ISLAMIC LIFE AND THOUGHT

by

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Religion and Secularism, Their Meaning and Manifestation in Islamic History

I

Those whose minds have been nurtured on Western thought turn inevitably to the concepts of religion and secularism when they wish to study the Islamic world. But words do not always have the same meaning within differing contexts. This is especially true in the perspective of different civilisations. Therefore, it is necessary to define what is meant by religion and secularism in relation to Islam before discussing their significance in Islamic history. To anyone familiar with Islam, it is only too obvious that these terms do not have the same meaning in languages connected with Muslim civilisation as they have in various European languages. In fact there exists no term in classical Arabic or Persian which is exactly synonymous with the word 'secularism'.[1] Nor is there in Islam the distinction between the religious and secular, or the sacred and the profane, as there is in Christianity.

In the unitary perspective of Islam, all aspects of life, as well as all degrees of cosmic manifestation, are governed by a single principle and are unified by a common centre. There is nothing outside the power of God and in a more esoteric sense nothing 'outside' His Being, for there cannot be two orders of reality. *Lā ilāha illa'Llāh* means ultimately that there is no being or reality other than the Absolute Being or the Absolute Reality. In essence, therefore, everything is sacred and nothing profane because everything bears within itself the fragrance of the Divine.

In such a perspective, the meaning of religion and secularism appears in a new light. Religion becomes the revelation sent by God to man to guide him towards Unity and to help him become what he always 'was' but has forgotten; that is, to make him remember and

regain the celestial beatitude which he once enjoyed before falling into the prison of the senses. Religion may be considered ultimately as the Divine guide by the help of which man can overcome the ontological barrier separating him from his Divine Origin, although in essence he has never been separated from it. Moreover, religion becomes not a single instance of Divine guidance but all the revelations sent through the 124,000 prophets mentioned in traditional Islamic sources to the peoples of all ages and nations, of which the last in the present cycle of humanity is Muḥammad – upon whom be blessings and peace.[2] So it is that the Prophet claimed not to have brought anything new but to have re-stated the Truth claimed by all the previous prophets and to have re-established the primordial tradition (*al-dīn al-ḥanīf*) which is the Truth lying within the nature of things.

The mystery of creation lies in the fact that God, despite His perfection and His plenitude, brings into being a world which, although nothing but Himself, does not share His perfection. In fact, manifestation means imperfection, because it means separation from the source of all goodness. It is this separation which, although an illusion with respect to the Divine, is nevertheless quite real with respect to cosmic existence, and which is the source of all secularism, or of all that is, from the human point of view, non-sacred or non-divine.

Secularism, therefore, may be considered as everything whose origin is merely human and therefore non-divine, and whose metaphysical basis lies in this ontological hiatus between man and God. Of course in reality even this void is a symbol of the Divine, just as Satan is the ape of God, but, from the point of view of man in his earthly imperfection or what in Christianity is called the state of 'fallen man', this separation is real with a reality matching that of the Divine order itself. Thus in man's social and historic existence secularism has come to acquire a reality as great as religion itself. Or, in today's world, in which to most modern men God seems to be nowhere and in which He has become eclipsed by the shadows of forgetfulness, it has even come to occupy the centre of the stage and to claim all rights for itself.

Considered from this point of view, religion in Islam means first of all the Islamic revelation and all the truths, both exoteric and esoteric, revealed in the Holy Quran and interpreted by the Prophet in his sayings and traditions. In the case of the Shi'ah the sayings of the Imams are included along with those of the Holy Prophet. Secondly, religion means all the teachings and institutions of Divine origin revealed through other prophets before Islam, many of which Islam, through the universality and synthetic power which is its *raison d'être*, integrated into its own perspective.

Similarly, secularism implies ideas and institutions of purely human origin, not derived from an inspired source. Therefore, we should not

consider anything that does not lie specifically within the teachings of Islam as secular, nor everything practised by those who profess Islam as necessarily religious. The Pythagorean-Platonic wisdom derived from the Orphic mysteries and inherited later by the Muslims cannot be called secular, and some of the apologetic writings of the Muslim modernists cannot be considered as religious, although they may be dressed in Islamic terms.

