

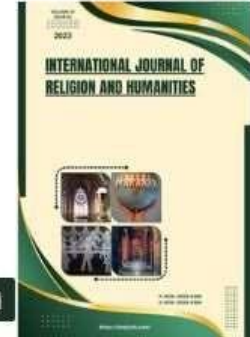
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	<p><b><u>Abul A'la Mawdudi's Religious and Social Thought: Analyzing the Interplay of Religion and Politics</u></b></p>
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## **Abul A‘la Mawdudi’s Religious and Social Thought: Analyzing the Interplay of Religion and Politics**

**Khaled Mahmoud Arif  
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### **Abstract**

*This article explores the religious and social thought of Abul A‘la Mawdudi (1903–1979), one of the most influential Islamic thinkers of the twentieth century, whose intellectual contributions continue to shape discourses on the relationship between religion and politics. By developing the concept of “theo-democracy,” Mawdudi presented an alternative to both secular liberal democracy and authoritarian theocracy. His thought situates Islam as a comprehensive system encompassing political, economic, and social life. This paper critically analyzes Mawdudi’s vision of an Islamic state, his interpretation of sharia as a socio-political framework, and his broader social vision, which includes moral reform, education, and the role of women. It also highlights critiques of his ideas and assesses their legacy in contemporary Muslim-majority societies.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Sexuality, Religion, Intersectionality, Humanities

### **Introduction:**

The twentieth century witnessed profound transformations in Muslim societies, driven by colonial encounters, nationalist struggles, and the quest for modernity. Within this context, Abul A‘la Mawdudi emerged as a leading intellectual and activist, whose works continue to resonate across the Muslim world. He challenged secular and Western paradigms of governance while also rejecting the rigid clericalism that characterized certain strands of Islamic tradition.

Mawdudi’s political theology centered on the conviction that sovereignty belongs exclusively to God (ḥākimiyyat Allāh), and that human political structures must be subordinated to divine law. Yet, he also envisioned participatory institutions, thereby formulating his concept of theo-democracy—a balance between Islamic principles and representative governance. His writings address not only politics, but also morality, social reform, and education, making his intellectual project both comprehensive and controversial. This paper analyzes Mawdudi’s religious and social thought by examining its foundations, theoretical innovations, social dimensions, criticisms, and contemporary relevance.

**Expanded Body Sections (Detailed)**

### **Foundations of Mawdudi's Religious and Political Thought**

Mawdudi's intellectual trajectory must be understood against the backdrop of early twentieth-century South Asia, a period marked by British colonial rule, the decline of Muslim political authority, and the rise of competing ideological movements such as Indian nationalism, secular modernism, and Hindu revivalism. His writings were motivated by the question of how Muslims could retain their religious and cultural distinctiveness while engaging with modernity.

Influenced by earlier Islamic reformers such as Shah Waliullah of Delhi and modernist thinkers like Muhammad Iqbal, Mawdudi emphasized the idea of Islam as a comprehensive system (*nizām-i-islām*). He argued that Islam was not merely a set of rituals or personal beliefs, but a complete socio-political order encompassing governance, economics, law, and morality.

At the center of this vision was the doctrine of *ḥākimiyyat Allāh* (sovereignty of God). For Mawdudi, sovereignty could not rest with monarchs, clerics, or even the unrestrained will of the people. Instead, political legitimacy derived solely from God's law (*sharia*). The rulers and citizens alike were bound to act as God's vicegerents (*khulafā'*), executing divine commands in the temporal realm. This foundational principle laid the groundwork for his later articulation of theo-democracy.

### **Theo-Democracy and the Islamic State**

One of Mawdudi's most original contributions was his concept of theo-democracy. This model sought to reconcile the idea of God's sovereignty with the need for political participation and consultation. For Mawdudi, pure theocracy was untenable because Islam lacked a clergy with exclusive religious authority. At the same time, secular democracy was rejected because it located ultimate authority in human will rather than divine law.

In a theo-democracy, *sharia* functions as the constitutional framework, while the people elect representatives who legislate within its boundaries. The process of *shūrā* (consultation) ensures collective deliberation and prevents authoritarian rule. In this sense, Mawdudi argued that democracy could be Islamized, provided it recognized the supremacy of divine law.

