

The Challenge of Secularism

Despite continuing opposition from various religious movements, and in spite of the presence of a few pockets of resistance here and there, the idea of secularism is still enjoying the status of the dominant ideology of our times. Essentially, secularism does not involve any absolute rejection of religion and religious doctrines, its primary claim being that religion has no right to interfere in the matters of the temporal and the mundane world. In other words, all matters concerning social organization, economic norms, legal practices, and political affairs should be decided and executed in terms of liberal, democratic, and non-religious criteria, while religion is to be treated as a personal and individual concern. The secular state is willing to patronize religious sentiments whenever these can be used to gain subservience to the state authority or to achieve the goals set by the state. Thus, religious values and imperatives are often invoked to justify and legitimize political actions, to gain support for political struggle, and to influence voting behavior. At the same time, however, the secular state does not tolerate any reference to religious teachings when it comes to the process of legislation or development of public policies.

Secularism as a doctrine implies that public policies should be based exclusively on this-worldly criteria, i.e., the main concern should be the welfare of humanity in the present life with total disregard for any belief in a supernatural being, salvation of the human soul, dependence on heavenly guidance, or concern for the life-after-death. The fundamental issue in a secular state is the attainment of material prosperity and well-being in the life of this world, as this is thought to be the only road to human happiness and bliss — the ultimate highway to a worldly Heaven. The hedonistic materialism inherent in the secular mode of life continues to gnaw at the roots of the religious sentiments, till there is nothing left but sheer greed and debauchery.

The degree of religious freedom that a secular state is willing to grant its citizens varies greatly. The French are reluctant, and the Turks openly hostile, to the idea of allowing Muslim women to wear a headscarf in government offices and on the campus; they fear that this would dangerously undermine their modern and secular values. The Americans are relatively magnanimous in this respect, although we continue to

come across incidents reflecting a more rigid and less tolerant attitude on their part too. The main issue, however, is that even the secular state requires its citizens to act morally, to abide by the law, to live according to the accepted rules and norms, and such a mindset cannot be cultivated among the citizens by any of the purely utilitarian ethical philosophies. The fact of the matter is that public morality cannot sustain itself without a powerful private religiosity. Religion, therefore, is needed by the state for its own survival, simply because it is impossible to inculcate goodness of character without the support of religion, and also because all moral values are, in the final analysis, derived from the religious tradition. A growing number of Western thinkers are realizing this truth.

Zbigniew Brezezinski, who has served as the National Security Adviser to President Carter, maintains that the out-of-control secularism contains within it the seeds of cultural self-destruction. He argues that without the development of a moral consciousness and adoption of an ethos of self-restraint instead of self-indulgence, the Western society would be left with no operational criteria for defining what is right and what is wrong, and thereby will slide into self-destruction. Charles W. Colson, founder of the Prison Fellowship, asseverates that there has never been a case in history in which a society has been able to survive for long without a strong moral code, and that there has never been a time when a moral code has not been informed by religious truth. He warns that rejecting transcendental truth is tantamount to committing suicide, as a secular state cannot cultivate virtue.

Thus, the secular state needs its citizenry to act righteously, yet it is not willing to permit religion to come out of its bounds of privacy and encroach upon matters relating to the collective life. This produces a quandary: the restriction and confinement of religion within the boundaries of the individual consciousness inevitably leads to its shrinkage and gradual decline, adversely affecting the moral standards of the society and, in turn, that of the state apparatus itself. The destruction of the traditional moral order in the West at the hands of secularism is a case in point, which has led to an immense amount of suffering, wreckage, and misery in the shape of widespread violence, soaring juvenile crime, rising drug addiction, skyrocketing rates of venereal diseases, and the rapidly growing sense of futility and aimlessness among the youth, leading to the most alarming sign of moral bankruptcy — teenage suicide. All the rhetoric which one comes across in the Western world about “family values” and “back to the basics” is actually a manifestation of this very quandary.

