

NAVIGATING FAITH IN A SECULAR STATE: ISLAMIC LAW AND MUSLIM PRACTICES IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract: *This study explores the multifaceted implementation of Islamic law among the Muslim community in North Macedonia, a secular country. It examines how Muslims navigate and practice various aspects of Sharia in their daily lives, despite the secular framework of the state. The research focuses on key religious practices such as religious marriage (Nikah), the giving of obligatory charity (Zakat), and the observance of fasting during Ramadan. It investigates the challenges and adaptations faced by the Muslim community in maintaining their religious obligations while complying with secular laws. This study provides insights into the dynamic interaction between Islamic law and secularism, highlighting the resilience and creativity of Muslims in preserving their religious identity. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of religious coexistence and the practical realities of implementing religious laws in a secular context.*

Keywords: *Islamic law, Sharia, secularism, North Macedonia, Muslim practices, religious identity.*

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1. Introduction

Islamic law, or Sharia, serves as a comprehensive guide for Muslims, encompassing spiritual, moral, and legal dimensions of life. For Muslim communities, adherence to Sharia is not only a matter of religious obligation but also a means of preserving their cultural and spiritual identity. However, the implementation of Islamic law can become complex in secular states, where religious laws are not formally recognized within the legal framework. This dynamic creates a unique interplay between religious and secular systems, requiring communities to navigate challenges and adapt their practices (An-Na'im, 2008).

North Macedonia, a small Balkan country, provides a compelling case study for examining this interaction. As a secular state with a diverse population, including a significant Muslim minority, North Macedonia offers a unique context in which Islamic law is practiced informally alongside the country's secular legal system. The Muslim community, which primarily consists of ethnic Albanians, Turks, and Bosniaks, has developed creative ways to maintain their religious obligations while complying with the state's secular framework (Матевски, 2014).

This study aims to explore how Muslims in North Macedonia implement key aspects of Islamic law in their daily lives. Specifically, it focuses on three central practices: religious marriage (Nikah), the giving of obligatory charity (Zakat), and fasting during Ramadan. By examining these practices, the study sheds light on the challenges faced by the Muslim community, the adaptations they have made, and the broader implications for religious coexistence in a secular society.

The findings of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamic interaction between Islamic law and secularism. They highlight the resilience and creativity of the Muslim community in preserving their religious identity while navigating the constraints of a secular legal framework. This paper seeks to provide insights into the practical realities of implementing religious laws in a secular context, offering lessons that may be applicable to other multicultural and secular societies.

2. North Macedonia: A Secular Framework

North Macedonia, located in the heart of the Balkans, is a multiethnic and multireligious country. Following its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, the country adopted a secular constitution that guarantees freedom of religion and the separation of religion from the state. While the majority of the population identifies as Orthodox Christian, Muslims constitute a significant minority, making up approximately one-third of the population. The Muslim community is primarily composed of ethnic Albanians, Turks, Bosniaks, and Roma, each contributing to the rich cultural and religious diversity of the country (Матевски, 2005).

The secular framework of North Macedonia ensures that religious practices are not formally integrated into the state's legal system. This means that Islamic law, or Sharia, is not officially recognized or enforced by the state. Instead, Muslims must practice their religious obligations informally, often within the confines of their communities. This creates a unique dynamic where religious practices coexist with secular laws, sometimes leading to tensions or the need for creative adaptations.

Islamic Law in a Secular Context

The practice of Islamic law in secular states is a complex and multifaceted issue. Secularism, by definition, separates religion from state governance, often relegating religious practices to the private sphere. For Muslims, this can pose challenges, as Sharia encompasses not only personal acts of worship but also social, economic, and legal dimensions of life (Hefner, 2011). In secular contexts,

Muslims must navigate a dual system: adhering to their religious obligations while complying with the laws of the state.

Despite these challenges, the Muslim community in North Macedonia has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. Through community networks, religious organizations, and individual efforts, they have found ways to preserve their religious identity and fulfill their obligations under Islamic law. This interplay between Islamic law and secularism provides valuable insights into the broader question of religious coexistence in multicultural societies.