He envisioned institutions such as elected parliaments, independent judiciaries, and executive authorities, all operating under constitutional constraints derived from Islam. His writings, particularly *Islamic Law and Constitution* (1960), detail the legal foundations for such a system. While critics questioned its practical feasibility, the idea of theo-democracy provided a compelling alternative for Muslims seeking modern governance without abandoning their faith.

### **Social Vision and Moral Reform**

Mawdudi's project was not confined to political institutions; it was deeply embedded in a broader vision of social transformation and moral reform. He believed that without ethical regeneration, political structures would fail to reflect Islamic values.

In his writings, he placed strong emphasis on public morality, advocating for the prohibition of usury, alcohol, and immoral entertainment, while encouraging social justice, economic fairness, and community welfare. He argued that the state must not be "neutral" in moral questions, but actively promote virtue (*amr bi'l-ma'rūf*) and prevent vice (*nahy 'an al-munkar*).

Education was central to this vision. Mawdudi criticized colonial educational systems for producing secularized elites detached from Islamic culture. He therefore promoted curricula infused with Islamic values, aiming to produce leaders committed to the Islamic way of life. The Jamaat-e-Islami, which he founded in 1941, became both a political party and a movement of religious propagation (da'wa), mobilizing educated Muslims to implement this social vision.

On gender, Mawdudi's views were conservative. He upheld the principle of modesty (purdah), assigning women primary roles as mothers and educators within the domestic sphere. However, he did not deny women's intellectual capacity or their participation in society, provided it did not compromise Islamic values. His gender prescriptions remain some of the most contested aspects of his thought, with critics accusing him of reinforcing patriarchal norms.

### **Critiques and Controversies**

Mawdudi's thought generated intense debate in both Muslim and non-Muslim intellectual circles. Secular critics charged that his theo-democracy was a veiled form of theocracy that curtailed individual freedoms and minority rights. They argued that subordinating legislation to sharia could undermine pluralism in diverse societies.

Modernist Muslim intellectuals, such as Fazlur Rahman, contended that Mawdudi's literalist approach to sharia neglected the spirit of Islamic ethics and failed to accommodate evolving social realities.

Traditional ulema often regarded him with suspicion, accusing him of reinterpreting Islamic law without sufficient scholarly authority, and of politicizing religion in unprecedented ways.

Despite these critiques, Mawdudi's writings gained traction internationally. His works were translated into Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and other languages, influencing Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and later Islamic revivalist movements in Southeast Asia. Some scholars credit him with laying the intellectual foundations of contemporary political Islam, while others see his ideas as contributing to exclusivism and authoritarianism.

### **Contemporary Relevance and Legacy**

More than four decades after his death, Mawdudi's legacy continues to resonate. His movement, Jamaat-e-Islami, remains active in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, shaping political debates around Islam and governance. His writings remain required reading for Islamist activists across the Muslim world.

In academic discourse, Mawdudi is regarded as a pioneer of Islamic revivalism, often studied alongside thinkers like Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. Scholars highlight his contribution to conceptualizing Islam as a holistic system capable of competing with Western ideologies such as liberalism, socialism, and nationalism.

At the same time, his framework is criticized for its limited adaptability in pluralist societies and its potential to justify authoritarian governance under the banner of religion. Nonetheless, his articulation of theo-democracy continues to be invoked in debates on Islam and democracy, particularly in contexts where Muslims seek to reconcile faith with modern statehood.

Ultimately, Mawdudi's thought bridges tradition and modernity: it preserves the primacy of divine law while embracing institutional structures of representation and accountability. His vision

remains both a source of inspiration and controversy, underscoring the enduring challenge of negotiating religion and politics in the Muslim world.

## **Foundations of Mawdudi's Religious Philosophy**

### **Islam as a Comprehensive Way of Life**

Abul A'la Mawdudi conceived of Islam not merely as a set of rituals or private faith but as a **holistic system** encompassing all spheres of life—spiritual, moral, political, social, and economic. He rejected the Western idea of separating religion from politics or governance. For him, Islam was a *deen* (complete way of life), in which individual morality and collective order were deeply intertwined. He consistently emphasized that Islam provides guidance for personal conduct, family relations, societal organization, law, economics, and politics, thereby offering a framework superior to secular ideologies.

