

*In the Name of God*

# **The Dilemma of Religion and the State in the Non-Arab Islamic World**

**Hamidreza Ayatollahy (حميدرضا آيت اللهی)**

**Head of Philosophy Department**

**Allameh Tabatabaai University**

**Tehran - Iran**

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 civilizations. 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 civilization as they have in various European languages. There is not in Islam the distinction between the religious and secular, or the sacred and the profane, as there is in Christianity.

The so-called dilemma of religion and the state has long history in Western culture that can be understood in its context. I believe that for understanding the matter we must study two important backgrounds and foundations of the matter, namely

Christianity and modernity (not modernization) which brought a secular solution for the problem.

The essence of Christianity is so that the best way for protecting religion and the state simultaneously is the separation that could reach an overall acceptance in Western culture, while this is not so for Islam.

First of all, we must study the essential differences of Islam and Christianity in this respect for a deep understanding of the problem in Muslim countries. The social attitudes of Islam and the important role of all social and political dimensions of human life in Islamic doctrines are quite different from Christianity which is more individual and ethical religion.

I, as university teacher of philosophy of religion, refer to some differences between fundamental doctrines of these religions which necessitate some demands for every one:

Islam, like Judaism, has religious jurisprudence, while this is not the case with Christianity that emphasize on morality. Because of this specification, the religious laws penetrate in all aspects of a Muslim believer's life.

Furthermore, the many social religious laws in Islam make this religion more involved to the social activities of a society. Islam does not concern only with the personal relation between man and God, which try to change individually the spirituality of human being. Because of this difference, religious experience has a more important role in Christianity than Islam. A lot of Islamic doctrines focus on the relation between man and his society. Islam emphasizes on the belief that the relation between man and God may not be completed unless the social duties of a

believer be fulfilled. The social duties of Muslim believers contain all dimensions of their lives like economy, politic, culture and social development. Therefore, if they want to be good believers they may not ignore their social duties.

We can not speak of Christian economy or Christian bank, while it is natural to speak of Islamic economy or Islamic bank. It means that some human dimensions of life must be examined in Islamic societies, but they may not be considered in Christian territories.

Because the social law in Islam is an essential specification for it, the acts and framework of the state must be examined by Islamic laws. Islam has some economical frame with a discipline of values that may not accept every economical frame, which is based on human autonomy apart from God's order. It has also some essential doctrines in politics that based on its own foundations. Certainly, it rejects some political thoughts (like racism, imperialism, and compulsion in acceptance of a political government, etc.), and accepts some others.

Another important difference between Islam and other religions is due to its attention to mundane matters of human being beside to future life. We have a lot of activities during our life that we think they are not religious ones, but in Islam every human activity is seen as a religious one. For example, Islam thinks of sexual relations between wife and her husband as worship like other kinds of worship. Although this relation must be done due to divine order that is, in some cases it is forbidden and in some other cases it is permitted, but, beside the prohibition in some cases, Islam does not think of sexual relation as far from being

in a spiritual duty of man. It means that the meaning of worship differs in Islam. The activities for mundane matters are just those spiritual activities. We may not separate endeavors for this world from attempts for the life after death. This matter makes secularism very far from an Islamic society than others.

Based on the above mentioned important difference between Islam and Christianity, the meaning of separation of religion and the state will be a more natural meaning in a Christian society in a Western definition but it is far from an Islamic society that can not ignore a solution for introducing a kind of relation between religion and the state in different models.

I believe that if in a period all attempts directed for a quite secular model of government in an Islamic society with a majority of true Muslim believers, because it is not natural for this society it can not be a stable society and it will be changed after some decades or one or some generations. The experiences of Turkey and Iran in Ataturk and Reza shah's period are good examples.

Secularization in Western territory has another background, namely modernity. Because I am an academic member of philosophy department and teach modern and contemporary Western philosophy, I examine it in a philosophical point of view.

Modernity which is a historical fact of three or four centuries in a Western context differs from modernization. Western modernity based on humanism, subjectivism, dualism with a hidden scientism in modern period. Humanism that is not necessarily an atheistic attitude made the human autonomy from all divine order in

the core of its discourse. It was usually speaking of God but as a man made meaning on his or her subjective perception. In modern period, there existed some kind of belief in God, but it was a man based belief that had its meaning from a humanly subjective point of view not as an external truth independent from human kind. While the existence of God on human understanding usually accepted the lordness of God rejected. Secularism implies ideas and institutions of purely human origin, not derived from an inspired source.

