



From Essentialism to Multiplicity: Rethinking Secularism, Sharia, and Democracy in the Globalized World – Turkey as a Model

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من الجوهرانية إلى التعددية: إعادة التفكير في العلمنة، والشريعة، والديمقراطية في العالم المعولم – تركيا أنموذجاً

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Abstract:

Secularism remains a polysemic and contested concept, operating across institutional, governmental, and individual-societal levels. Contemporary debates regarding secularism in Muslim-majority societies are fundamentally polarized between two distinct theoretical paradigms: the essentialist perspective, which views Sharia as a fixed and immutable set of binding norms derived from sacred texts, and the multiplicity perspective, which interprets Sharia as a dynamic framework subject to evolving human interpretation and ongoing social change. This paper critically examines the complex compatibility among Islam, Sharia, and democracy. It contends that essentialist interpretations, as championed by scholars such as Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis, tend to foster civilizational clashes, human rights violations, and religious conflicts. Conversely, the multiplicity perspective offers a viable, constructive pathway for establishing liberal, secular governance within Muslim-majority nations. Through a rigorous theoretical and comparative analysis, the study incorporates three foundational dimensions: first, the socio-political impacts of migration and globalization as inescapable drivers of societal heterogeneity; second, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im's conceptual framework, as articulated in *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Sharia* (2008), which redefines Sharia as a methodological approach rather than a rigid legal code; and third, a comparative case study examining the incorporation of Sharia in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey, drawing upon the empirical insights of Otto (2010) and Freedom House reports. The analytical findings indicate that essentialist models—predominant in Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, in Egypt, where Sharia is constitutionally enshrined as a primary source of legislation—significantly undermine legal pluralism and minority rights. In stark contrast, the Turkish model established under Atatürk demonstrates that a Muslim-majority nation can successfully adopt institutional secularism, defined as principled state neutrality rather than hostility toward religion, while concurrently preserving the cultural legitimacy necessary for progressive social change. The study concludes that liberal multiculturalism,

firmly rooted in the multiplicity perspective, is an absolute imperative for attaining sustainable peace in an increasingly globalized world. Consequently, it advocates for a progressive, liberal reinterpretation of Sharia to gracefully accommodate secularism, democratic principles, minority protections, and universal human rights, while proposing the Turkish model as a pragmatic blueprint for reform in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Keywords: Secularism, Essentialism, Multiplicity Perspective, Liberal Multiculturalism, Sharia, Islamic State, Globalization, Turkey, An-Na'im.