### **The Role of Qur'an and Sunnah**

Mawdudi's intellectual framework rested heavily on the **primacy of the Qur'an and Sunnah** as the ultimate sources of knowledge and guidance. He argued that these texts were not limited to ritual or spiritual matters but also laid down principles for governance, law, and societal reform. He criticized modern Muslim societies for adopting Western ideologies while neglecting the Qur'an and Sunnah as the **foundation of civilization**. For Mawdudi, the revival of Muslim societies required a return to these original sources, interpreted dynamically in light of contemporary challenges.

### **The Concept of Divine Sovereignty (Hakimiyyat)**

At the core of Mawdudi's religious philosophy lies the doctrine of **Hakimiyyat** (Divine Sovereignty). He maintained that ultimate authority belongs solely to Allah, and no human—whether monarch, parliament, or ruler—has the right to legislate independently of divine revelation. Human beings, including rulers, are **vicegerents (khalifah)** who administer God's law on earth. In this vision, the state is neither secular nor purely theocratic but a theo-democracy, where sovereignty rests with God, but governance is carried out by the people through consultation (*shura*) within the framework of Shari'ah.

## **Religion and Politics: The Doctrine of an Islamic State**

### **Vision of Political Islam and Rejection of Secularism**

Abul A'la Mawdudi firmly opposed the Western principle of **secularism**, which advocates a separation between religion and politics. In his view, such a separation distorted the very essence of Islam, which he defined as a comprehensive way of life regulating both private and public spheres. For Mawdudi, politics could not be divorced from religion because governance itself was a form of worship if conducted according to divine law. He envisioned **political Islam** as the embodiment of divine guidance in statecraft, where laws and policies were grounded in the Qur'an and Sunnah, ensuring both moral order and justice.

## **The Theocratic-Democratic Model of Governance (Theo-Democracy)**

Mawdudi rejected both **absolute theocracy**—where power is monopolized by clergy—and **Western liberal democracy**, which rests on human sovereignty. Instead, he introduced the concept of theo-democracy. This model combined divine sovereignty with **collective consultation (shura)** and public accountability. In Mawdudi's framework:

**Sovereignty** belongs exclusively to God (Allah).

**Legislation** must align with the Qur'an and Sunnah, leaving no room for laws contrary to divine injunctions.

**Citizens** (the Muslim community) act as vicegerents responsible for implementing divine law, with rulers serving as trustees (amanah).

This system, according to Mawdudi, protected societies from tyranny while preserving moral integrity by ensuring that both rulers and the ruled remained bound by divine law.

### **Relationship Between Shari'ah and State Institutions**

Mawdudi argued that the **Shari'ah** must form the constitutional and legal foundation of the Islamic state. Institutions such as the parliament, judiciary, and executive were legitimate only insofar as they functioned within the boundaries of Islamic law.

**Parliament:** Could deliberate and legislate, but only on matters not explicitly covered by the Qur'an and Sunnah, and even then, within Shari'ah principles.

**Judiciary:** Held the responsibility to safeguard Islamic law, ensuring that no legislation or action contradicted divine sovereignty.

**Executive:** Functioned as an agent of the community in implementing divine law, accountable both to God and the people.

This balance between divine guidance and institutional governance reflected Mawdudi's belief in the **fusion of moral and political authority**, which he considered essential for an authentic Islamic order.

### **Critique of Western Ideologies and Modernity**

#### **Rejection of Nationalism, Secularism, and Western Liberal Thought**

Abul A'la Mawdudi viewed **Western ideologies** as fundamentally flawed because they displaced divine sovereignty with human authority. He was especially critical of **nationalism**, which he regarded as a divisive construct that fragmented the unity of the Muslim ummah. In his thought, the Qur'an emphasized a universal brotherhood of believers that transcended race, language, or territory. Similarly, he rejected **secularism** for stripping religion from public life, thereby reducing

Islam to mere ritual. Western **liberalism**, with its focus on individual autonomy, was also condemned for eroding moral values and promoting materialism at the expense of spiritual well-being.

### **Response to Socialism, Capitalism, and Democracy in Western Terms**

**Mawdudi analyzed dominant Western socio-economic and political systems with a critical lens:**

**Capitalism:** He argued that capitalism produced inequality, exploitation, and moral decay by placing profit above justice and compassion.

**Socialism/Communism:** Although he acknowledged socialism's concern for economic justice, he criticized its atheistic foundation and denial of spiritual dimensions of life. For him, communism replaced one form of materialism (capitalist) with another (collectivist).

**Western Democracy:** While valuing public participation and consultation, he rejected the Western model where sovereignty belonged to the people. In his view, absolute human sovereignty contradicted Islam's principle of Hakimiyyat (divine sovereignty).

