

## CHAPTER 19

# Islam and Secularism

Asghar Ali Engineer

Is Islam compatible with secularism? This question is quite important in the present context, particularly in the twenty-first century. Both non-Muslims and orthodox Muslims feel that Islam is not compatible with secularism. Fundamentalist Muslims totally reject secularism as anti-Islamic and *ḥarām* (forbidden). Mawlana Mawdūdī, founder of Jamaat-e-Islami, had said, while leaving for Pakistan in 1948, that those who participated in secular politics were raising the flag of revolt against Allah and His Messenger. The Saudi *ulama*, too, denounce secularism as strictly prohibited in Islamic tradition.

The fundamentalist Hindus, on the other hand, say that Muslims support secularism while in minority in any country and oppose it while in majority. But this is not wholly true. Some Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia and others do reject secularism but all Muslim majority countries do not. For example, Indonesia does not reject secularism though 85 percent of its population comprises Muslims. However, by and large, it is true that many Muslim majority countries opt for Islamic state or at least make Islam a state religion.

It is important to note that there is some difference between an Islamic state and Islam being a state religion. In an Islamic state all laws must strictly conform to Islamic *sharī'ah* but if a country declares "Islam as its religion," it means that Islam is preferred to all other religions and it enjoys more privilege than other religions in the country. In 1948 Islam was declared the state religion in Pakistan, but Pakistan did not become an Islamic state until Ziyaul Haq declared it to be an Islamic state in the late 1970s. He then began to enforce *sharī'ah* laws in Pakistan.

Islam is declared to be incompatible with secularism because in a secular state there is no place for divine laws, and secular laws are unacceptable to Islam. Also it is believed that in Islam religion and politics cannot be separated. On these grounds secularism is totally rejected by orthodox Muslims. They also think that secularism is atheistic, and atheism has no place whatsoever in Islam. Islam strongly emphasizes faith in Allah. These are some of the grounds which make orthodox Muslims uneasy with the very

word secularism. Islam emphasizes life hereafter and secularism means only those matters which pertain to this world. There is no place for the world hereafter as far as secular philosophy is concerned.

I would examine here whether these assertions are true and whether Islam is really incompatible with secularism. Firstly, one must make a distinction between what is theological and what is historical. The concept that religion and politics cannot be separated is more historical than theological. In fact the Qur'an does not give any concept of the state; it only gives the concept of the society. The Qur'an is concerned with morality rather than polity. An upright conduct, justice, truth, benevolence, compassion, and human dignity are very basic to the Holy Scripture. It repeatedly asserts these values. Thus it clearly means that these values are very fundamental to an Islamic society rather than to a state.

The view that religion cannot be separated from politics in Islam is due to this primary concern with these Islamic values. It was thought by early Islamic *ulama* and jurists that if religion was separated from politics, the rulers would totally neglect these fundamental Islamic values and would behave in a manner which would only satisfy their greed for power. In fact in those days there was no concept of secularism as a philosophy of humanism. The *ulama* were afraid that if religion and politics were separated there would be absolutely no check on the conduct of the rulers. In fact, one does not find clear articulation to this effect (that religion cannot be separated from politics in Islam) in any early Islamic source. This formulation itself is of nineteenth-century origin when colonial powers began to impose secular laws in Islamic countries, i.e. the laws which were not basically derived from *sharī'ah*.

In the early Islamic period there were no other laws than the *sharī'ah* laws. And since there was no such concept of the state in the Qur'an, the Islamic state itself is an historical construct. The structure of the Islamic state evolved over a period of time. The Qur'an and hadith were the primary sources for the new state. It is important to note that before Islam there was no state in Mecca or Medina. There was only a senate of tribal chiefs who took collective decisions and it was tribal chiefs who enforced those decisions in their respective tribal jurisdiction. There were obviously no written laws but only tribal customs and traditions. Any decision had to be taken within the framework of these customs. There was no other source of law.

However, after Islam appeared on the social horizon of Mecca, the scenario began to change. In Medina the Prophet laid the framework of governance through what is known as *Mithaq-e-Madina* (Covenant of Medina). This Covenant also basically respects tribal customs to which adherents of Judaism, Islam, and pre-Islamic idol worshippers belonged. Each tribe, along with the religious tradition it belonged to, was treated as an autonomous unit in the Covenant, which has been described in full detail by Ibn Ishaq, the first biographer of the Prophet. Thus the Covenant of Medina respected both the tribal as well as religious autonomy of the inhabitants of the town. It can also be said to be the first constitution of the state in making. The Covenant laid down certain principles, which are valid even today in a secular state. When the covenant was drawn up by the Prophet of Islam, *sharī'ah* as a body of law had not evolved. In this important Medinan document what is most important is that the Prophet did not compel the different tribes of Jews and idol worshippers to follow the Islamic law.

