



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

## Intellect and Religion, East and West

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### Abstract

The relationship between intellect and religion has been an essentially harmonious one in the context of Islam. Despite various disputes over the place of the intellect in relation to religion, one does not observe the two elements being pitted in opposition to each other in any radical or extreme manner. This is to be contrasted with the philosophical situation that has prevailed in the West since the 18th century Enlightenment movement. Religion is deemed antithetical, in large part, to the free operation of the intelligence, as a result of the secularisation of thought and culture in western society. In this essay, the author addresses this theme in relation to the criticisms being voiced by intellectuals within the West itself; and by reference to the perspectives of certain Muslim philosophers, for whom there was no contradiction between intellect and religion.

### Keywords

Intellect, religion, secularisation, philosophy, Enlightenment, religious studies, faith, philosophy, symbolism, science, intellectual history, history, Christianity, Islam, Roman Catholicism, Isaac Newton, Galileo, Copernicus, Meister Eckhart.

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*I'm talking about attitudes in our culture, in our political culture, in our legal culture and in our popular culture; attitudes that suggest that religion is somehow something that is not important ... something that you should leave behind when you come into serious public debate or into the workplace; something that you should be willing to split off from yourself if you want to be taken seriously.*

Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York, 1993).

### **Theorising the Role of Religion in Contemporary Society**

In his best-selling book, Stephen Carter, Professor of Law at Yale University, laments the crystallisation in America of a culture within which religion is no longer intellectually respectable. He is of course not unique in this. There are, and always have been, intellectuals in the West who oppose the secularisation of thought and society, and who have criticised the processes by which materialism and worldliness have become the new forms of cultural tyranny; but what is important to note is that now, there are voices from within the bastions of the intellectual establishment in the West that are calling for a re-evaluation of some of the central assumptions that underlie modern Western society, and, in particular, the principles and the proper scope or limits of secularism. That is, questions are being asked about how far secularism should go, and whether it might not be time to de-secularise some domains. This de-secularisation can also be called a re-sacralisation; or, as John Keane, Professor of Politics at the University of Westminster in London and one of the key theoreticians on civil society says, a 'return to the sacred'.

Carter refers to several factors that he feels are responsible for undermining the intellectual and cultural credibility of religion. Let us mention here the three most important ones: the 'myth' that religious people are pre-Enlightenment oddities, irrational and childish; the 'myth' that religious faith leads to political sedition; and the assumption that religion must be irrelevant because it is inaccessible to modern science.

Taking the idea of political sedition first, it is clear that many fear that the authority of the state in the modern West is threatened by any religion that wishes to impose itself in the domain of politics. This understandable fear stems from the particular experience of the West. The principle of the separation between Church and State — the basis of secular political doctrine — arose as a political necessity in a historical context dominated by religious wars and religious persecution. Carter and others like him would not wish to see this aspect of secularism reversed; the question for them is of not allowing political pragmatism to extend to the secularisation of thought and culture, to the eclipse of faith as an element in identity, both personal and social.



## The Roots of the Antagonism Between Religion and Science

As for the assumption that religious people are ‘pre-Enlightenment oddities’, one needs to appreciate why it was that the Enlightenment was so opposed, not so much to religion *per se*, but to the monolithic power of institutionalised religion, the Church and its dogmas. In the bourgeois salons of 18th century Paris, the Roman Catholic Church was seen as more fit to burn witches and heretics than to guide souls to salvation!

The vitriolic arguments of Voltaire, Diderot and other thinkers against religion can only be understood in the light of the third of the factors noted above: the assumption that religion is necessarily opposed to reason and to science. How and why did this assumption take root? This is an extremely complex issue and resists any unilateral explanation. Nonetheless, there are certain key events that help shed light on the underlying chains of historical causation, on determinative intellectual and cultural tendencies, that is, on the *zeitgeist* that produces the event in question. One such event constitutes a particularly important watershed in the process by which this assumption becomes quasi-axiomatic for the Western mind: the trial of the Italian astronomer Galileo (d. 1642).

### Science as a Distinct Worldview

Galileo’s confirmation through empirical observation of the Copernican theory that the earth orbits the sun was rejected by the Church not on scientific but theological grounds. This notion was heretical, he was informed, because it contradicted the words of the Bible. In his defence he pleaded that ‘the Bible tells us how to go to Heaven, not how the heavens go’. But the sentence of the Inquisition was unyielding: he was ‘vehemently suspected of heresy’, that is, ‘of having believed the doctrine which is false and contrary to the sacred and divine Scripture, that the sun is the centre of the world and does not move from east to west and that the earth moves, and is not the centre of the world’. He was told that the penalties of holding this belief would not be applied if he were ready to ‘abjure, curse and detest before us’ the error and heresy of the heliocentric theory.