Secularism in man's social and historic existence 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.

The modern philosophy necessitated this kind of thought because of some spatio-temporal conditions of Western history and contexts in its three centuries adventures. If we want to survey secularism in Western context we must consider its humanistic approach with its philosophical foundations. It can be shown that this kind of humanistic approach was the result of a Western culture in its historical processes that differs from other cultures with their own specifications.

However, briefly stated, it is difficult to speak of this kind of modernity in Muslim countries while we may speak of modernization in their own culture with their own foundations. It is difficult to extend Western humanism which necessitated secularism in Islamic domain. Therefore, the dilemma of religion and the state

must reconsider in Islamic context and it must be found what the special problem is in Islamic thought and what can be the solution.

### **The necessity of introducing nonsecular models of relation between religion and the state**

There are some suspicions for a Western secular model of the state in an Islamic society. These suspicions are from two perspectives. In one perspective there are serious doubts about the successfulness of Western secular humanistic states historically and theoretically. In another perspective there are some doubts that these models of state can be compatible with Islamic culture.

The first view is directed to the critiques of modern secular societies and in the second one the important dimensions of Islamic teachings which introduce other models not based on the separation between religion and the state.

### **The critiques of modernity and its humanistic foundations and its secular consequences**

There are some critiques of Western modernity that make its secular models of society in question:

1- Western modernity based on enlightenment movement tried to manifest all its capacity in all dimensions of human life in three centuries but the successfulness of this attempts was in question by postmodern thinkers. The foundations of modernity have been analyzed by these thinkers. There were some presuppositions

that the castle of modernity was based on them. Postmodern thinkers tried to criticize these presuppositions in both sides for example theistic and atheistic ones. The ideal achievements of modernity in politics, culture, and art and so on, all encountered some fundamental deficiencies. For example, political approach of Western modernity like democracy and liberalism was criticized essentially by some of these thinkers.

The West-centered of all truth has been attacked by them. They emphasized on plurality of truth which is manifested in different cultures. Thus the expanding of Western models of politics has been rejected by them. Although they seek of a kind of relativism that can not accept a religious state they insist that the Western models of thought also are in question. I want to show that Western modernity as the best model of politics is in question so that the reliance on it can not bring a best model of politics for us so that we introduce an Islamic society based on those western values.

2- The secular humanistic thought that defends of separation of religion and the state has tried to introduce some alternatives for religious state like socialism, democracy and liberal democracy and so on. But these kinds of political systems have had a lot of problems that are pointed by political philosophers. Marxism was also a kind of those models of modernity that in a long period of time in twentieth century could attract huge number of peoples in the world as the best kind of the state but its collapse from political discourse showed the deficiency of those secular solutions. In an examination of liberal democracy by contemporary

scholars the consequences of those liberal democracies in the future may be more problematic than Marxism. American militarism in recent years made liberal democracy as the enemy of human kind. The existence of Israel and its huge governmental crimes, and also imperialistic militarism and nuclearism of United States is supported by liberal democracy of Western countries.

3- In reality, the humanistic achievements of western modern political thought brought the biggest disasters in human history, namely the world war one and two. Although the western modern people reject those kinds of political systems like fascism and racism and Nazism, they can not ignore the secular humanistic basis of those systems. The secular solution of the state may cause those tragedies that may be the result of its secularity and it is not rational to rely unconsciously on those treatments.

4- While the twentieth century was a century of development in science and technology for human kind to use their capacity in serving man, the twenty first century is a century with a lot of suspicion to this kind of human activities because of all disasters they brought for human kind by their technological development. Thus, the twenty first century is named as the century of environment. This new approach brings bioethics in the core of scientific and technological circles. Because of insufficiency of secular bioethics, the need for religions has been more and more important in this century for removing environmental pollutions that have made by human vanity. Professor Nasr has analyzed the matter and the role

of religions in helping humanity for the best solution in his book *Religion and the Order of Nature*. He emphasizes in this book that the most capacity in this respect can be found in Abrahamic religions specially in Islam. The problem and dangers of pollution made by a secular science and technology based on human autonomy in interfering in the nature, and the emergency of a solution have been in the center of scientific and technological circles. Therefore the necessity of solution has shown the weaknesses of humanistic solutions which brought those huge troubles and the need for a sacred science. It can be a time for religions to introduce themselves as savior of humanity.

