



Keep religion and state separate, says scholar

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Religion could “very easily” become a tool of the state if the two entities are not separated, a prominent Turkish scholar says, adding that it could lead to a single interpretation of the faith.

Mustafa Akyol said this could lead to a government imposing its beliefs on the rest.

“In Malaysia, the official religious view is Islam. Which Islam? Well it’s not Shia Islam for sure. Ask the Shia Muslims in Malaysia and they are not very happy,” he said in a webinar hosted by the International Islamic University Malaysia.

The Shia sect, with a substantial following in Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Bahrain, Lebanon and several parts of Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Pakistan, is the second largest branch of Islam.

But its teachings are labelled as deviant by Malaysia’s Islamic authorities, who have in the past raided the private religious events of its adherents.

Fatwas have been issued in most states declaring Shia Muslims as deviant, while mosques in Selangor have for years included a prayer condemning the school of thought during Friday sermons.

Likewise, Sunni Muslims in Iran – a theocratic state where a majority of its citizens are Shia Muslim – will complain of discrimination, he said.

Governments, Akyol said, should focus on protecting the rights of citizens, regardless of “whoever they are” be they Shia or Sunni Muslims or Ahmadis.

Akyol, a senior fellow on Islam and modernity at the Cato Institute, a US-based libertarian think tank, said that if one believed in their religion, there was no need for the state to administer it.

“We need the state to protect us from theft. We need the state to build highways. But religion is our faith, why do you need to ‘officialise’ our faith?” Akyol said, adding that he supported the separation of state and religion, but with full freedom for religious communities.

Akyol said religion in the pre-modern world was inevitably linked to the state, adding that was the case in Christianity and traditional Islam.

But he said at some point Christians realised how “terrible” the consequences were, noting that the idea of the separation of church and state emerged in Europe with thinkers like John Locke after seeing all the persecution of the heretics in the name of religion.

“I think we are having a similar crisis right now where official religious doctrines and states upholding a certain view of religion are inevitably persecuting others and discriminating against them.

“I think it is the same lesson we have to get.”

Akyol also said it was unfair to demand for freedom when one was a minority but crush freedom when in the majority, adding “there was no virtue in that”.