Mawdudi's critique was not just rejectionist; he engaged deeply with Western concepts to show their internal contradictions and incompatibility with an Islamic worldview.

### **Efforts to Construct an Islamic Alternative**

In response to these ideological currents, Mawdudi sought to **construct a distinctly Islamic alternative:**

He envisioned an **Islamic economic system** based on principles of zakat, prohibition of interest (riba), and ethical commerce, balancing equity with individual initiative.

Politically, he proposed theo-democracy, where governance would embody collective participation but remain firmly grounded in divine law.

Socially, he argued for a **moral community** centered on justice, modesty, and accountability to God.

Through works such as *Towards Understanding Islam and Islamic Law and Constitution*, he articulated a comprehensive vision where Islam stood as a **complete civilization**, not merely a religion. His project was not isolationist but rather **competitive with modern ideologies**, offering Islam as a universal system capable of addressing modern challenges without compromising faith.

## **Social Reform and Moral Order**

### **Emphasis on Social Justice and Ethical Transformation**

Abul A‘la Mawdudi placed **social justice** at the heart of his reformist vision. For him, Islam was not only a faith but also a **moral project** that sought to establish justice (‘adl) and compassion (ihsan) within society. He believed that exploitation, inequality, and corruption were the products of human systems not guided by divine law. Mawdudi argued that true justice could only be realized when **Shari‘ah governed all aspects of life**, regulating economic relations, social conduct, and political authority. Ethical transformation was equally central—individuals had to cultivate honesty, humility, and accountability to God, while communities had to foster mutual responsibility and collective solidarity.

### **Views on Education, Family Structure, and Gender Roles**

- **Education:** Mawdudi saw education as the primary vehicle for cultivating moral consciousness and producing a new generation committed to Islamic values. He emphasized an **integrated educational system** where modern sciences were taught alongside Qur’anic principles, ensuring that Muslims could engage with contemporary challenges without losing their faith.
- **Family Structure:** He regarded the family as the foundational unit of the Islamic social order. Strong family ties, parental authority, and intergenerational respect were essential for preserving moral integrity. For him, the family was the first site of socialization, where values of piety, modesty, and discipline were instilled.

**Gender Roles:** While often criticized as conservative, Mawdudi articulated a vision in which men and women had **complementary roles**. He emphasized modesty and moral responsibility, advocating restrictions on gender mixing in public life. However, he also acknowledged women’s rights in education, property, and spiritual development, while insisting that their primary role was within the family as nurturers of future generations.

### **Balancing Tradition and Modernity**

Mawdudi’s approach to reform was marked by an attempt to **balance tradition with modernity**. He opposed blind imitation of Western models (taqlid al-gharb) but also rejected rigid traditionalism that ignored contemporary realities. His method was to **reinterpret classical Islamic principles** in light of modern conditions, ensuring that Islam remained dynamic and relevant. For instance, while defending the authority of Shari‘ah, he encouraged Muslims to engage with modern science, technology, and administration—provided they did not contradict Islamic values. This balancing act made his thought appealing to many Muslims who sought a middle path between secular modernity and unyielding conservatism.

