

Justifying the Sacred through the Secular: Evaluating *Gema Dari Menara*'s Arguments for Religious Prohibitions

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze and evaluate the arguments provided in *Gema Dari Menara* that aim to justify Islamic prohibitions. The first part of this paper will attempt to indicate that the arguments concerning Islam's prohibition of certain activities are surprisingly secular in their justification, in the sense that their reasoning rests on mundane empirical considerations rather than lofty theological exhortations. For instance, pre-marital sex must be prohibited because it would "ruin one's personality and community", Bruneians should not gamble because people who do so "forget their own responsibilities", and alcohol should not be consumed because it can "ruin a sound mind and one's personality". These justifications do not appeal to the divine but instead refer to phenomena that can be observed, measured, and quantified. The second part of this paper will consider the implications of trying to justify absolute religious prohibitions through secular considerations. It will be argued that in doing so the film opens itself to empirical queries that must be addressed for the film to have its desired effect. This paper ultimately draws attention to some of the challenges facing religious apologetics as the social sciences gain prominence.

Introduction

The primary intention behind *Gema Dari Menara* is made clear at the beginning of the film. As the then Head of the Department of Religious Affairs, P. M. Yusuf states, the film:

is part of the government's efforts through the Department of Religious Affairs to give awareness for the Muslim community in Brunei particularly on the importance of holding on to the teaching of Allah in our daily lives.

This point is reiterated by another official at the start of the movie:

Thus, the film *Gema Dari Menara* was produced solely as a measure to explain to the Muslim community about the benefits and functions for those who adhere to the religion and the losses as well as danger to those who ignore the teachings of Allah SWT. Through this film, it is our intention to call all Muslims to uphold and practice the teachings of religion.

In pursuit of this goal, the film attempts to convince Muslims to remain steadfast in the Islamic faith not just through the cautionary tales of Nordin and Noriah, but also through addressing concerns and queries about Islam. Such topics include the rationale for Islam forbidding certain activities, the compatibility of Islamic beliefs with Westernized ways of life, whether Islam is outdated, and how religion can be beneficial to societal harmony.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the film's attempts to justify Islam's prohibition of gambling, consumption of alcohol, and *zinā*. The plan of this paper is as follows. First, I shall present the relevant parts of the film that supply justifications for Islam's prohibitions. Next, I shall provide a breakdown of these arguments and point out how its premises are secular and empirical in nature. In the following two sections I shall evaluate the film's premises and show how they are

made precarious precisely because they are secular and empirical. In the final section I shall consider two potential objections and give my replies to them.

I wish to clarify at the start that this paper is not meant as an attack on Islam's restrictions or on the desire to supply religious guidance through the medium of film. Rather, this paper should be construed as an attempt to show how arguments for religious claims might intersect with secular reasoning and the challenges this entails so that future collaborations between religious scholars and filmmakers are better equipped to reach inquisitive minds.

The purpose of Islam's restrictions

A recurring theme throughout *Gema Dari Menara* concerns the perception that Islam's prohibitions are unnecessary hindrances. For example, Azman laments that "there are still many people who see religion as an obstacle in their lives. They say Islam has too many restrictions" and that "some people are mad when they get punished for doing things that are forbidden by Islam". Similarly, Hassan worries "that confusion over the purposes of religion may lead to disregard of God's orders and restrictions."

In response to this worry, the film's protagonists point out that Islam's restrictions are for humanity's benefit. For instance, when Nordin confronts Azman by asking "Tell me, what can religion give us in life?" Azman responds that

It is Islam that maintains spiritual and physical human perfection. Do you think that the order and prohibition of Islam is devoid of any good purpose? And Islam forbids us to do evil things for our own good. This is where you are wrong, Nordin. You see the orders and restrictions as obstacles in life.

Along the same lines, Hassan states that "The command and prohibition of Islam is to preserve the perfection of human beings as whole. This should really be understood by everyone" and "religion is intended to safeguard the well-being of fellow human beings."