The birth and development of secularism in the West was

intimately linked with the contemporaneous shift of allegiance from God to man, from faith in revelation to that in science, and from reliance on religious authority to freedom of thought. These constituents of the modern mind emerged during Renaissance, were empowered by the Scientific Revolution and solidified during Enlightenment, finding their full realization in the secular nation state which developed during the nineteenth century. It must be stressed that the process of the secularization of state was essentially a European historical experience, basically related to the reaction against the merciless rule and venality of the Roman Catholic Church, and subsequently against the hatred and violence that was perpetuated in the name of religion. Prior to the industrial revolution, secularization in Europe had the support of the Protestants, who had sought to achieve a separation between religion and state in order to purify Christianity by removing it from the realm of worldly corruption. After the decline in the political power of the religious hierarchy, and especially after the industrial revolution, the process of secularization made inroads in the realm of society and social institutions, followed by a general acceptance of liberal humanism.

It is often claimed that secularization of the state was accompanied by a positive rise in religious faith and practice at the private and popular levels. This may be true for the Christian Europe, but it cannot be true for Islam and Muslims. The reason can be understood either in terms of the difference between a mere religion (*madhhab*) and a total system of human existence (*Deen*), or by appreciating the fact that the main emphasis in Islam is upon obedience to Allah (SWT) and His Messenger (SAW), and not just on the creed, spiritual enlightenment, or the performance of specified rituals. This is not to say that these elements are absent in the Islamic way of life, but to argue that whereas Christianity primarily aims at attaining salvation through faith, Buddhism stresses the achievement of enlightenment, and Judaism emphasizes the performance of ceremonies and rituals, the fundamental thrust of the Islamic teachings is on observing the commandments of Allah (SWT) and following the example of the Prophet (SAW). The preoccupation with intricacies of creed, attainment of higher spiritual stations, and the performance of spotless rituals are quite useless if they are not accompanied by a total and unconditional adherence to all injunctions of the *Shari'ah*.

Islam asserts that the entire human existence is one unified whole; it cannot be bifurcated into the religious or spiritual on the one hand and the secular or mundane on the other. The kind of obedience that is accepted by Almighty Allah (SWT) is the one that encompasses all

realms of a person's life. Dividing up human life into numerous compartments and obeying Allah (SWT) in one of these domains and disobeying Him in the others, is a sure way to earn the Divine Wrath. In sharp contrast to the European Reformation, therefore, all reform movements throughout Islamic history had aimed at reviving the purity of the original teachings of Islam by removing the heretical or alien accretions and by establishing or reinforcing the authority of the Divine Guidance over all aspects of life, including the state.

The rise of secular ideology in the Muslim world was essentially a matter of imposition from outside, instead of being an indigenous development as happened in Europe. The secularization of modern Turkey presents an obvious example. The new state of Turkey emerged under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in the aftermath of the defeat and dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire following World War I. Ruthless and stubborn, Atatürk embarked upon a comprehensive mission of Westernization and secularization of Turkish government and society. With the abolition of *Khilafah*, Islam was effectively divorced from state authority and relegated to the private affair of the individual. Arabic script was replaced by Roman script, history was rewritten to suppress Turkey's Islamic heritage, wearing of clerical garb was proscribed, religious seminaries were closed, the traditional fez was replaced with European hat, the wearing of veil by Muslim women was forbidden, co-education was imposed, and *Shari'ah* was replaced by Swiss, Italian, and German laws. The state-sponsored process of secularization, however, did not succeed in erasing Islam as a political force, and the conflict between Islamic fundamentalism and stark secularism still continues today, even after 73 years.

This conflict is also alive in Pakistan, albeit under circumstances which are very different from those in Turkey. Even in the 50th year of independence, the debate is still going on as to whether Pakistan is supposed to be an Islamic state or a secular one. It is an undeniable historical fact that Pakistan was created in the name of Islam, as no other slogan could have untied the millions of Indian Muslims. The proponents of secularism argue that the Indian Muslims had rejected Islam when they renounced the religious leadership of the Jami'yat Ulama-e-Hind in favor of the All India Muslim League. It is indeed true that the movement for independence was not religious in character, neither were the majority of its leaders practicing Muslims. These verities do not, however, indicate any rejection of Islam; in fact, the exact opposite is true. The religious leadership of that era was, in general, alienated from the true feelings of the Indian Muslims, hence their failure to appreciate

the common Muslim's perception of the threat of Hindu majority. The real motivating force behind the movement for independence, instead of pure religious fervor, was the burning desire on the part of the Indian Muslims to preserve their separate nationhood and to cultivate their distinct identity. But the crucial question is: what was the basis of the separate nationhood and distinct identity of the Indian Muslims? Their sense of being a unique nation was neither racial or linguistic in origin, nor based upon any common homeland, but was, in fact, founded upon their ideology and religion. According to W. C. Smith, it was not a territorial or an economic or a linguistic or even, strictly speaking, a national community that was seeking a state, but a *religious* community. This is precisely the reason why the All India Muslim League, during the years 1940-47, appealed to the religious sentiments of the Indian Muslims and, as a result, emerged as the embodiment of their love and devotion for Islam, in addition to being the defender of their political rights. Thus, we find that the motifs of Islam, Islamic state, and Islamic Law were quite prominent in the speeches and statements made by the Muslim League leaders during the height of the freedom movement, including those made by Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah himself.

