavering dedication to an Islamic framework represent two distinct paths toward shaping the future of any community, including the Muslim community. Their debates highlight the tension between modernity and tradition, individuality and collective identity and secularism and religious guidance. Thank you, dear readers, for joining us in the Asian Age on this intellectual journey. Who do you think was right? Mustafa Kemal Atatürk? Or Imam Hassan al-Banna? Looking at them from today's global, regional, and national perspectives?

**Writer:** Commodore Syed Misbah Uddin Ahmad, (C), NUP, ndc, afwc, psc, BN (ret'd), Director General, Bangladesh Institute of Maritime Research and Development (BIMRAD). Email: misbah28686@gmail.com

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