المخلص

تظل العلمانية مفهوماً متعدد الدلالات وإشكالياً، حيث تتجسد على المستويات المؤسسية، والحكومية، والفردية المجتمعية. تنقسم النقاشات المعاصرة المتعلقة بالعلمانية في المجتمعات ذات الأغلبية المسلمة بحدّة بين نموذجين نظريين رئيسيين: المنظور الجوهري الذي ينظر إلى الشريعة باعتبارها مجموعة ثابتة وغير قابلة للتغيير من المعايير الملزمة المستمدة من النصوص المقدسة، ومنظور التعددية الذي يفسر الشريعة بوصفها إطاراً ديناميكياً يخضع للتأويل البشري المتجدد والتغير الاجتماعي المستمر. تبحث هذه الورقة بصورة نقدية في مدى تعقيد توافق الإسلام والشريعة والديمقراطية، مجادلة بأن التفسيرات الجوهريّة، كما يتبناها باحثون أمثال صامويل هنتنغتون وبرنارد لويس، تغذي الصدمات الحضارية، وانتهاكات حقوق الإنسان، والصراعات الدينية. في المقابل، يقدم منظور التعددية مساراً قابلاً للتطبيق وبناءً لإرساء دعائم الحكم الليبرالي والعلماني في البلدان ذات الأغلبية المسلمة. ومن خلال تحليل نظري ومقارن دقيق، توظف الدراسة ثلاثة أبعاد أساسية: أولاً، التأثيرات الاجتماعية والسياسية للهجرة والعولمة بوصفهما محركين حتميين للتنوع المجتمعي؛ ثانياً، الإطار النظري لعبد الله أحمد النعيم في كتابه "الإسلام والدولة العلمانية: التفاوض حول مستقبل الشريعة" (2008)، والذي يعيد تعريف الشريعة كمنهجية تحليلية وليست قانوناً جامداً؛ وثالثاً، دراسة حالة مقارنة تفحص إدماج الشريعة في كل من المملكة العربية السعودية ومصر وتركيا، مستندة إلى الرؤى التجريبية لدراسات أوتو (2010) وتقارير فريدوم هاوس. تشير النتائج التحليلية إلى أن النماذج الجوهريّة-السائدة في السعودية وبدرجة أقل في مصر، حيث تُدسّر الشريعة كمصدر رئيسي للتشريع- تقوض بشكل كبير التعددية القانونية وحقوق الأقليات. وعلى النقيض من ذلك، يثبت النموذج التركي المؤسس في عهد أتاتورك أن الدولة ذات الأغلبية المسلمة قادرة على تبني العلمانية المؤسسية بنجاح، والمتمثلة في الحياد المبدئي للدولة لا عداؤها للدين، مع الحفاظ في الوقت ذاته على الشرعية الثقافية اللازمة للتغيير الاجتماعي التقدمي. تخلص الدراسة إلى أن التعددية الثقافية الليبرالية، المتجذرة راسخاً في منظور التعددية، تمثل ضرورة حتمية لتحقيق السلام المستدام في عالم يتزايد فيه التباين والاتصال. وعليه، تدعو الدراسة إلى إعادة قراءة ليبرالية وتجديدية للشريعة لاستيعاب العلمانية، والمبادئ الديمقراطية، وحماية الأقليات، وحقوق الإنسان العالمية، مقترحة النموذج التركي كنموذج عملي يحتذى به للإصلاح في دول مثل السعودية ومصر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العلمانية، الجوهريّة، منظور التعددية، التعددية الثقافية الليبرالية، الشريعة، الدولة الإسلامية، العولمة، تركيا، النعيم.

Introduction

Secularism is a term that is regarded to be polysemic as well as contested in nature. It is predicated on the view that the religions of the world are, or ought to be, neither public nor social. In such a state, manifestations of religious belief are kept away from civic functions and places, which are under the aegis of the state. In understanding the full picture of secularism, there are three aspects at which secularism must prevail. The first is explained at the Institutional level of a state, which means that political regime that will be considered to be secularist in nature must ensure that governmental legitimacy (popular sovereignty), constitutional principles, and judicial public law procedures are shunned from any set of established religious rules or any institutional religious control.

The second aspect is known as the governmental level, which explains that ‘separation between religion and state’ implies an adequate level of mutual dissociation between the state and the religion particularly at the institutional level. According to this principle, while institutionalized religion does not interfere with the governmental sphere, the state tolerates and recognizes an autonomously free sphere to religion. Through this way, the state not only ensures the individual freedom of religious worship and of conscience but also promotes religious pluralism in a given society (Stepan, 2000). And the last aspect is known as individual and societal level, which explains that modernization would inevitably result not only in the decline of religiosity (faith and belief) at the individual level but also in the diminution of religion’s role in influencing public life and space.

There are two theoretical discussions concerning the meaning of secularism, which are essentialism and multiplicity perspective. As explain in Gallup extensive survey between 2001 and 2007, on compatibility between Sharia and democracy. Essentialist perspective considers Sharia to be a fixed set of binding norms found in authoritative sacred texts representing the essence of an Islamic civilization, an Islamic culture, an Islamic legal system. The protagonists to this approach are Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington. While multiplicity perspective recognizes that social change may bring new textual interpretations as well as different practices. Rather than seeing Islamic civilization, culture and law as having one clear, identifiable core, the second perspective is prepared to see a highly differentiated picture. Protagonists of this approach assume different concepts of Sharia in different contexts. This is the multiplicity perspective.

Furthermore, some authors argues that the practice and existence of essentialism can be found in the ideas of multiculturalism by advocating that it promotes “essentialism”, reifying the identities and practices of minority groups. According to Anne Phillips, multiculturalism “exaggerates the internal unity of cultures, solidifies differences that are currently more fluid, and makes people from other cultures seem more exotic and distinct than they really are”. Multiculturalism has therefore become a “cultural straitjacket” rather than a “cultural liberator”, and requires “radical overhaul” if it is to serve emancipatory goals. It was argued that If essentialism is to be blamed, multiculturalism is the cause of the blame according to these scholars.