In addition to the dominant current of Muslim nationhood, there was also a relatively weaker current of Islamic revivalism underlying the ebullience of the movement for independence. Both of these apparently distinct currents can be traced back to the personality of Allama Iqbal who, on the one hand, persuaded Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah to return from Europe and lead the Indian Muslims in their struggle for freedom, and, on the other hand, invited Maulana Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi to migrate from Deccan to the Punjab and lead the Islamic revivalist struggle on an intellectual plane. Again, it was Allama Iqbal who, while working for the Muslim League in the Punjab, endeavored during the 1932-36 period — though unsuccessfully — to establish an Islamic revivalist group on the basis of *Baiy'ah*, to be called *Jamiy'at Shubban-ul-Muslimeen Hind*. Therefore, we find in the personality of Allama Iqbal a rare blend of the highest idealism along with pragmatic realism. While envisioning the renaissance of Islam and the revival of the Muslim *Ummah* in the distant future, Iqbal was fully aware of the problems being faced by the Indian Muslims in the here and now. Attempts to portray Iqbal as a supporter of secularism are, therefore, a travesty of truth. Indeed, his Presidential address to the Annual Session of the All India Muslim League at Allahabad, on December 29, 1930, is very revealing as far as the Islamic dimension of the Pakistan movement is concerned. Here are some excerpts:

Is religion a private affair? Would you like to see Islam, as a moral and political ideal, meeting the same fate in the world of Islam as Christianity has already met in Europe? Is it possible to retain Islam as an ethical ideal and to reject it as a polity in favor of national polities, in which religious attitude is not permitted to play any part?... The proposition that religion is a private individual experience is not surprising on the lips of a European. In Europe the conception of Christianity as a monastic order, renouncing the world of matter and fixing its gaze entirely on the world of spirit, led by a logical process of thought to the view embodied in this proposition. The nature of the Prophet's religious experience, as disclosed in the Qur'an, however, is wholly different.... It is an individual experience creative of a social order. Its immediate outcome is the fundamentals of a polity with implicit legal concepts whose civic significance cannot be belittled merely because their origin is revelational. The religious ideal of Islam, therefore, is organically related to the social order which it has created. The rejection of the one will eventually involve the rejection of the other....

The demand for an independent Muslim state, therefore, must be understood in its proper context. In addition to his view that a Muslim state in this region will defend the rest of India against any foreign invasion, Allama Iqbal firmly believed that the revival of pristine Islam will be possible only after its centralization in a specified territory:

... I therefore demand the formation of a consolidated Muslim State in the best interest of India and Islam. For India it means security and peace resulting from an internal balance of power; for Islam an opportunity to rid itself of the stamp that Arabian imperialism was forced to give it, to mobilize its law, its education, its culture, and to bring them into closer contact with its own original spirit and with the spirit of the modern times.

No discussion of secularism in the Pakistani context can be concluded without referring to the famous — or notorious? — speech made by Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah in the Constituent Assembly on August 11, 1947. He said *inter alia*:

...you will find that in the course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State.

On the face value, this statement is clearly a negation of the Two-Nation theory, a denial of the separate nationhood of Muslims, and

a rejection of the ideas expressed by Allama Iqbal in his Allahabad address. As such, a plethora of interpretations have been offered to explain this statement. Was it simply a reference to his promise that there would be no victimization of minorities in Pakistan? Does this statement represent a serious lapse on his part due to the stress he was undergoing? Was it only a temporary strategy to appease the secular powers of the world? Does it represent his effort to cool down the tempers in the background of Hindu-Muslim riots? Irrespective of the exact interpretation that you choose to accept, the very fact that this statement was considered to be in need of interpretation speaks volumes about the matter at hand. The need for interpretation arose because this statement is diametrically opposed to the innumerable speeches made and statements issued by the Quaid-e-Azam prior to August 11. Either you seek to explain this statement differently from the way it sounds, or you try and reconcile yourself with the fact the founder of Pakistan was a hypocrite — a man who gave the impression to his devoted followers that their promised homeland would be an Islamic state, but who was actually endeavoring for a secular one. If you are not inclined to conceive of the Quaid-e-Azam as a hypocrite — and neither am I — then the only solution is to read this statement in a manner that takes into account all of the multitudinous statements made by him during 1940-47, which indicate that an Islamic state was what he had in mind, not a secular one.