A state structure began to evolve only after the death of the Prophet when vast areas of other territories were conquered and new problems began to arise. During the Prophet's time the governance was limited almost to a city. He did not live long after the conquest of Mecca. But after his death the jurisdiction of the state expanded much beyond the frontiers of Arabia. During the Prophet's time people were more concerned with day-to-day problems of marriage, divorce, inheritance etc. on the one hand, and theft, robbery, murder etc. on the other, for which the Qur'an and the Prophet were the only source of guidance. The people asked the Prophet for guidance and followed his pronouncements or the Qur'anic injunctions voluntarily. There was no state machinery to enforce it. There was neither any police force nor any regular military. There was no separate judiciary either. As far as the Prophet was concerned he was a legislator, an enforcer of laws (executive), and also a judge (representing judiciary). He combined all three functions.

Thus it will be seen that there was no regular state structure during the Prophet's own time as he was a unique personality who could combine all these functions for judicious governance, in addition to being a source of law. However, the death of the Prophet created a vacuum and no other person could fill it. Also, as pointed out above, the conquest of other territories created more complex problems. Now there was a need for enforcement of laws as people in far-off places with no commitment to Islam would not follow the laws voluntarily as they did in Medina in the Prophet's time. Thus a police force was needed to enforce the laws. Also, during the Prophet's time people volunteered to fight against enemies of Islam and there was no need for a paid regular army. Now after his death a need was felt for a paid regular army. The border areas had to be guarded constantly. There were no such borders before.

The corpus of *sharī'ah* was being evolved and for new situations guidance could no more be had from the Prophet. One either had to look for verses in the Qur'an or in hadith, which the Prophet's companions remembered, or one had to resort to analogy by keeping analogous situations in mind. That was how the corpus of *sharī'ah* evolved slowly. The primitive Islamic state was democratic in spirit and the caliphs often consulted their colleagues and companions of the Prophet while making any decision so as to conform to the Qur'anic values. Thus the Qur'an and hadith then were the main sources of law. But in secular matters like building up institutions like the army or police or bureaucracy, they did not hesitate to borrow concepts from other sources like Roman or Persian. Thus the second caliph Umar borrowed the concept of *diwān* (i.e. maintaining records of salaries to a paid army and bureaucracy). Similarly the caliphs were called upon to legislate on matters like land ownership, and suspension of certain punishments during times of emergency like famine, etc.

The conquests, internal strife among the Muslims, struggle for power among different tribes, groups and personalities, and many other factors created strong pressures so much so that the institution of caliphate itself did not survive. It was ultimately replaced by monarchy and dynastic rule. This was totally against the spirit of the Qur'an. These changes became inevitable under the fast developing situation. The Islamic jurists had to come to terms with these new developments and to legitimize them somehow. Once the institution of caliphate was replaced by dynastic rule, it could never be restored throughout Islamic history. Monarchy and dynastic rule persisted until Western colonial rule took over.

It was under colonial rule that Muslims began to discover the virtues of democracy and saw in the caliphate a “golden period of Islamic democracy.” It is true that during the dynastic rule *sharī‘ah* could not be ignored and the rulers had to keep the *ulama* in good humor. However, they often found ways to go around and violate the spirit of *sharī‘ah*. But they never ceased to pay obeisance to it. The situation changed drastically with the onset of colonial rule during the nineteenth century in the Islamic world. Many laws were enforced by the colonial rulers who were secular in origin. The Western countries themselves were once governed by the Church and it was the Church law that was supreme. The reformation changed all that and the struggle against the Church gave rise to the concept of secularism. Thus there was an intense fight between the Church and the ruling princes who desired independence from the hegemony of the Church. The emerging bourgeois class too wanted to be free of the sacred rule and saw immense benefits in the secularization of politics and society. Thus it took more than three centuries in the West for the secularization of society and marginalization of religion and religious institution. When colonial rule was established in Asian and African countries, many of which happened to be Islamic countries, the process of secularization had traversed a great distance in the metropolitan countries.