Anti-multiculturalists, such as Brian Barry (2001) and Samuel Huntington (2004), say that multiculturalists’ ideas are inherently illiberal whereby multiculturalism is based on a repudiation of Enlightenment values of individual freedom, democratic citizenship and universal human rights, and it is precisely this repudiation of core Enlightenment principles which explains why multiculturalists seek to challenge traditional Western models of national citizenship in the name of cultural difference. In order to save multiculturalism from these sharp critics, an approach of liberal multiculturalism which explains the effectiveness of multiples perspective and accept that multiculturalism is rooted in familiar liberal-democratic ideals of equality, freedom and citizenship, and indeed aims precisely to address the many ways in which full equality and citizenship are denied to minorities. This means that recognizing the minority group in a country is not enough as multiculturalism claims but fair treatment and practice of liberal principles justify the different between essentialism, multiculturalism and multiplicity perspective to secularism.

Considering the two perspectives, I can find out that liberal multiculturalism and multiplicity perspective would be an ideal form of a secular state in the present world of globalization. The sources of conflict will be civilizational clash according to Samuel Huntington thesis on clash of civilization. This civilization will be basically a matter of religion, which will bring conflict between the West and Middle East because, Islam are not and can never be compatible with democratic liberal principles. If this essentialist approach of Huntington dominates the global society, the world will not be a better place for us to live because there shall always be mixture

of culture, religions and if there can never be merged of religion, then religious conflict will always prevail, which will make peace to lack in the world. This project aims to argue that essentialist perspective will be harmful for any state in the world and it is high time for the so called Islamic state to recognize multiplicity perspective and give room for minority rights, freedom of religion, respect of human rights and liberal multiculturalism. Generally, it was found out that essentialist perspective of a state is commonly found at Islamic states with the practice of Sharia law, which argues on the fact that the practice of Sharia in the Islamic states negates the practice of liberal multiculturalism and multiplicity perspective. But this project argues for a better liberal interpretation of Sharia to incorporate the right understanding of a secular state and compatibility of Islam with democracy in order to facilitate multiplicity perspectives of a secular state as propounded by Gallup in Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt using Turkey as a model of how a Muslim state can be secular.

In order to support the multiplicity perspective, this project aims to discuss the following factors as facilitating tools toward the need for multiplicity perspective in every state. Firstly, migration and globalization shall be defined in order to see how the world has been globalized and the inevitability of heterogeneous society at every country in the world. This will suggest the need to adopt a multiplicity perspective in order to ensure peace and how essentialist perspective has led to religious conflict in the world. Secondly, the conception of Islam and the secular state according to Abdullahi Ahmed AM-NA'IM book shall be discussed in order to review how Islam has the hope of adopting democratic principles and recognizing multiplicity perspectives. And lastly, some cases of a secular Islamic state (Turkey) and essentialist Islamic states (Egypt and Saudi Arabia) shall be discussed in order to see how these two approaches are incorporated in some states in the world.

Migration and Globalization

In explaining the reasons why every society should be guided by multiplicity perspective, there is need to review the meaning of migration and globalization and how these had affected the population of every society whereby virtually every society in the world is now culturally mix with different religion. Though aside these two factors, many societies have developed in their histories to be heterogeneous, whereby there are different ethnic groups and religions in a single society and in order for them to survive with each other, the state has to be secular from multiplicity perspective. Migration is a complex process covering population movement across societal boundaries, either within or between nation states, affecting gaining and losing societies, covering temporary and permanent movement and includes asylum-seekers and economic migrants as well as illegal migration. The basic question is whether migration has more benefit than loss to the host country? Huysmans sees three dangers to societal security through migration: public order may be undermined; cultural identity may be challenged, and the domestic labour market may be destabilized. Cultural proximity is concerned with the extent to which the migrant community is perceptibly different, most notably in terms of race, language and religion to the indigenous society, and also the perceptions of the host society about how easily they can assimilate the new group (Neil P.E.O, 2006).