3. Key Religious Practices and Their Implementation

The Muslim community in North Macedonia practices various aspects of Islamic law (Sharia) in their daily lives, despite the secular framework of the state. This section focuses on three central religious practices: religious marriage (Nikah), the giving of obligatory charity (Zakat), and fasting during Ramadan. Each of these practices represents a significant aspect of Islamic law and provides insight into how the Muslim community navigates the challenges of practicing their faith in a secular context.

3.1. Religious Marriage (Nikah)

Marriage in Islam is not merely a social contract but a sacred covenant that holds both religious and legal significance. The Nikah, or Islamic marriage ceremony, is a fundamental aspect of Sharia, requiring the consent of both parties, the presence of witnesses, and the offering of a dowry (Mahr) by the groom to the bride. However, in North Macedonia, as in many secular states, religious marriages are not legally recognized unless they are accompanied by a civil ceremony.

Challenges in Practicing Nikah

Muslims in North Macedonia face several challenges in practicing Nikah within the secular legal framework:

- **Legal Recognition:** A Nikah performed solely in a mosque or by an imam is not legally binding under North Macedonian law. Couples must also register their marriage through a civil ceremony to gain legal recognition, which can create a dual process for Muslim couples.
- **Cultural Expectations:** For many Muslims, the Nikah is seen as the “true” marriage, while the civil ceremony is often viewed as a bureaucratic formality. This can lead to situations where couples delay or even forgo the civil ceremony, resulting in legal complications, particularly in cases of divorce, inheritance, or child custody.
- **Imams and Civil Law:** Imams who perform Nikah ceremonies often encourage couples to comply with civil law, but there is no formal mechanism to integrate the two processes. This lack of coordination can create confusion and inconsistencies in how marriages are conducted.

Adaptations and Community Solutions

Despite these challenges, the Muslim community in North Macedonia has developed creative ways to navigate the dual requirements of religious and civil marriage:

- **Dual Ceremonies:** Many couples choose to perform both the Nikah and the civil ceremony, often on the same day, to ensure both religious and legal recognition. This approach has become a common practice, blending religious tradition with legal compliance.
- **Community Support:** Religious organizations and community leaders play a crucial role in educating couples about the importance of fulfilling both religious and legal obligations. Some mosques even offer guidance on how to complete the civil registration process.
- **Symbolic Integration:** In some cases, couples incorporate elements of the Nikah into their civil ceremony, such as reciting Quranic verses or including the Mahr, to create a sense of unity between the two processes.

The practice of Nikah in North Macedonia highlights the adaptability of the Muslim community in preserving their religious traditions while complying with secular laws. It also underscores the importance of community networks in supporting individuals as they navigate these dual systems.

3.2. Obligatory Charity (Zakat)

Zakat, the giving of obligatory charity, is one of the five pillars of Islam and a cornerstone of Islamic law. It requires Muslims to donate a specific portion of their wealth (typically 2.5% of savings) to those in need, including the poor, orphans, and other vulnerable groups. In Islamic societies, Zakat is often institutionalized, with formal mechanisms for collection and distribution. However, in North Macedonia, where the state does not recognize or support religious laws, the practice of Zakat is entirely community-driven.

Challenges in Practicing Zakat

The implementation of Zakat in North Macedonia faces several obstacles:

- **Lack of Institutional Support:** Unlike in some Muslim-majority countries, there is no state-run system for collecting or distributing Zakat. This places the responsibility entirely on individuals and community organizations.
- **Economic Constraints:** North Macedonia is one of the poorer countries in Europe, and many Muslims face economic hardships themselves. This can limit their ability to fulfill their Zakat obligations.
- **Awareness and Education:** Not all members of the Muslim community are fully aware of the rules and significance of Zakat, particularly younger generations who may be less connected to traditional religious teachings.

Adaptations and Community Solutions

To address these challenges, the Muslim community in North Macedonia has developed various strategies for practicing Zakat:

- **Community-Based Collection:** Local mosques and Islamic organizations often take the lead in collecting and distributing Zakat. These institutions act as intermediaries, ensuring that funds are directed to those in need within the community.
- **Informal Networks:** Many Muslims prefer to give Zakat directly to individuals or families they know, creating informal but effective networks of support. This approach fosters a sense of personal connection and accountability.