Thus the technological supremacy of the colonials posed a great challenge to Islam. The religious leaders and intellectuals in these colonized countries found refuge in the “glory of the past” and some were overwhelmed by the supremacy of the West and began to advocate secular modernization. Many reform movements thus were born in Islamic countries. Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ‘Abduh of Egypt were among them. Some others, however, totally rejected the secularism of the West and launched intense efforts to revive the past. Revivalist and reformist movements jostled with each other for social and political space. Among those who faced the Western challenge were those who rejected religion altogether and adopted the secular humanism of the West. However, they remained in the minority.

Islamic societies, however, found it more challenging to adopt change and adjust to it smoothly. Many sociologists ascribe this resistance to change inherent to the teachings of Islam. This, however, is not true. No religion including Islam is prone or opposed to change. The causes of resistance to change lie in the society, not in religion. In fact most of the Muslim societies were led by feudal lords and failed to produce a modern bourgeois class. In these societies there was no well-entrenched mercantile or industrial class. It is as much true of Indian Muslims as of other Muslim countries. The Hindus, on the other hand, had a centuries-old merchant class, which smoothly adjusted itself to modern industrial capitalism. Thus those who took to modern industrial capitalism felt the need for secularization and social change. The pressures for change were the result of the changing historical reality for them.

The Muslims, on the other hand, felt no such need for change, as there was no well-entrenched mercantile class to effect a smooth change over to modernity. Also, in most of the Muslim countries, including India, Islam was embraced by weaker and poorer sections of society, for it appealed to them due to its emphasis on equality and justice. Those sections had no felt need for modernization and they remained under the tight grip of traditional *ulama* who were anyway opposed to the process of secularization.

Also, unlike other religions, Muslims had well-developed *sharī‘ah* law which was unanimously accepted as divine in origin. Most of the religious leaders thus rejected

the very concept of secular law as unacceptable. The *ulama*, as pointed out above, had a strong grip over the hearts and minds of the poor and illiterate masses and used the social base to oppose any change. The feudal lords, too, had not much use for secularism and readily struck an alliance with the *ulama* giving them their full support. Thus the *ulama* strongly resisted any change in *shari'ah*. Not only that, they would not even admit of any reform. Those like Muḥammad 'Abduh and others who advocated *ijtihad* (creative interpretation of *shari'ah* in view of modernization and change) were marginalized. Those important socioeconomic factors cannot be ignored while discussing Islam and secularism.

Before we proceed further I would like to throw some light on some inherent limitations of secularism. In the nineteenth century rationalism became a dogma. The rationalists and secularists almost began to worship reason and dismissed religion with contempt. In fact the rationalists have been as contemptuous of religion as the faithful have been of secularism. Both have refused to admit the limitations of their respective positions. One can say that as there are religious fundamentalists so there are rational or secular fundamentalists. These secular fundamentalists have no respect for believers whom they consider as nothing less than "superstitious." Even certain cultural practices are considered as such. Some of them even refuse to admit the emotional richness of life.

There has to be a balance between reason and faith. Faith is as important to human existence as reason. Reason, in fact, is a tool that humans use to achieve their goal. Reason can never become absolute though its usefulness as a tool cannot be minimized. Faith, on the other hand, is not a tool but a belief in higher values. These values are fundamental to a meaningful life on this earth. Reason at best ensures a "successful" life but not a meaningful one. It is faith in values like compassion, justice, equality, non-violence etc. that make human life meaningful. Thus a creative synthesis between reason and faith is absolutely necessary for a successful and meaningful life on this earth. Sacral and secular should not be treated as two poles or antagonistic contradiction. They are, rather, complementary to each other.

The faithful should also bear in mind that faith should not mean blind imitation of past traditions. Faith has to be in values, not in past traditions. As absolute secularism could lead to a life devoid of meaning and responsibility towards fellow human beings so absolute faith could lead to blind surrender to an authority, which leads to highly exploitative practices. One has to guard against such a possibility by employing rationality. In other words while reason should not become arrogant, faith should not become blind.

If understood in this sense there should be no contradiction between reason and faith and between religion and secularism. Islam is also compatible with secularism, seen from this perspective. If secularism is interpreted as an atheistic philosophy, no believer in religion would accept it, let alone a believer in Islam. Islam, as pointed out above, lays strong emphasis on belief in God and unity of God. Muslims believe in the divine revelation of the Qur'an and in Muhammad being a Messenger of Allah. One need not challenge these beliefs in the name of secularism. Secularism should be taken in a political rather than a philosophical sense. Secularism in a political sense creates social and political space for all religious communities.