The main reason for the confusion prevailing about the ideology of Pakistan is that statements are often quoted to suggest that the Quaid-e-Azam wanted Pakistan to be a modern Socio-democracy and not a theocracy. True enough. But these statements do not prove that he had a secular polity in mind. What most people do not realize is the fact that *socialism* — in the sense that economic justice must prevail and grossly unequal distribution of wealth must be eradicated — is an altogether Islamic imperative. Similarly, *democracy* — in the sense that the affairs of the state should be run in accordance with the will of the people, and that they should be free to make their own laws within the boundaries set by the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* — is again an Islamic imperative. That is why Allama Iqbal, the real ideologue of Pakistan, has said that Socialism can be turned into Islam if you add to it the Islamic concept of God, and that the republican form of government is perfectly harmonious with the Islamic political teachings. As for *theocracy*, it is best defined as the rule by a particular ecclesiastic or priestly class, and since there is no such category in the Islamic scheme of things, it is patently obvious that Islam and theocracy represent two entirely different forms of governance.

The sovereign in an Islamic state is Almighty Allah (SWT) and

all Muslims are His vicegerents (*Khalifah*); the ultimate authority rests with the Qur'an and *Sunnah*; the affairs of the state are to be decided and executed with the spirit of democracy and mutual consultation (*Shura*); the legislature is bound by the injunctions of the Qur'an and *Sunnah* which it cannot transgress; the judiciary makes sure that no law is formulated, and no decision is taken, that is repugnant to the Islamic teachings; the Ulama are there to educate the masses and to guide the parliament and the courts, but they have no real authority. The provision of the basic necessities of life to all citizens (whether Muslim or non-Muslim) — including food, shelter, security, education, and health care — is among the foremost responsibilities of the state. Thus conceived, there is no similarity between an Islamic state and a theocratic one.

As a matter of historical fact, the movement for independence was energized and the Indian Muslims were galvanized into action when the Muslim League leaders started to invoke the name of Islam in their speeches and statements. They appealed to the Indian Muslims' perception of being a community unlike any other. The invocation of an emotional and hereditary religiosity served the purpose quite well under those circumstances, but such an approach cannot suffice now. We gained our independence and separate existence as a country in the name of our distinct nationhood, the basis of which is Islam. This makes Islam the only justification for our continuing existence and stability — the very rationale for our being. Paying lip-service to Islam, however, is not going to help us anymore. What is needed is the fulfillment of the promises made during the struggle for independence — the implementation of the teachings of the Qur'an and *Sunnah* in their totality, so as to make Pakistan an Islamic state rather than a mere Muslim "nation" state.

The conflict between Islamic fundamentalism and secularism is intensifying throughout the Muslim world. The danger is that the various Islamic movements, after failing in their efforts to realize their goals through political and democratic means, would increasingly turn to violence and even terrorism. We know from the experience of Egypt, Algeria, and other countries that such an approach could bring nothing but disaster for both Islam and Islamic fundamentalism. What is urgently required on the part of all the workers and well-wishers of Islamic revivalism is to take a step back and consider dispassionately the issue of methodology. The process of an Islamic Revolution, its derivation from the *Seerah* of the Holy Prophet (SAW) and its application in the modern era, has been one of the major themes of the lectures and writings of Dr. Israr Ahmad, the *Ameer* of Tanzeem-e-Islami. The present issue of "The

Qur'anic Horizons" contains the first of the series of articles based on his Friday sermons on this very topic. These discourses were made in 1984, and subsequently printed as an Urdu book, *Manhaj-e-Inqbalab-e-Nabawi*. It is hoped that the points elucidated in these lectures would provide the adherents of various Islamic movements and groups with valuable insights vis-à-vis the correct methodology of *Iqamah Al-Deen*.

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