So Galileo was duly forced to renounce the ‘heresy’ that he knew was in fact an indubitable empirical reality. This enforced *mea culpa* — as absurd as it was insincere — rebounded against the Roman Catholic Church, delivering indeed a fatal blow to the dogmatic authority of the Christian faith, a blow from which it is still reeling to this day. From Galileo’s time onwards, religion and reason came to be seen, increasingly, as two incompatible ways of looking at the world. The ensuing scientific revolution of the 18th century, personified above all by the great English scientist, Isaac Newton (d. 1727), was seen by significant parts of the intelligentsia as the result of natural reason liberating itself from the shackles of a religion that was at once unnatural and unreasonable. It is difficult for us today to sense the excitement generated by this revolution. The poet Alexander Pope (d. 1744) expressed well the spirit of the age in his famous *Essay on Man*, published in 1733. First, as regards the intolerance of dogmatic Christianity, he wrote:



*For modes of faith let graceless zealots fight.  
He can't be wrong whose life is in the right.*

Second, as regards the wonders of science and the discovery of nature's hitherto hidden laws, he declared with some hyperbole:

*Nature and Nature's Laws lay hid in darkest night.  
God said: Let Newton be, and all was light.*

### **Secularism and Secularisation**

Now, it is important to understand not only that secularism as a political doctrine arose as a result of a Church that had overreached itself politically, socially and institutionally, and which needed to be put back in its place, as it were; it is also necessary to see the relationship between the de-sacralisation or reduction of religion itself, on the one hand, and the secularisation of thought and culture, on the other. As Henry Corbin points out, the Copernican revolution in cosmology presupposed a Copernican revolution in theology. The heavens above were no longer seen as symbols of man's quest for enlightenment: the revolving planets were henceforth lifeless objects marking time, no longer moving images of eternity. One can thus appreciate the secularisation of the cosmos — the view of nature as so many empirical facts out there to be analysed and exploited to man's advantage, rather than as symbols and signs to be contemplated and interiorised — one can see this secularisation as an expression of a preceding secularisation of religion itself, that is, as the concomitant of a diminution of spiritual perception, of mystical penetration, of esoteric profundity, in short, the erosion by purely horizontal modes of thought of the dimension of depth in religion.

One can better understand this linkage between spiritual reductionism within religion and secularisation of intellectual culture within society at large by taking a glance at one of the most profound representatives of the esoteric tradition in Christianity, Meister Eckhart. This great German mystic of the 14th century fell foul of the authorities of his day, being accused of 'coming close' to heresy. Here we have a foreshadowing of the trial of Galileo that came two centuries later. Despite the vast difference of perspective between the mystic and the scientist, the destiny of these two individuals had one characteristic in common: they both confronted a Church that had become hardened, ideological, dogmatic; a Church that, most importantly, had become insensitive to *symbolism*. The ecclesiastical authorities could not move away from the literal words of the Bible: for them the creation story in Genesis was not only divine revelation, it was also scientific fact. Galileo's 'discoveries' simply had to be false, the strength of this assumption being in direct proportion to the inability to interpret scripture spiritually. To borrow a term from the Islamic lexicon, the Church had lost its sense of *ta'wil*.



## Secularism as a Reaction to the Roman Catholic Church

Thus, secularism came to dominate the currents of philosophy and thought in general in the West, largely as a reaction to a particular kind of religion and religious authority; that is, to a Church that was fatally compromised by its own worldliness; a Church which became a virtual state itself, with its own hierarchy and vested interests; a Church which indulged in Inquisitions and persecutions of the most abhorrent kind; a Church that, following the Reformation, was implicated in a series of crippling religious wars and sectarian strife; and, perhaps most importantly of all from the point of view of intellectual history, a Church in which dogmatic theology had marginalized the ethical, spiritual and esoteric perspectives of the Christian faith, and was thus vulnerable, to its core, by scientific discoveries. These, I would argue, are the principal factors responsible for making religion appear antithetical to reason, and which gave rise to the radical anti-Christian tendencies of the Enlightenment, which, in turn, was a central foundation of secular culture and philosophy in Western thought, within which the intellect and religion seem to have taken divergent and contradictory paths.

The Roman Catholic Church has, of course, changed a great deal in the modern era and to its credit, recognised the errors of the past conducted in its name. The Muslims of today have much to learn from this process. The story of the rise of secular culture in the West can also alert Muslims to the dangers inherent in the manifold attempts to ‘revive’ or ‘reform’ Islam today. Despite being ostensibly opposed to ‘Western secularism’, many revivalist movements fall prey to ‘secular’ orientations themselves, and this in two key respects. Firstly, efforts that are concentrated exclusively on power relations, on the state itself, or simply on the social expression of religion in the public space, can be seen as so many ‘secular’ tendencies that carry the spiritual content of religion into the alien realm of political agitation. Secondly, the deliberate marginalisation or downgrading of symbolism, of mystical penetration, of spiritual depth which so often accompanies the use of religion as a political weapon, is likewise a form of secularisation, constituting a mirror-image of a key feature of the process by which the Western world succumbed to the polarization between faith and intellect.

In other words, the challenge for Muslims today who aspire to revive their faith, is to perceive the deepest aspects of the religion with the most elevated part of the intellect. The opposite of this is to focus on the most superficial aspects of the religion with the most rudimentary part of the intellect which translates into a fixation on the outward forms of the religion by the rational faculty alone, aided by passionate, if not inflamed, sentiment. On the other hand, there is a solidarity between the inward (*batin*) aspect of religion and the innermost aspect of the intellect, that is, spiritual intuition which is capable of grasping ultimate realities, and fashioning this world in accordance with those realities, in the clear and indubitable knowledge that no outward social ‘reform’ will succeed without the spiritual and moral ‘reform’ of individual souls, beginning with one’s own.

*Truly God changeth not the condition of a people  
until they change the condition of their own souls.  
(The Qur'an, 13:11)*