- **Education Campaigns:** Religious leaders and organizations have launched initiatives to raise awareness about the importance of Zakat and how it should be calculated. These efforts often include sermons, workshops, and online resources.
- **Seasonal Giving:** The practice of giving Zakat often peaks during Ramadan, a time of heightened religious devotion. Community events and fundraising drives during this period help to mobilize resources and distribute aid more effectively.

The practice of Zakat in North Macedonia demonstrates the resilience of the Muslim community in upholding this pillar of Islam, even in the absence of formal institutional support. It also highlights the role of community solidarity in addressing social and economic challenges.

3.3. Fasting During Ramadan

Fasting during the holy month of Ramadan is another central pillar of Islam. It requires Muslims to abstain from food, drink, and other physical needs from dawn to sunset as an act of worship and self-discipline. In North Macedonia, where Muslims live in a predominantly non-Muslim society, the observance of Ramadan presents unique challenges.

Challenges in Observing Ramadan

Muslims in North Macedonia face several difficulties in observing Ramadan:

- **Workplace Accommodations:** Many Muslims work in environments where fasting is not the norm, and employers may not provide accommodations such as adjusted work hours or breaks for prayer.
- **Social Pressures:** In a secular society, fasting can sometimes lead to misunderstandings or social isolation, particularly for younger Muslims in schools or workplaces.
- **Public Life:** The lack of public recognition of Ramadan means that there are few visible signs of the holy month, such as reduced business hours or public iftar (breaking of the fast) events, which are common in Muslim-majority countries.

Adaptations and Community Solutions

Despite these challenges, Muslims in North Macedonia have found ways to observe Ramadan and maintain their religious identity:

- **Community Iftars:** Mosques and Islamic organizations frequently host communal iftar events, bringing people together to break their fast and fostering a sense of solidarity.
- **Flexible Work Arrangements:** Some employers, particularly those in Muslim-majority areas, are willing to accommodate fasting employees by offering flexible schedules or shorter workdays during Ramadan.
- **Youth Engagement:** Islamic organizations have made efforts to engage younger Muslims during Ramadan through events, workshops, and social media campaigns. These initiatives help to strengthen their connection to their faith and provide a supportive community.
- **Charitable Activities:** Ramadan is also a time for increased charitable giving, with many Muslims combining their fasting with acts of kindness and Zakat contributions. This reinforces the spiritual and social dimensions of the holy month.

The observance of Ramadan in North Macedonia reflects the determination of the Muslim community to uphold their religious practices, even in a secular environment. It also highlights the im-

portance of community support in overcoming the challenges of practicing faith in a multicultural society.

4. Challenges and Adaptations

The Muslim community in North Macedonia faces a range of challenges in practicing Islamic law within the constraints of a secular legal and social framework. These challenges stem from the inherent tension between religious obligations and the secular nature of the state, as well as the broader societal and economic context. Despite these difficulties, the community has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, finding innovative ways to preserve their religious identity and fulfill their obligations under Islamic law.

4.1. Navigating Secular Laws

One of the most significant challenges for Muslims in North Macedonia is the need to navigate a dual system of religious and secular laws. While the secular framework guarantees freedom of religion, it does not formally recognize or accommodate Islamic law, creating a number of practical and legal obstacles.

Legal Challenges

- **Marriage and Family Law:** As discussed earlier, religious marriages (Nikah) are not legally recognized unless accompanied by a civil ceremony. This dual requirement can create confusion and legal complications, particularly in cases of divorce, inheritance, or child custody. For example, a couple married only through Nikah may not have their union recognized by the state, leaving them without legal protections.
- **Charitable Giving (Zakat):** The lack of institutional support for Zakat means that Muslims must rely on informal networks for its collection and distribution. This can lead to inconsistencies and difficulties in ensuring that Zakat reaches those who need it most.
- **Workplace and Public Life:** The secular nature of the state means that there are no formal accommodations for religious practices such as fasting during Ramadan or daily prayers. Muslims must often negotiate these practices on an individual basis, which can be challenging in workplaces or public institutions.