Given that the film intends its viewers to perceive Islam's prohibitions as beneficial to the well-being humanity, it would be helpful to specify exactly what are these benefits. The film does this by addressing three prohibitions: gambling, consumption of alcohol, and *zinā* (*zinā* refers to sexual intercourse committed by a man and a woman who are not married to each other and as such includes both adultery and fornication).

The film's explanations for Islam's prohibition of gambling and alcohol are supplied during site visits organized by the Department of Religious Affairs. In these scenes, a speaker addresses a crowd and explains why these prohibitions must be upheld. Regarding gambling, the speaker informs us that:

Gambling can ruin one's character. People are willing to commit robberies to get money for gambling bets. Gambling often brings poverty and misfortune. Gambling also makes people forget their duty to themselves. Gambling even makes people forget their responsibility to God who created them. A peaceful and happy life always turns into frustration, suffering, and chaos. To avoid these dangers, Islam forbids gambling.

On the consumption of alcohol, the speaker tells us that:

Alcohol can ruin a sound mind. And it can ruin sanity. Alcohol also ruins one's character. Alcohol can make people forget about the responsibilities towards God. When one has forgotten grace and blessing of God and lost his sanity, he has lost his dignity as a human being and all kinds of bad things can happen. So, to avoid these dangers, Islam has forbidden alcohol.

The film's rationale for the prohibition of pre-marital sex is provided in a scene taking place in court where Noriah and Zulkifli are being sentenced for the crime of *zinā* (it is implied that they have engaged in fornication). As the judge explains,

Zinā is very much condemned in Islam because such acts are not beneficial and can even ruin one's character and community. Therefore, people who are here today are required to distance yourselves from any act that is prohibited by Allah's law.

Analyzing the three arguments

For the sake of clarity, we can set out the three arguments provided by the film as to why gambling, alcohol, and *zinā* should be prohibited.

The argument for prohibition of gambling goes as follows:

- (G1) Gambling can ruin one's character.
- (G2) Gambling often brings poverty and misfortune.
- (G3) Gambling causes people to forget their duties to themselves.
- (G4) Gambling causes people to forget their duties to God.
- (G5) Gambling always turns a peaceful and happy life into frustration, suffering, and chaos.
- (G6) Therefore, gambling should be prohibited.

The argument for prohibition of alcohol consumption goes as follows:

- (A1) Alcohol can ruin a sound mind and sanity.
- (A2) Alcohol can ruin one's character.
- (A3) Alcohol causes people to forget their responsibilities towards God.
- (A4) Therefore, consumption of alcohol should be prohibited.

The argument for prohibition of *zinā* goes as follows:

- (D1) *Zinā* can ruin one's character.
- (D2) *Zinā* can ruin one's community.
- (D3) *Zinā* is not beneficial.
- (D4) Therefore, *zinā* should be prohibited.

There are two things worth noting about these three arguments. First, that each of these three arguments are attempts to justify the prohibition of an activity that is otherwise legal and regulated by law in many other countries. The second thing to notice is that most of the premises (with the exception of G4 and A3) are secular, in the sense that their truth is verifiable by secular reasoning rather than by appealing to faith or theology.

To help explain this distinction between secular and theological premises, consider G4 and A3, which together claim that gambling and alcohol causes people to forget their duties or responsibilities towards God. These are theological premises, since to verify the truth of these claims requires answering the question ‘What are our responsibilities towards God?’ Additionally, to assess whether these premises justify the conclusion that certain activities should be prohibited requires answering questions such as ‘What are the ramifications of our relationship with God if we neglect our responsibilities to Him?’ These questions pertain to the nature of God, what He requires from us, our relationship with Him, and what He has revealed to us through divine revelation. In short, they pertain to theology.

Having made this distinction between theological and secular premises, we can see that the remaining premises do not require theological understanding to verify their truth or to assess how well they support their conclusions. To see how these other premises are secular, consider a premise that all three arguments share, namely the premise that these activities can ruin a person’s character (G1, A2, D1). While gambling, alcohol consumption, and extra-marital sex can be identified and quantified, is character something identifiable through secular means?