Through the effect of migration, many societies have been mixed and if care is not taken, there can religious or ethnic conflict, probably xenophobic attacks and genocidal conflict in the society. But with the liberal ideas of multiplicity perspective to provide some basic rights for the minority population and recognition of a secular state whereby the issues of religion is kept away from the affairs of state and made to be individual personal choice without conflicting each other than migration might have effect on the society but it would be a limited issues and religious differences among the people would not lead to war in the society. It is very hard in this present world to find a homogenous society without some minority ethnic groups and

religious differences. Society insecurity comes when the identity and religion of a particular ethnic group is threatened by another dominant ethnic groups.

Another factor that must be considered in order to prioritize the need for multiplicity perspective in a society is the influence of globalization that aims to reduce the whole world to a connected society. According to Anthony McGrew (1990), globalization has to do with multiplicity of linkages and interconnections that transcend the nation states (and by implication the societies), which make up the modern world system. It defines a process through which events, decisions and activities in one part of the world can come to have a significant consequence for individuals and communities in quite distant parts of the globe. Cerny G. (1997), explains further that Globalization is defined here as a set of economic and political structures and processes deriving from the changing character of the goods and assets that comprise the base of the international political economy, in particular, the increasing structural differentiation of those goods and assets. Mrak M. (2000: p.3) summarizes the basic features that can generally be found in almost every definition of globalization to be as follow; globalization involves numerous features, but the following three seem to be the main engine driving global economic integration: (a) internationalization of production accompanied by changes in the structure of production, (b) expansion of international trade in trade and services, and (c) widening and deepening of international capital flows.

The influence of globalization in the world today has made it difficult for any state to be monolithic in nature. Advancement in communication and transportation increased the rate at which people can communicate and move from country to another. Essentialist perspective can only flourish in the traditional age whereby there is no mean of transportation and to cross boarder might be difficult. But in this era, where there is no limited issues to a particular society and problem in a society will affect the neighbouring countries and international system as a whole due to the effect of globalization. The need for multiplicity perspective of a secular state only provides us with solution to cultural and religious conflict that is bond to happen during this globalized era.

Islam and the Secular State

According to Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im (2008) wrote the book titled *Islam and the Secular State Negotiating the Future of Sharia* discussing the meaning of a secular state and how interpretation of Sharia can be made to incorporate democratic principles for the Islamic state. It is a general belief that an Islamic state due to the practice of Sharia law can never be secular states and adopt multiplicity perspective but considering the book written by this author, It was made known how Islamic and democracy can function together. According to An-Na'im (2008), A secular state is defined as neutral state regarding to religious doctrine, one that does not claim or pretend to enforce Sharia (the religious law of Islam) simply because compliance with Sharia cannot be coerced by fear of state institutions or faked to appease their officials. A secular state gives people freedom to choose any religion of their choice. The so-called Islamic state coercively enforces Sharia to destroy the foundational role of Islam in the socialization of children and the sanctification of social institutions and relationships. Sharia principles cannot be enacted and enforced by the state as public law and public policy solely on the grounds that they are believed to be part of Sharia. If such enactment and enforcement is attempted, the outcome will necessarily be the political will of the state and not the religious law of Islam. According to Jonathan Fox (2006) article titled *World Separation of Religion and State Into the 21st Century* examines the extent of separation of religion and state (SRAS) and found out that only United State has a no state support for religion and no state restrictions on religion. This study argues for separation of religion and state, which is no government involvement in religion (GIR) as a multiplicity idea to encourage the free right of individual to practice different religion and support the fact that different religions can work together in a state. The

findings also show that GIR has increased slightly between 1990 and 2002, economic development is associated with higher levels of GIR, states with Muslim majorities have higher levels of government support for religion, and democracies have higher levels of SRAS than do autocratic states. This study defines SRAS as no government support for religion and no government interference in the religious practices of both the majority and minority religions in a state. But it argues also that Government restriction and regulation of minority religions is often a sign of the dominant religion's influence in a state. Also, any government involvement in religious issues contradicts the argument that religion is an epiphenon.