Social Challenges

- **Misunderstandings and Stereotypes:** As a minority group, Muslims in North Macedonia sometimes face misunderstandings or stereotypes about their religious practices. This can lead to social isolation or pressure to conform to secular norms, particularly for younger Muslims in schools or workplaces.
- **Lack of Representation:** The Muslim community often lacks representation in public institutions and decision-making processes, which can make it difficult to advocate for accommodations or address systemic challenges.

4.2. Community Resilience and Creativity

Despite these challenges, the Muslim community in North Macedonia has shown remarkable resilience and creativity in adapting to the secular context. Through a combination of individual efforts, community networks, and religious organizations, they have developed strategies to preserve their religious identity and fulfill their obligations under Islamic law.

Community Networks and Religious Organizations

- **Role of Mosques:** Mosques serve as central hubs for the Muslim community, providing not only a place for worship but also a space for education, social support, and the organization of religious activities. Imams and other religious leaders play a crucial role in guiding the community and helping individuals navigate the challenges of practicing their faith in a secular environment.
- **Islamic Organizations:** In addition to mosques, Islamic organizations and charities have emerged as key players in supporting the community. These organizations often take the lead in organizing Zakat collection, hosting communal iftars during Ramadan, and providing educational resources about Islamic law and practices.

Education and Awareness

- **Raising Awareness:** Religious leaders and community organizations have made significant efforts to raise awareness about the importance of fulfilling both religious and legal obligations. For example, they educate couples about the need to register their marriages through civil ceremonies in addition to performing the Nikah.
- **Youth Engagement:** Recognizing the challenges faced by younger Muslims, particularly in secular schools and workplaces, the community has invested in youth engagement initiatives. These include workshops, social events, and online campaigns aimed at strengthening their connection to their faith and providing a supportive environment.

Adaptation in Daily Life

- **Workplace Negotiations:** Many Muslims have found ways to negotiate accommodations for their religious practices in the workplace. For example, some employees arrange flexible schedules during Ramadan or find private spaces for daily prayers.
- **Informal Support Networks:** In the absence of formal institutional support, Muslims often rely on informal networks of family, friends, and community members to fulfill their religious obligations. For example, Zakat is frequently distributed directly to individuals or families in need, bypassing the need for formal structures.

Cultural Integration

- **Blending Traditions:** The Muslim community has also found ways to blend Islamic traditions with local cultural practices, creating a unique expression of their faith that is rooted in both religion and local identity. For example, some couples incorporate elements of the Nikah into their civil wedding ceremonies, creating a sense of unity between the two processes.

- **Public Celebrations:** While Ramadan and other Islamic holidays are not officially recognized by the state, the community has made efforts to celebrate these occasions publicly, fostering a sense of visibility and solidarity. For example, communal iftars and Eid celebrations are often organized in public spaces, inviting participation from both Muslims and non-Muslims.

4.3. Lessons from Adaptation

The challenges and adaptations of the Muslim community in North Macedonia offer valuable lessons for understanding the interaction between religious law and secularism. These lessons include:

- **The Importance of Community:** Strong community networks and religious organizations are essential for supporting individuals in practicing their faith, particularly in contexts where formal institutional support is lacking.
- **Flexibility and Creativity:** The ability to adapt religious practices to the constraints of a secular environment demonstrates the resilience and creativity of the Muslim community. This flexibility is key to preserving religious identity in a multicultural society.
- **Dialogue and Cooperation:** Building bridges between religious and secular institutions can help to address misunderstandings and create a more inclusive environment. For example, greater dialogue between religious leaders and public officials could lead to more accommodations for religious practices in workplaces and schools.

5. Interaction Between Islamic Law and Secularism

The interaction between Islamic law and secularism in North Macedonia reflects a complex and dynamic relationship. On one hand, the secular framework of the state ensures freedom of religion and the separation of religion from public governance. On the other hand, the comprehensive nature of Islamic law, which governs both personal and communal aspects of life, requires Muslims to find ways to reconcile their religious obligations with the constraints of a secular legal system.