Character and virtue

Let us start with some background. The notion that we have a duty to cultivate positive character traits has a rich history. It can be traced back to ancient Greeks thinkers such as Plato who called upon humans to seek wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice, to Hinduism’s advocacy of nonviolence, truth, purity, and self-control, and to Confucius who encouraged people to adopt courtesy, generosity, honesty, persistence, and kindness (Pojman & Fieser, 2012, p. 147). These laudable character traits can be called virtues, and a virtue can be defined in general as

a disposition to act, desire, and feel that involves the exercise of judgment and leads to a recognizable human excellence or instance of human flourishing.

Moreover, virtuous activity involves choosing virtue for itself and in light of some justifiable life plan. (Yearley, 1990, p. 13)

The fact that diverse ancient world cultures have been able to identify and prescribe traits of good character already suggests that the ability to recognize and classify virtues is not exclusive to any particular culture or faith. This ability has been further honed in modern times, where in the effort to conduct empirical research on strengths of character, psychologists have identified the following core set of virtues that are acknowledged as important across all human societies (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005):

- wisdom and knowledge—cognitive strengths entailing the acquisition and use of knowledge
- courage—emotional strengths involving the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal
- humanity—interpersonal strengths that involve “tending and befriending” others

- justice—civic strengths underlying healthy community life
- temperance—strengths protecting against excess
- transcendence—strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning

Having identified this core set of virtues, these researchers embarked on measuring character strengths corresponding to these virtues:

To date, we have devised and evaluated (a) focus groups to flesh out the everyday meanings of character strengths among different groups; (b) self-report questionnaires suitable for adults and young people; (c) structured interviews to identify what we call signature strengths; (d) informant reports of how target individuals rise to the occasion (or not) with appropriate strengths of character (e.g., hope when encountering setbacks); (e) a content analysis procedure for assessing character strengths from unstructured descriptions of self and others; (f) strategies for scoring positive traits from archived material like obituaries; and (g) case studies of nominated paragons of specific strengths. (Peterson & Park, 2012, p. 7)

Furthermore, these different methods of measurement show promising reliability and validity:

We have successfully established the internal consistency of our questionnaire measures and their test—retest stability over several months. We have investigated their validity with the known-groups procedure and more generally by mapping out their correlates. (Peterson & Park, 2012, p. 7)

The purpose of this account has been to convince the reader that good character can be identified and measured without recourse to theology. In other words, whether and to what extent someone possesses the virtues of, e.g., humanity or temperance can be determined without answering questions involving the nature of humanity's relationship with the divine or what God has decreed through revelation. This is of course not to claim that theology has nothing to say about virtue, nor that religiosity has nothing to do with being virtuous. After all, these researchers acknowledge that the core virtue of transcendence includes religiousness which they characterize as having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life (Peterson & Park, 2012, p. 6). Does this imply that theology is necessary to make sense of the virtue of transcendence? Not quite, for there is an appreciable difference between the psychologist's questionnaire that asks, 'Do you think God has a plan for you?' and the endeavor to answer the question 'What is God's plan for you?' The former is an attempt to find out what people think through secular and empiricalⁱ methods while the latter is a theological and philosophical query. To be clear, the claim here is merely that good character can be identified and quantified without resorting to theology.

The upshot of showing that good character can be measured without theology is as follows. *Gema Dari Menara* has claimed that there is a causal connection between two kinds of observable and quantifiable phenomena: gambling, extra-marital sex, and alcohol consumption on the one

hand, and the decline of virtues on the other. As a result, the film opens itself to the following secular and empirical query:

- (Q1) Does the film provide any evidential support for believing that there is a causal connection or at least a correlation between gambling, extra-marital sex, and alcohol consumption on the one hand, and the decline of virtues on the other?

Unfortunately, beyond what can be gleaned from the vignettes accompanying the site visit scenes, the film is reticent in addressing this question. Therefore, it seems we must conclude that premises G1, A2, and D1 are insufficiently justified by the film.

