The obvious reason for avoiding any reference to religion in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 is the exclusive nature of religious and secularity. The political-ideological side, while such debates need to occur within an internal frame of reference (Qur’an and Sunna), human agency has al-
ways been central to Muslims’ understand-
ing and practice of Islam. Muslims believe that the Qur’an is the literal and final word of God, the Sunna being the second divinely inspired source of Islam. But the Qur’an and Sunna have no meaning or relevance in the daily life of individual believers and their communities except through human under-
standing and behaviour. The Qur’an was re-
vealed in Arabic, which is a human language that evolved in its own specific historical context, and not a specific part of the Qur’an were addressing specific situations in Mecca and Medina when they were con-
veyed by the Prophet. The Sunna had to re-
govern the religious and social life of Muslims who find this proposition disturbing tend to think that it undermines the divine quality of the sources of Islam. But that apprehen-
sion fails to recognize that the Qur’an and Sunna are intended to readdress human im-
perfections, and are not simply manifesta-
tions of the divine will. As a result of this, I see the Qur’an and Sunna as legal ey to self-determination, but that can be real-
ized only when exercised with due regard to the realities of their national and global con-
text, and through viable constitutional and political institutions. In my view as a Muslim, the realization of this right should be found-
ed on a clear and categorical acknowledge-
ment of the interdependence of Islam, human rights and secularism. 

Notes
1 This article is a drastically abridged version of a long human rights and religious law.
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While the reasons for the political and social reality of tension between religion, human rights and secu-
larism are to be appreciated, an argument can be made for focusing on the interdependence of these three paradigms in the Islamic context, rather than making a choice between them. Each of the three paradigms requires the other two for fulfilling its own rationale, and sustaining its relevance and validity for its own constituency. The difficulties facing this proposal can be overcome through an internal transformation within each paradigm. This process should be deliberately promoted in order to achieve political stability and development as well as individ-
ual freedom and social justice.

The consequent religious transformation, in turn, would facilitate the interdependence among all three.

Islam Human Rights and Secularism Does it have to be a Choice?

The obvious reason for avoiding any refer-
ence to religion in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 is the exclusive nature of religious and secular justifications, be-
cause that does not address the question of how to make human rights equally valid and legitimate from the perspectives of the wide-


The ISIM would like to solicit your reactions to the de-ate found on this page. We ask that you please com-

Debate ABDULLAH A. AN-NA’IM

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