II

Islamic history presents several instances in which foreign ideas have intruded into the world view of Muslim civilisation, ideas which have in more than one instance been secular in the sense defined above. As mentioned earlier, the first set of historical circumstances in the career of Islam concerned the Arab environment in which Islam was revealed. There were many 'pagan' Arabic practices and traditions such as blood-feuds, absolute allegiance to the tribe, and cults of idol worship which were banned in the unitarian and universal perspective of Islam. Islam waged a battle against many such elements, not only during its early life in Arabia, but also in another form during the Umayyad caliphate. During the first struggle of its terrestrial existence, Islam succeeded in freeing itself from becoming a local Arabic religion, but nevertheless it acquired a certain Arabic character, since all revelation is coloured by the world in which it is first revealed and it is also spoken in the language of the people to whom it is revealed. Furthermore, despite the victory of Islam over 'pagan' ideas, the aftermath of the battle of Ṣiffīn and the later establishment of the Umayyad caliphate by Mu'āwiyah mark the first intrusion of secularism into the political life of Islam in the sense that politics, or at least a part of it, became divorced from divinely revealed principles and fell into the arena of power politics in which human ambition was the dominant factor.[3]

In spreading northward into what was previously the domain of the Persian and the Byzantine empires, Islam encountered another set of political, administrative, and fiscal institutions and laws which presented a challenge to the unified structure of the earlier Medinan community. By the power of integration inherent within Islam, many of these institutions were Muslimised and absorbed into the structure of Muslim society so that they lost their foreign attributes. Yet other adaptations of Byzantine and Persian customs and procedures, especially in the fields of taxation, introduced a certain heterogeneity into Islamic law which later played an important part when much of the law in the Muslim world was secularised during the thirteenth/nineteenth

and fourteenth/twentieth centuries. There were also cultural movements of a national character in this encounter between Islam and the Persian and Byzantine civilisations in the second and third centuries AH, especially among the Persians. The latter were finally absorbed into the bosom of Islam and at this point no major secular ideas were able to penetrate the Islamic world view.

During the succeeding period, the intrusion of an ancient political institution became a reality as the Abbasid caliphate weakened in the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries. At the very moment when al-Māwardī was defining the function of the caliph, the power of the caliphate was for all practical purposes being replaced by that of local princes. However, it was not until the establishment of the Seljuks that the existence of a third authority, the *sultān*, became recognised alongside that of the Sacred Law and the caliph. In this new adjustment, which is reflected in the writings of such theologians as al-Ghazzālī and especially in the *Siyāsat-nāmah* of Khwājah Niẓām al-Mulk, the sultanate, an institution based on Sassanid models and alien to the early political organisation of Islam, became recognised as the necessary factor for the preservation of religion in society.[4] This view was accepted to such an extent that many of the Sufis, philosophers and scientists of the Mongol period, such as Najm al-Dīn Rāzī and Khwājah Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, wrote in its support.[5]

Turning from social and political matters to cultural and intellectual questions, once again we meet with the introduction of foreign elements into the Muslim world – this time, the vast heritage of the ancient Mediterranean civilisations, Persia and to some extent India. But here also a close study reveals that the Muslims accepted only those elements of this heritage which were ultimately of an inspired origin and not the secular and naturalistic aspects of the Graeco-Roman heritage which ultimately led to the death of classical civilisation. So we see the Muslim sages turning eagerly to the teachings of the Pythagorean-Platonic school and the writings of the Aristotelians viewed through the commentaries of the neo-Platonists. The Muslims, much like the Jewish philosopher Philo, considered these sages the heirs to the wisdom of the prophets, and in their wisdom they saw the reflection of the doctrine of Divine Unity taught by the sacred scriptures.

Similarly, Muslims made the scientific heritage of Alexandria their own, because these forms of knowledge, like other ancient and medieval cosmological sciences, sought to show the unicity of Nature and the interrelatedness of all that exists.[6] Therefore, far from being secular modes of knowledge, they were closely related to the central theme of Islamic wisdom. unity, and throughout Islamic history, the sciences and religious and metaphysical doctrines were knit together,

as in the Jābirian corpus or the *Rasā'il* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'. For example, the mathematics of the Greeks and the Hindus were united in the writings of the Muslim mathematicians, thereby creating or giving further development to several new branches of this science including algebra. But here, too, mathematics was considered not a secular technique but more as the ladder of Jacob extending from the sensible to the intelligible world and as the science which the Pythagoreans considered to be the key to the treasury of Divine mysteries.

There were, of course, also aspects of the classical culture which scarcely interested the Muslims, among them the secularist philosophies of the Epicureans and of some of the Cynics or the naturalism of the atomists. The one element of potential secular nature, however, which did penetrate into the Islamic world view was the rationalism inherent in Peripatetic philosophy. Rationalism, basing itself on the exclusive validity of judgement of the human reason which is but a reflection of the Intellect, tends towards the secular by nature, because human reason, although real on its own level, is but a limitation and dispersion of the Intellect and to that extent rooted in that illusory void which separates our existence from Ultimate Reality. This rationalism, based neither upon Islamic revelation nor on other inspired doctrines which are largely gnostic and illuminationist rather than rationalistic, was for several centuries the main source of potential secularism in the cultural life of Islam. It manifested itself primarily in the form of various philosophical and theological movements. The most famous of these was that of the Mu'tazilites and it was not weakened until the fifth/eleventh and sixth/twelfth centuries. At that time, under the pressure of both theology and Sufism, the danger of the suffocation of spiritual life under rationalism was curtailed, and the scene prepared for the expansion of the sapiental doctrines of sages like Shaykh al-Ishrāq Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī and Ibn 'Arabī. In this challenge, the spiritual principles of Islam met secularism in its most basic form, and in restricting its influence enabled the Islamic world to continue its life upon the foundations established by the Quranic revelation.