Communal well-being

Let us now move on to examine the remaining set of premises:

- (A1) Alcohol can ruin a sound mind and sanity.
- (G2) Gambling often brings poverty and misfortune.
- (G3) Gambling causes people to forget their duties to themselves
- (G5) Gambling always turns a peaceful and happy life into frustration, suffering, and chaos.
- (D1) *Zinā* can ruin one's community

Taken together, these five premises propose that performing certain actions forbidden by Islam will produce deleterious effects on the well-being and development of a community. This causal relationship is further emphasized in a scene where a speaker encourages her audience to raise children who will adhere to religious guidance, for the sake of avoiding the destruction of society:

Parents need to provide religious education to their children. This is because the causes of all the adverse events among our society are due to most of our society members being unable to provide religious guidance during their childhood. Parents should be aware that without holding onto religious guidance, one can be easily influenced by bad elements and will forge to do things that are condemned by God and will destroy society.

To be sure, the five premises above relate to the well-being and development of a community. For instance, poverty and misfortune are negative indicators of standards of living, while neglect of duties is a manifestation of hindered human development, and frustration, suffering, and chaos are signs of poor life satisfaction. Additionally, the ruining of sound minds and sanity negatively affect all the indicators just listed. Standards of living, human development, and life satisfaction are all indicators of well-being and human development. So now we ought to ask, are there metrics for a community's well-being and development that can help us assess these five premises?

The answer is yes, and a prime example of measuring well-being is provided by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) which examines eleven dimensions of life such as income and wealth, health status, education and skills, subjective well-

being, social connections, and work-life balance (OECD, 2017). So, given that well-being is quantifiable in principle, the following secular and empirical questions present themselves:

- (Q2) Does the film provide any evidential support for believing that there is a causal connection or at least a correlation between the legalization of gambling, alcohol consumption, and extra-marital sex in a society with that society having poor well-being?
- (Q3) Do Muslim societies have higher well-being than non-Muslim societies?

The answer to question 2 is unfortunately, no. Similar to its previous claims on the ruining of character, the film chooses not to provide any statistics or case studies to help convince its viewers that there is a correlation between allowing these activities to take place and the degradation of societal well-being. Consequently, it seems we must conclude that premises A1, G2, G3, G5 and D1 are also insufficiently justified by the film.

Question 3 is especially pertinent given the film's insistence that society will crumble if it allows the activities forbidden by God. Taking the film at its word, we would therefore expect countries—especially ones with non-religious majorities—that legalize alcohol, gambling, and adultery to have the least amount of well-being. Conversely, we should also expect Muslim countries to be at the top of the rankings.

To enable ease of comparison, we can turn to the Human Development Index (HDI) created by the United Nations Development Programme. The HDI is intended to measure three key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge, and a decent standard of living ("Human Development Index," n.d.). Notably, these three dimensions overlap with some of the indicators of well-being in the OECD index, and thus the HDI can be considered as a proxy for measuring a nation's well-beingⁱⁱ or at least its level of human development. Another reason for using HDI over the OECD index is that the HDI ranks 189 countries including Brunei, but the OECD only measures 41 countries and does not include Brunei. Finally, given the large number of indicators used in the OECD index, a definitive ranking of countries is especially difficult due to the number of different possible sets of weighted indicators (Lorenz, Brauer, & Lorenz, 2017).

In the latest HDI rankings at the time of writing ("2018 Statistical Update," 2018), the top ten countries in order are Norway, Switzerland, Australia, Ireland, Germany, Iceland, Hong Kong, Sweden, Singapore and the Netherlands. To help us determine how religious their populations are, we can turn to a survey by WIN/ Gallup International that explored the religious beliefs of over 66 000 people in 68 countries across the world. Among the questions asked by the survey was whether an individual would say that they are a) a religious person, b) not a religious person, c) a convinced atheist, or d) do not know/ no response. Here are the breakdowns of responses for these countries except for three that did not participate, namely Switzerland, Singapore, and the Netherlands (*Religion prevails in the world*, 2017, pp. 7–8):