According to secularization thesis, modernization theory argues that several of trends inherent in modernity would lead to the demise of primordial factors such as religion and ethnicity in politics. These processes included mass education, growing rates of literacy, urbanization, economic development, pluralism, the increasing importance of modern secular social and political institutions, and advancements in science and technology. Sociology's secularization paradigm predicted the demise of religion as a social factor for similar reasons. It is important to note that many of these predicted causes of religion's demise are linked to economic modernization. But there have been many arguments concerning this prediction that as modernization progresses, religion shall demise, some authors have argued that Failed efforts at modernization by secular governments have increased religions' legitimacy as an alternative ruling ideology (Juergensmeyer, 1993). All of this is especially true of religious fundamentalists (Appleby, 2000). Modernity has seen increased mass participation in politics, allowing religious individuals to place religion on the political agenda (Rubin, 1994, pp. 22-23). Modern communications technology has enabled religious groups to better coordinate and exports their ideas. Also, modernity has increased the ability of both religious and political institutions to involve themselves in more areas of life, causing more clashes between them (Shupe, 1990, pp. 22-26). It can be concluded with this analysis that modernization will not demise religion but probably decline its effectiveness in order to accommodate some liberal principles and multiplicity approach.

An-Na'im (2008) argues in his book that Sharia law can be defined from two different perspective, which are Sharia as a concept and secondly, the methodology for determining the normative content of Sharia. As a concept, this term refers to the religious law of Islam in general, which is derived from human interpretations of the Quran and Sunna of the Prophet. As a methodology applied in practice states the interpretations of Sharia according to authoritative formulations of Sharia in a particular time and place. Since human constructs any methodology of interpretation, then it means the content of Sharia can change over time, and alternative methodologies can come to be accepted and applied by Muslims. This aspect is what the author explained to be "negotiating the future of Sharia." The author further explains the processes of social transformation whereby Islam, Sharia and State can be culturally transformed to accommodate democratic principles, which can also be regarded as multiplicity perspective. The author was very much concern about the way Sharia can be re-interpreted to function along with liberal principles like Turkey contrary to the essentialist perspectives of the traditional or classical interpretation of Sharia which constituted the national law of countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

To further more on the possibility of multiplicity perspective in Islamic states, the author discussed the process of transformation in the following ways; firstly Culture and Identity: Though cultures may seem identifiable and distinguishable from each other, but each of them is characterized by internal diversity, propensity to change, and mutual influence in its relationship with other cultures. . Shared norms, customs, and histories within a group bring coherence to the notion of a common culture even when there are overlaps with other groups. Both Culture and Identity can be transformed to accommodate differences and work together

with in a multicultural society. This might help the Islamic countries to redefine the definition of their Islamic Culture and Identity in order to recognize this differences among people.

Secondly, Cultural Legitimacy for Social Change is explained as the possibilities of diversity among and within cultures and the need to secure the possibilities of contestation as well as consensus within and among them emphasize why social change needs to be culturally legitimate. Once we realize that our ways of being and doing things are not in fact the universal norm, sometimes not even for everyone within our own community, we will appreciate how difficult it is to speak of universal values or norms without dealing with the reality of permanent and inherent cultural diversity. Thirdly, is the Role of Human Agency, which explains that there is need for action at the state as well as the societal level, and that these two dimensions of change should be complementary and mutually reinforcing. State alone cannot transform the society to accommodate diversities but whatever material resources and coercive powers are available to the elites who control the state, they depend on the willingness of the general population to accept or at least acquiesce to the state's actions.

In order to change the perception of the Islamic states like Saudi Arabia and Egypt about the essentialist perspective of Sharia laws, it must be made known that Secularism does not mean the exclusion of religion from the public life of a society, which is the misconception that many Muslims tend to be enemy of the concept. The ability of a mediating secularism to unite people despite religious and philosophical differences depends on its making minimal moral claims on the community and its members. To some extent, Turkey can be a good example of a secular Muslim majority state in the world. This justifies the fact secularism is not a dismissal of any religion but in order to accommodate diversity of religion in the society, government should not intervene in religious matters because any intervention from government whether to restrict or to increase any religion will divide the society.

Sharia Incorporated in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey.