III

The most devastating attack of secularism upon Islam did not begin until the thirteenth/nineteenth century, and then by a civilisation which, unlike that of the defunct Greeks, was materially more powerful than the Islamic world and politically and economically interested in overcoming it. This attack, facilitated by internal weakness within much of the territory of Islam which had set in during the latter part of

the twelfth/eighteenth century, and the partial destruction of some of the Sufi brotherhoods by new forms of puritanical rationalism like Wahhabism in Arabia and the *Ahl-i ḥadīth* in India, began to affect nearly every realm of Muslim life, including law, government and administration, education, and even religion itself.[7]

In the field of law, through a series of changes or *tanẓīmāt* carried out in the Ottoman Empire, that part of the law which from the beginning had remained outside Quranic legislation was converted to various European codes. These codes did not originate from theocratic societies like Byzantium and Persia but from the modern West, which ever since the Renaissance has moved with ever-increasing speed towards the complete secularisation of all life and the divorce of things from their spiritual principles. The acceptance of European codes for commercial and civil matters has been followed in the fourteenth/twentieth century by the demand for the 'modernisation', which always means secularisation, of even personal law which is clearly outlined in the Holy Quran. And so we find such well-known modernists as al-Zahāwī, Ṭāhir al-Ḥaddād and many others pleading for the legal 'equality' of women in the European sense within a secular law and apologists like Sayyid Amīr 'Alī feeling ashamed of the Islamic conception of the status of women because it does not agree with the modern European view.[8]

In the field of government, there has been no uniformity of action. Each Muslim land has a political form peculiar to itself. It may be said in general that throughout the Islamic world, many ideas concerning government and administration have been spread which are not only of non-Islamic origin but which are, moreover, fruits of the various revolutions of the past two centuries in Europe. Each of these has aimed at a greater degree of secularisation of the society. Among these ideologies, not the least of them is Western-style nationalism, which in most areas of the Muslim world has become a powerful force in the secularising of Islamic society.

Nowhere is the intrusion of secularism into the Islamic world more evident than in the field of education. Here, from the thirteenth/nineteenth century onward, schools on a European model and teaching European subjects have often been built by Muslim authorities. The original hope was to enable Muslims to overcome their European invaders. However, the consequence of such schools has been the growth of a segment of Muslim society into a class with views differing radically from the majority of Muslims and the creation of serious rifts in the Muslim social order.[9] To see this difference of approach, it is enough to speak with a student of a modern university in the Muslim world and compare his ideas with those of a student from a religious school or *madrasah*.

The new education represents an important factor in the introduction of secularism. This is especially true not so much because of the subject-matter taught but because of the point of view from which the subjects are taught. The medieval Muslim schools also taught mathematics, the natural sciences, languages, and letters, besides theology, jurisprudence, and philosophy. However, the modern subjects bearing the same name are not simply the continuation of the Islamic sciences, as is claimed by many Muslim apologists.

It is true that the modern sciences have borrowed many techniques and ideas from the ancient and medieval sciences, but the point of view in the two cases is completely different. The Islamic sciences breathed in a Universe in which God was everywhere. They were based upon certainty and searched after the principle of Unity in things which is reached through synthesis and integration. The modern sciences, on the contrary, live in a world in which God is nowhere or, even if there, is irrelevant to the sciences. They are based on doubt. Having once and for all turned their back on the unifying principle of things, they seek to analyse and divide the contents of Nature to an ever greater degree, moving towards multiplicity and away from Unity. That is why, for the majority of Muslim students studying them, they tend to cause a dislocation with regard to the Islamic tradition. Unfortunately, not everyone is able to see the heavens as both the Pedestal of God's Throne and incandescent matter whirling through space.[10] Therefore, by teaching the various modern European arts and sciences which are for the most part alien to the Islamic perspective, the curriculum of the schools and universities in the Muslim countries has injected an element of secularism into the mind of a fairly sizeable segment of Islamic society.