Country	A religious person	Not a religious person	A convinced atheist	Do not know / no response
Norway	30%	50%	12%	8%
Australia	31%	50%	13%	7%
Ireland	40%	47%	9%	4%
Germany	34%	46%	14%	6%
Iceland	46%	32%	17%	5%
Hong Kong	33%	33%	30%	3%
Sweden	22%	55%	18%	5%

As seen from this table, in all seven countries the number of people who identified as religious were less than the number of people who identified as the opposite (i.e., either as non-religious or as convinced atheists). Moreover, all the countries in the top ten of the HDI rankings have legalized gambling and alcohol (subject to regulations and age limits), and do not criminalize adultery (although it may still be a legal ground for divorce).

What about Islamic countries and their HDI rankings? While attempting to identify a country as Islamic may not be straightforward, we can use membership in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as a guide. The highest ranking OIC country on the HDI index is the United Arab Emirates at number 34, followed by Qatar at number 37, and then Brunei at number 39ⁱⁱⁱ.

The takeaway from this comparison is as follows. Contrary to the film's insistence that societal well-being and development is intimately linked with following the dictates of Islam, the data indicates that there is no such correlation. Instead, we find that the countries with the highest amounts of human development have populations that are mostly non-religious and institute laws that do not conform to Islamic prohibitions. To put things another way, it appears that a religious majority is neither necessary for well-being and human development (due to the countries with the highest HDIs being mostly non-religious), nor is it sufficient (due to the fact that six of the ten countries with the lowest HDIs are members of the OIC, i.e., Niger, Chad, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Mozambique). To be clear, none of this implies that high well-being correlates with irreligious populations. Rather, the point here is merely that there is no clear correlation between well-being and religiosity as the film tries to claim.

Replies to potential objections

Let us now look at two potential objections to the analyses provided so far. To start, one might say that the evaluation of some of the premises have been unfair due to interpreting them as making general claims when they are in fact meant to be specific. For instance, perhaps

(A1) Alcohol can ruin a sound mind and sanity

is not intended to be understood as implying that

- (A1[^]) If we were to compare two similar groups of people, where the only major difference is that in one group alcohol is prohibited and that in the other it is allowed, we would find that after some time the group where alcohol is allowed will have more cases of mental illness than the group where it is prohibited.

Rather, the suggestion here is that we should interpret (A1) as:

- (A1*) There has been at least one specific case where someone has developed a mental illness due in part to the consumption of alcohol

Obviously, (A1*) is easier to support compared to (A1[^]). Whereas (A1[^]) requires case studies or statistics, (A1*) can just rely on common knowledge.

So does interpreting (A1) as (A1*) help strengthen the argument for banning the consumption of alcohol? To see why it does not, consider the following analogous argument:

- (C1) There has been at least one specific case where someone's life has ended due in part to the use of a car.
- (C2) Therefore, the use of cars should be prohibited.

Most people would find this argument highly dubious for obvious reasons. Firstly, there needs to be an explanation for why one individual's death or ruin due to an activity justifies a ban on the activity for the rest of society. Secondly, the argument neglects to consider regulation of the activity as an alternative to prohibition to lessen its dangers. Thirdly, there needs to be a consideration of the advantages of permitting the activity and a justification for why the disadvantages of the activity outweigh them. Thus, unless these concerns are addressed, it seems that interpreting the premises of the arguments given by the film as specific rather than general does not necessarily put them in a better position to withstand criticism.

The second potential objection to this paper is that while it has focused on secular measures of well-being and human development such as the HDI, perhaps Islamic countries should instead prioritize indexes that take into account their non-secular developmental goals and well-being.

To be sure, indexes such as an Islamic Human Development Index (I-HDI) have been proposed (Anto, 2013). One of the unique features of the I-HDI is that it possesses a 'Faith-Index', which takes into account data such as daily mosque visitors per 1000 Muslim population, fasting per 1000 Muslim population, the ratio of actual *zakah* to expected *zakah*, and the percentage of the Muslim population who have performed the Hajj pilgrimage.