The nineteenth-century rationalism and modernism are under challenge today. Our period is characterized as a postmodernist period in which religious pluralism rather than rejection of religion is accepted. Postmodernism recognizes the limitations of reason and accepts the validity of religious ethos. We are now in a world that is far removed from the struggle between Church and laypeople. The Church has also accepted the inevitability of secularization of society. It no longer enjoys the hegemonic position it held before the reformation. It has apologized for the persecution of scientists for discovering new scientific truths. It has also accepted the concepts of democracy and human rights. There is, thus, no serious contradiction between Church and secularism.

Islam, it must be noted, has no concept of an organized church. No single religious authority is considered absolute. However, the *ulama* promoted the concept of consensus (*ijmā'*), which is quite democratic. In fact consensus has been considered as one of the sources of Islamic law in Sunni Islam. Also, there is the concept of *ijtihād*, which infuses the spirit of dynamism and movement, though, of late, the *ulama* have refrained from using it for change. However, pressures are building in Islamic societies for using the concept of *ijtihād*. All Islamic societies are in the throes of change and modernization. Islamic laws are no longer a stagnant pool of old traditions. Changes are being effected.

As there is no organized church in Islam the *ulama* are divided on the issues of modernization and change. In Iran there is an intense struggle between the conservatives and the reformists. In Saudi Arabia the process of change is there for anyone to see, although the monarchy is quite cautious and wants to include the orthodox *ulama*. However, social pressures are building in Saudi society in favor of change and modernization. Even in Afghanistan under the Taliban, the regime was more coercive than consensual. In other words, the Taliban enjoyed political and not social hegemony.

Islam admits to freedom of conscience and democratic rights. Islam also officially accepts religious pluralism in as much as it is Qur'anic doctrine to hold other prophets in equal esteem. The Prophet provided equal social and religious space to all religions present in Medina, as pointed out above, through the Covenant of Medina. The leaders of Jami'at al-Ulama in India rejected the concept of two nations and supported composite nationalism on the basis of this Covenant. Religious pluralism and composite nationalism, which are the very spirit of secularism today in India, are not incompatible to Islam. All Islamic leaders of India have accepted Indian secularism. Even the Jamaat-e-Islami has not only accepted Indian democracy and secularism but has also set up a democratic and secular front.

The other characteristic of secular democracy is a respect for human dignity and human rights. The Qur'an expressly upholds both. It is true that some rulers in the Islamic world reject the concept of human rights as Western in origin and not fit for their society, but it is to preserve their own absolute and unchallenged rule rather than upholding the Islamic doctrinal position. It is a cultural and political rather than a religious problem. There are different political systems in different Islamic countries from monarchy to military dictatorship to limited democracy to democracy. But it would be naive to blame Islam for this. One has to look into the political history of the country rather than search for its causes in Islamic doctrines. Islamic doctrines do not nurture

any concept of absolutism as perhaps no other religion does. In fact the Qur'an's emphasis is on consultation (*shūra*), and even the Prophet used to consult his companions in secular matters.

It will thus be seen that Islam is not incompatible to secularism if it does not mean rejection of religious faith. Throughout the world today there is increasing emphasis on harmonious coexistence of different religious faiths and Islam had inculcated this spirit from the very beginning of revelation of the Qur'an. The doctrine that religion and politics cannot be separated in Islam is a later historical construct rather than Qur'anic doctrine. It is a human construct rather than a divine revelation. One of the important aspects of modern secularism is, of course, separation of religion from the state. While the state should not interfere in religious autonomy, religious authorities should not poke their noses into affairs of the state. The Indian *ulama* had accepted this position with a good conscience throughout the freedom struggle and it was on this basis that they became allies of the Indian National Congress.

In Muslim majority countries, the state suffers from lack of autonomy. Again, one should not look for causes in religious teachings but in the socio-political history of those countries. These countries have hardly emerged from their feudal past. There is no history in these countries of democratic struggles of the people. Also, most of these countries have very small religious minorities and these minorities have historically accepted the religious hegemony of Islam. It will take quite some time for this position to change as the feudal past has a strong presence in these countries. However, there are strong pressures building and human rights movements are emerging in all these countries. Globalization may not be desirable for many other reasons but it is creating conditions for close interaction among various cultures and political systems. The information revolution also is a tide that cannot be stopped and is making a deep impact on every aspect of life. Muslim countries cannot remain aloof from this and have to become open to new ideas and forces.