5.1. Coexistence of Religious and Secular Systems

The coexistence of Islamic law and secularism in North Macedonia highlights the potential for religious and secular systems to operate in parallel, even in the absence of formal integration. While the state does not officially recognize or enforce Islamic law, it provides a legal framework that allows Muslims to practice their religion freely within the private sphere. This creates a dual system in which Muslims navigate both religious and secular obligations.

Mutual Accommodation

- **Freedom of Religion:** The secular constitution of North Macedonia guarantees freedom of religion, allowing Muslims to practice their faith without interference from the state. This legal protection is essential for the preservation of religious identity in a multicultural society.
- **Informal Recognition:** While Islamic law is not formally recognized, there is an implicit acknowledgment of its importance within the Muslim community. For example, religious leaders and community organizations often work alongside secular institutions to address issues such as marriage, charity, and education.

Tensions and Limitations

- **Legal Gaps:** The lack of formal recognition for Islamic law can create legal gaps, particularly in areas such as marriage and family law. These gaps often require Muslims to navigate complex and sometimes conflicting systems of religious and secular law.
- **Social Misunderstandings:** The coexistence of religious and secular systems can also lead to misunderstandings or tensions, particularly in a society where the majority population may not be familiar with Islamic practices. This underscores the need for greater dialogue and mutual understanding.

5.2. Adaptation and Resilience

The interaction between Islamic law and secularism in North Macedonia demonstrates the adaptability and resilience of the Muslim community. Faced with the challenges of practicing their faith in a secular context, Muslims have developed creative solutions that allow them to fulfill their religious obligations while complying with state laws.

Strategies for Adaptation

- **Blending Religious and Secular Practices:** As discussed in previous sections, Muslims in North Macedonia often blend religious and secular practices to navigate the dual requirements of Islamic law and state law. For example, couples may perform both a Nikah and a civil marriage ceremony, ensuring both religious and legal recognition.
- **Community-Based Solutions:** The Muslim community has relied heavily on mosques, religious organizations, and informal networks to address the challenges of practicing Islamic law in a secular environment. These community-based solutions have been instrumental in preserving religious identity and fostering a sense of solidarity.

Resilience in the Face of Challenges

- **Preservation of Identity:** Despite the constraints of a secular framework, the Muslim community in North Macedonia has succeeded in preserving its religious identity. This resilience is evident in the continued observance of key practices such as Zakat, fasting during Ramadan, and religious marriage.
- **Intergenerational Continuity:** The community has also made significant efforts to pass on its religious traditions to younger generations, ensuring the continuity of Islamic practices in a rapidly changing social and cultural environment.

5.3. Broader Implications for Religious Coexistence

The case of North Macedonia offers valuable insights into the broader question of religious coexistence in secular societies. It highlights both the challenges and opportunities of integrating diverse religious traditions into a secular legal and social framework.

Lessons for Multicultural Societies

- **The Role of Secularism:** Secularism, when implemented in a way that guarantees freedom of religion, can provide a neutral framework for the coexistence of diverse religious traditions. However, it must also be flexible enough to accommodate the specific needs of minority communities.
- **The Importance of Dialogue:** Building bridges between religious and secular institutions is essential for fostering mutual understanding and addressing potential conflicts. In North Macedonia, greater dialogue between the Muslim community and state institutions could help to address issues such as legal recognition for religious practices and accommodations in public life.
- **Community Empowerment:** The experience of the Muslim community in North Macedonia underscores the importance of strong community networks in supporting religious practices and preserving cultural identity. These networks play a crucial role in bridging the gap between religious and secular systems.

Global Relevance

The interaction between Islamic law and secularism in North Macedonia is not unique to this context. Similar dynamics can be observed in other secular states with significant Muslim populations, such as France, Germany, and the United States. The lessons learned from North Macedonia can therefore contribute to a broader understanding of how religious and secular systems can coexist in multicultural societies.

5.4. The Dynamic Nature of Religious and Secular Interaction

The relationship between Islamic law and secularism in North Macedonia is not static but dynamic, evolving in response to changing social, political, and economic conditions. This dynamic nature reflects the broader reality of religious coexistence in a globalized world, where communities must constantly adapt to new challenges and opportunities.