Finally, in the field of religion itself, secularism has made a certain encroachment in the form of rationalism or of various apologetic tendencies.[11] The movement begun by Jamāl al-Dīn Astarābādī, known usually as al-Afghānī, and Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abduh to consider once again the basis of Islamic Law and theology was marked often by a tendency to belittle or even deny elements that were not in conformity with modern thought. This finally led to the neo-Wahhābī Salafiyyah movement in Egypt and spread to other lands, including Persia, where a few of the religious leaders like Sharī'at-i Sangilajī became its advocates. Even more in India, where modernism has spread more in the philosophical and educational fields than in the Middle East, nearly all of the modernist leaders from Sir Aḥmad Khān and Sayyid Amīr 'Alī to contemporary figures have been influenced to some extent by secularism. Although most of the above mentioned authors still thought within the unified view of Islam, some, like the Egyptians 'Alī Abdal-Rāziq, Shaykh Khālid, and Ṭaha Ḥusayn (at

least in his earlyperiod), moved a step further and preached openly the separation of religio n from temporal life, recognising secularism as a legitimate pole of life alongside religion. In Persia and other areas of the Muslim world, the Bahā'ī movement has introduced Western and secular ideas in a religious dress and has played some role in spreading secularism among certain classes of the countries involved.

We see, therefore, that in nearly every domain of life the unitary principles of Islam are challenged by secular ideas and the Islamic world is faced with the mortal danger of 'polytheism' or *shirk*, that is the setting up of various modern European ideas as gods alongside Allah. As to what will be the outcome of this struggle between a weakened defender and a materially powerful enemy it is difficult to predict. Certainly the Islamic world cannot hope to return to a homogeneous and integrated life while the ever increasing disorder in the Western world continues. Moreover, Islam is not exclusively a way of love like Christianity and therefore cannot remain oblivious to any form of knowledge. The way of Islam is essentially gnostic. Therefore it must have a response to other systems which claim to expound a science of things and must be able to place all orders of existence within its universal perspective.

Whatever the immediate outcome of this struggle, there is no doubt that ultimately the clouds of illusion and unreality will fade away. No matter how much secularist thought may appear dominant, it has no more substance than the fragile and changing human nature from which it derives its being. When the illusion of the separation between the soul and the Divine Self is removed, we realise that there is but one Principle dominant in every mode of manifestation, and that the reality we saw in secularism as a competing principle with religion has been no more than the reality of the fantasies of a soul not yet awakened from the dream of negligence and forgetfulness.

Notes

1 However there is the word *'urfī* which refers essentially to law, *dunyawī*, which means this-worldly in contrast to other-worldly, and *zamānī* which means temporal as opposed to eternal, but none of these has exactly the same meaning as secular.
2 Actually Islam, in the most universal sense, means reassertion of the Truth which always was and always will be and of which all orders of existence partake including Nature.
3 See Gibb, H. A. R., 'An Interpretation of Islamic History. I', *Muslim World*.
4 See Lambton, A. K. S., 'Quis custodiet custodes? Some Reflections on the Persian Theory of Government', *Studia Islamica*, vol. V, 1965, pp. 130 ff.; and Binder, L., 'Al-Ghazali and Islamic Government', *Muslim World*, XLV, No. 2, July 1955.
5 See *Mirṣād al-'ibād* of Najm al-Dīn Rāzī and the *Nasirean Ethics* of Ṭūsī.
6 See Burckhardt, T., 'Nature de la perspective cosmologique', *Études traditionelles*, vol. 49, 1948, pp. 216–19.

7 For a detailed study of Western influence on these and other aspects of life in the Ottoman Empire, see Gibb, H. A. R., and Bowen, H., *Islamic Society and the West*, Oxford University Press, 1957 on. Needless to say, modernism, which is for the most part synonymous with secularism, has also affected the daily life of the Muslims, their dress, architecture, city planning, interior decoration, diet, and other aspects of similar nature which have a profound influence on the whole of man's outlook. Although we cannot delve into this question at the present moment, we wish to emphasise the importance of these factors in preparing the way for the spread of secularism.
8 For a thorough study of modernism in Islam see Gibb, H. A. R., *Modern Trends in Islam*, Chicago, 1947.
9 'It is important for us to appreciate the breadth of this rift between religious and secular education in Egypt and its far reaching consequences. Not only has it ranged school against school and university against university, but it has contributed more than any other factor to the division in Muslim society . . . ranging orthodox against 'Westernizer' in almost every department of social and intellectual activity, in manner of dress, living, social habits, entertainment, literature, and even speech'. Gibb, H. A. R., *Modern Trends* . . . , p. 42. The same could be said of Persia, Pakistan, and most other Muslim countries.
10 For a profound discussion of this question, see F. Schuon, *L'Œil du cœur*, Paris, 1974, pp. 95–7.
11 See L. Gardet, *La Cité musulmane*, Paris, 1954, pp. 350–62.