According to the book published in 2005 by Freedom House titled Radical Islam's rules argues that since the 1980s Muslim countries have started replacing their laws with extreme and barbarous 'Sharia'. On the basis of seven country studies it claims that Sharia, as it has been applied in those countries, undercuts legal systems, frequently employs cruel punishments, threatens Muslims who are not part of the dominant group, and reduces women to secondary status. All states, where such laws have been imposed, it says, produce terrorism. Freedom House thus advised the United States government to wage war against the Islamist ideology in general and against the forces that supposedly promote Sharia (Otto J.M. 2010, p.11). This is to argue that the practice of Sharia, which could be regarded under essentialist perspective, is against the Human Rights Standard with several harsh treatments imposed on people and treatment of minority religion in the country.

Sharia as a Muslim law is said to be developed by Muslim scholars in different ways that cannot be regarded as a fixed idea that cannot be changed. Scholars like Vikør (2005: 1) argues that there is no such thing as a, that is one, Islamic law, a text that clearly and unequivocally establishes all the rules of a Muslim's behaviour. There is a great divergence of views, not just between opposing currents, but also between individual scholars within the legal currents, of exactly what rules belong to Islamic law. Another scholar of Islamic law, Peters (1997: 260) wonders if Sharia is a legal system at all because such a diversity of opinions exists next to one another and even within the schools of law there are often differences of opinion'. In respect to this Otto J.M. (2010, p.25) explains four different classifications of Sharia, which includes; divine abstract Sharia, classical Sharia, historically transferred Sharia, and contemporary Sharia.

The various ways whereby Sharia has been incorporated in Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey were explained by Otto J.M. (2010) book titled "*Sharia incorporated: A*

Comparative Overview of the Legal Systems of Twelve Muslim Countries in Past and Present.” Firstly, state is defined as institutions that are supposed to have the authority to make and enforce rules that govern their people. But state became the instrument of enforcing Sharia law on the people. During the 19th centuries, after the independence, the new political elites had to decide how religion should be embodied in ideology, policy, and law. Suddenly nationalist leaders and religious leaders, who had fought side by side in the struggle for independence, became opponents. In this respect, state interference with Sharia became broad and deep. Example of this is that kings of Saudi Arabia, who have always had to rely on support of the powerful religious elite of Wahhabi scholars, proclaimed the Quran and the Sunna to be the country’s ‘constitution’, and as such denied that name to the ‘basic law’ that spells out the organization of that state. And due to this, the country practiced Sharia laws till today. The government of Egypt accepted in its constitution the principles of Sharia to be ‘the source of legislation’, but ultimately decided not to adopt its substantive criminal law, and to modernize its family law. But in Turkey the new elite under Atatürk removed Sharia from the Turkish legal system and kept tight control on religion through the Diyanet, the state office for religious affairs (p.27). In this respect, Saudi Arabia became an extreme Muslim country with high rate of Sharia practices as well as Egypt, which is not as severe as that of Saudi Arabia but Turkey took a different path and decided to be a secular state from the beginning.

Conclusion and Discussion

Essentialist perspective justifies the practice of Sharia law in Muslim countries with an excuse that Sharia is part of people's culture and it cannot change to accommodate any other religion. This project argues that the practice of Sharia law violates Human rights and imposes cruel corporal punishments on the people. This idea has led many Muslims to become fundamentalist and terrorism has become a stereotype for mostly classical Muslims. This idea as well can lead to violent-conflict as it was explained by Samuel Huntington civilization clash. The terrorist attack of 9/11 was considered to be a civilization clash between the USA and the Muslim Middle East. Essentialist perspective will produce nothing but war though it might be useful to promote oneness among the Muslim countries and reproduction of Muslim society. But the world has become a globalised environment considering the effect of globalization and migration in every society in the world today, it will make a hard living for minority population with different religion to survive in the world.

This Projects support multiplicity perspective of a secular state, which is defined as liberal multiculturalism according to some authors. This allows the recognition of the rights of the minority population, adoption of liberal principles, and respect for human rights. And this project concludes that If Turkey a Muslim majority state can be a secular state to some extent, liberal interpretation of Sharia can also be adopted by states like Saudi Arabia and Egypt using Turkey as a role model to become secular states.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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