## **Legacy and Influence in Contemporary Muslim Societies Role in Shaping Islamic Movements Worldwide**

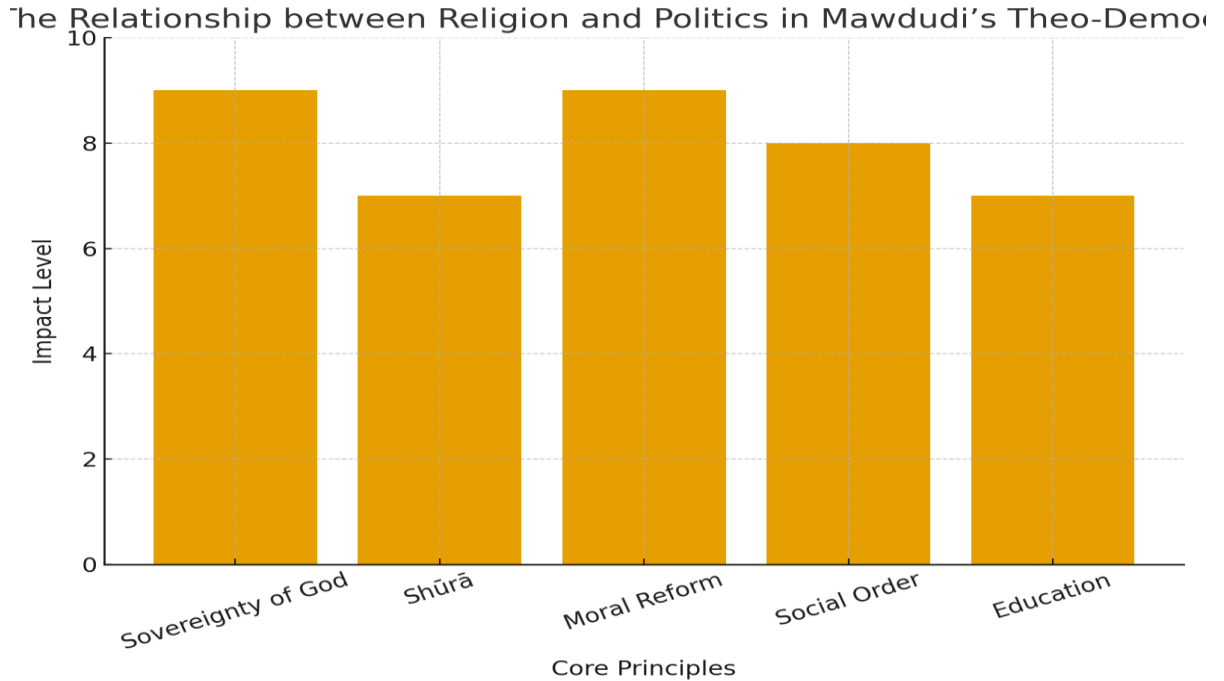
Abul A‘la Mawdudi’s ideas left a **profound mark on Islamic revivalist movements** across the Muslim world. Through the establishment of Jamaat-e-Islami (1941), he pioneered the concept of a modern Islamic political party rooted in ideological activism. This model was later emulated by groups in the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt drew parallels between their own struggle and Mawdudi’s project of establishing an Islamic order. His works, translated into Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and English, became central reading for activists seeking to fuse religious values with political struggle. In this sense, Mawdudi functioned as both a **theorist and organizer** of political Islam.

### **Intellectual Impact on Political Islam in South Asia and Beyond**

In **South Asia**, Mawdudi’s intellectual impact was especially significant. His insistence on Islam as a comprehensive system influenced the debates on Pakistan’s constitutional development in the 1950s and 1960s. He pressed for the **Objectives Resolution (1949)** to enshrine the principle of divine sovereignty in Pakistan’s constitution. His critique of secular nationalism provided an ideological foundation for those who opposed India’s secular model and sought a distinctly Islamic identity for Pakistan. Beyond South Asia, his writings inspired Islamist thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb in Egypt and Ali Shariati in Iran, contributing to a broader **global discourse on Islamism** that shaped the second half of the 20th century.

### **Continuing Debates on Compatibility with Pluralism and Democracy**

Mawdudi’s legacy remains the subject of **ongoing debate**. Supporters argue that his model of theocracy provides a unique synthesis, where divine sovereignty safeguards moral order while popular consultation ensures accountability. Critics, however, contend that his framework risks curtailing pluralism, minority rights, and democratic freedoms by subordinating them to a rigid interpretation of Shari‘ah. In contemporary contexts—whether in Pakistan, Turkey, or the broader Muslim world—questions persist about whether Mawdudi’s vision can accommodate the complexities of **modern pluralistic societies** and globalized democratic norms. His ideas continue to inspire both revivalist movements seeking to implement Islamic governance and reformist thinkers who reinterpret his thought for more inclusive political frameworks.



### Summary

Abul A'la Mawdudi remains a seminal figure in the intellectual history of modern Islam. His concept of theo-democracy attempted to reconcile Islamic principles with modern governance, offering a distinctive response to both secularism and authoritarian religious rule. While admired for articulating a coherent vision of Islamic politics, Mawdudi has also been criticized for potentially fostering exclusivist and authoritarian tendencies. His emphasis on moral reform, education, and sharia law underscores his holistic vision of Islam as a complete way of life.

Today, Mawdudi's ideas continue to influence Islamist movements and academic debates on political Islam. By situating his thought within historical and contemporary frameworks, this paper underscores the enduring significance—and contested nature—of his legacy.

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