Evolving Practices

- **Modernization and Globalization:** The Muslim community in North Macedonia, like other religious communities worldwide, is influenced by broader trends of modernization and globalization. These trends have led to changes in how Islamic law is practiced and understood, particularly among younger generations.
- **Interfaith and Intercultural Exchange:** The multicultural nature of North Macedonian society has also created opportunities for interfaith and intercultural exchange, fostering greater understanding and cooperation between different religious and ethnic groups.

Future Directions

- **Legal and Institutional Reforms:** As North Macedonia continues to develop as a multicultural and secular state, there may be opportunities for legal and institutional reforms that better accommodate the needs of religious minorities. For example, the state could explore

ways to provide greater recognition for religious practices without compromising its secular framework.

- **Strengthening Community Networks:** The Muslim community can continue to strengthen its networks and institutions, ensuring that they remain resilient in the face of future challenges.

6. Conclusion

The implementation of Islamic law among the Muslim community in North Macedonia offers a compelling case study of the dynamic interaction between religion and secularism. As a secular state with a significant Muslim minority, North Macedonia provides a unique context in which Islamic law is practiced informally alongside the country's secular legal framework. This study has explored how Muslims in North Macedonia navigate and adapt their religious practices—specifically religious marriage (Nikah), obligatory charity (Zakat), and fasting during Ramadan—within the constraints of a secular system.

6.1. Key Findings

The findings of this study highlight several important themes:

- **Challenges of Secularism:** The secular framework of North Macedonia, while guaranteeing freedom of religion, does not formally recognize or accommodate Islamic law. This creates practical and legal challenges for Muslims, particularly in areas such as marriage, charity, and public observance of religious practices.
- **Community Resilience and Adaptation:** Despite these challenges, the Muslim community has demonstrated remarkable resilience and creativity. Through community networks, religious organizations, and individual efforts, they have found ways to preserve their religious identity and fulfill their obligations under Islamic law. These adaptations include blending religious and secular practices, relying on informal support networks, and fostering a strong sense of community solidarity.
- **Coexistence of Religious and Secular Systems:** The coexistence of Islamic law and secularism in North Macedonia illustrates the potential for religious and secular systems to operate in parallel. While tensions and misunderstandings exist, the Muslim community has largely succeeded in maintaining its religious practices within the constraints of a secular legal and social framework.

6.2. Broader Implications

The case of North Macedonia provides valuable insights into the broader question of religious coexistence in secular societies. It highlights the importance of:

- **Flexibility and Dialogue:** The ability of religious communities to adapt their practices to a secular context, combined with open dialogue between religious and secular institutions, is essential for fostering mutual understanding and coexistence.
- **Community Empowerment:** Strong community networks and institutions play a crucial role in supporting religious practices and preserving cultural identity, particularly in contexts where formal institutional support is lacking.
- **Legal and Social Reforms:** Secular states can benefit from exploring ways to better accommodate the needs of religious minorities without compromising their secular principles. This

may include legal reforms, public education campaigns, and greater representation of minority communities in decision-making processes.

6.3. Contributions and Future Research

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the practical realities of implementing religious laws in a secular context. By focusing on the lived experiences of Muslims in North Macedonia, it sheds light on the challenges, adaptations, and resilience of a minority community navigating the intersection of religion and secularism.

Future research could build on this study by:

- Examining the experiences of other religious minorities in North Macedonia or similar secular states.
- Exploring the role of interfaith dialogue and cooperation in fostering religious coexistence.
- Investigating the impact of globalization and modernization on the practice of Islamic law in secular societies.

6.4. Final Reflection

The experience of the Muslim community in North Macedonia underscores the complexity of religious coexistence in a multicultural and secular world. It reveals the challenges of balancing religious obligations with secular laws, but also the opportunities for creativity, resilience, and mutual understanding. As societies around the world become increasingly diverse, the lessons learned from North Macedonia can serve as a valuable guide for fostering harmony and coexistence in a shared legal and social framework.

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