Does the proposal to use the I-HDI instead of the HDI help the film's arguments? The first thing to note is that one of the key performance indicators of Brunei's latest National Development Plan, *Wawasan 2035*, is to be among the top ten nations in the world as measured by the HDI ("FAQ National Development Plan," n.d.). Of course, this does not imply that a Muslim country cannot seek to achieve a high rank on both the HDI and I-HDI. However, one concern that might be raised is that while the HDI and I-HDI share some indexes, some indexes are unique to the I-HDI. As a result, in a situation where decisions on allocating resources need to be made, one index may need to be prioritized at the expense of the other.

Another general concern with prioritizing a religion-focused index is that it is tension with some claims from the film. During one of the site visit scenes, a speaker tells her audience that "I believe that the Muslim community could also be developed on par with other communities when

the Muslim community follows the teachings of God.” Taking this claim at face value, it implies that the film is confident that a Muslim community can achieve similar if not better levels of development than non-Muslim communities. But of course, in order prove this claim it must be the case that Muslim and non-Muslim communities are evaluated by an index that measures shared developmental goals, rather than by a religious index that measures goals not present in non-Muslim communities. Thus, the proposal to prioritize a religious index over a secular one faces considerable difficulties.

Summary and conclusion

One of the primary aims of *Gema Dari Menara* is to convince its viewers that Islamic restrictions are beneficial. To this end, the film deploys three arguments concerning alcohol consumption, gambling, and *zinā*. This paper has analyzed these three arguments and found that their secular premises fall into two general categories. The first is that if these activities are allowed, then peoples’ characters will be ruined, and the second is that if these activities are permitted, then societal well-being and development will be severely compromised.

However, this paper has also shown that these premises are secular and empirical, and as a result the film opens itself to queries that need to be answered in the positive for the sake of its arguments. These queries were:

- (Q1) Does the film provide any evidential support for believing that there is a causal connection or at least a correlation between gambling, extra-marital sex, and alcohol consumption on the one hand, and the decline of virtues on the other?
- (Q2) Does the film provide any evidential support for believing that there is a causal connection or at least a correlation between the legalization of gambling, alcohol consumption, and extra-marital sex in a society with that society having poor well-being?
- (Q3) Do Muslim societies have higher well-being than non-Muslim societies?

This paper has indicated that the answers to these three questions are negative. Consequently, it becomes difficult to assert that the film provides a strong case for believing that Islamic restrictions are beneficial.

However, it should be reiterated that this paper has only focused on the secular premises of the film’s arguments and does not address its theological premises G4 and A3. It is therefore entirely possible that the religious prohibitions advocated by the film be justified on theological grounds instead. That being said, I do not wish to claim that arguments pertaining to religion should avoid using secular or empirical premises and solely rely on theological justifications. In fact, quite the opposite—I encourage religious thinkers to support their arguments with such premises so that non-religious persons and those ‘on the fence’ about religion can find such arguments persuasive as well. The purpose of this paper is merely to constructively indicate that such attempts ought to be done with requisite care and attentiveness.

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ⁱ To be clear, I am not proposing that ‘secular’ and ‘empirical’ are co-extensive with each other. For instance, it might be granted that there can be statements that are empirically testable and yet make use of non-secular concepts, e.g., ‘I saw an angel in my living room.’

ⁱⁱ The proposal to use HDI as a measure of well-being has its detractors and supporters. For further discussion, see (Yang, 2018) and (Gallardo, 2009).

ⁱⁱⁱ What might be interesting to note is that while the U.A.E., Qatar, and Brunei share encompassing bans on gambling and *zinā*, the policies of the U.A.E. and Qatar on alcohol consumption are relatively more relaxed. In comparison with Brunei, where the sale of alcohol is prohibited, the U.A.E. and Qatar allow alcohol to be sold in licensed hotel restaurants and bars to non-Muslims (“Drinking alcohol in UAE: 7 things you must know to avoid jail,” 2018; “Living in Doha Qatar,” n.d.). This combined with the fact that the U.A.E. and Qatar have higher HDIs than Brunei raises further questions regarding the film’s insistence that human development is intimately linked with following the dictates of Islam.