**The need for a presence of religious and Islamic teachings in most dimensions of human life:**

1- The increasing tendencies and inclinations to religions specially in recent decades have made the religious discourse in the core of human life while religions in the middle of twentieth century was in the margin. This is not restricted to a personally religious activity but is going to penetrate all dimensions of human life; it is going to requisite a need for social and political attendance of religions.

2- There are a lot of Islamic doctrines that are social with a kind of political attitudes. If someone wants to be a true Muslim believer he can not ignore his social and political duties. To reduce Islam to spirituality that is more compatible with Christianity and Buddhism means to ignore the most part of Islamic teachings

of Qur'an and *Hadiths*. The Semitic conception, shared by Judaism and Islam, sees law as the embodiment of the Divine Will, as a transcendent reality which is eternal and immutable, as a model by which the perfections and shortcomings of human society and the conduct of the individual are judged, as the guide through which man gains salvation and, by rejecting it, courts damnation and destruction.

3- The other challenge of Muslim believers with Humanistic approach of the West is the challenge of best way of life. While in Western culture the best way of life depend of welfare and humanistic freedom this is not so with Islamic system of value. The importance of spiritual progress of man kind and defining him as who must think of himself as spiritual animal which will be possible in his worshipping God bring an Islamic worldview quite different from a Western concern. The emphasis of Islamic teachings to heavenly essence of man and the duty of prophets to purify him toward training that essence (*Tazkiah*) as well as its emphasis on mundane matters have brought different system of value from a Western one in which the definition of the best way of life is restricted to the best material life manifested in those material welfare and freedom. For example, homosexuality rejected in all its kind in Islam because it makes man very far from its true life, while in a Western system of value it is in the direction of human enjoyment and a kind of his welfare and freedom. Homosexuality in an Islamic system of value is just like terrorism in a Western one. The judgment about one action due to two systems of value is quite different because the different definition of man kind.

The decision about a successful and fruitful political system hardly based on the system of values and the definition of man and his ideals in which we are going to judge about. Therefore, we may not judge about development absolutely in a Western manner of life; perhaps some of those developments are decline than improvement.

This is the sovereignty of mass media ruled by Western secular humanistic regimes that try to impose its system of value that is made for the benefits of Western companies.

There are also some other reasons for the need of attendance of religions in the state.

### **The need for some models of relation between religion and the state**

Based on the following concepts, we must think of some models of relation between religion and particularly Islam to the state:

1- The importance of social and political teachings of Islam without which the Muslim believer will loose his or her complete belief.

2- The insufficiency of Western secular position for the state in practical level, in system of value, in theoretical foundations and in its destructive consequences.

The role of the *Shari'ah* and its institutions as protection for the community against arbitrary military and political oppression needs to be emphasized; Since most modern studies on the subject only view the external political institutions and

not the personal relationships, family structure, Individual fights, etc., all embraced within the comprehensive fold of the *Shari'ah*.

3- The incompatibility of Western treatment in introducing a kind of separation of religion and the state based on Christianity to Islamic countries based on their own culture. It may be added that the blind following of Western ideas in matters concerned with law, as in so many other domains, will never solve any basic problem of Islamic society.

It is a form of *taqlid* or blind following much more dangerous than the traditional type of *taqlid* which has always been decried by Muslim sages over the ages.

### **The specifications of a successful model**

At the end I study the renewal in Islamic approach based on the above explanation which may open Islam to a special kind of development that can be more effective and conclusive. In my view, there must be some independent models of relation between Islam and the state which must have some characteristics:

- 1- It is necessary for Islamic societies that have their own political system.
- 2- The political system must be compatible in its foundations with Quran and *Hadiths* in general. 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. Religion also 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 integrated into its own perspective.

- 3- This Islamic system must recognize mundane needs of Muslim believers as well as their spiritual and transcendental needs.
- 4- The political system has two parts: in one part there are some basic rules of Islamic doctrines and in another part there are some humanly rational activities for introducing a political system compatible with those Islamic principles. This rationality differs from that kind of humanistic rationality named instrumental rationality. In the tension between tradition and modernism, one of the most acute problems faced by the contemporary Muslim is the relationship between the *Shari'ah*, and especially the parts belonging to the domain of personal law, and modern theories and legal practices.
- 5- There are a lot of human experiences that can give Islamic scholars some solutions for introducing a favorite political system. But they must be avoid

of the hidden fundamental values of those treatments incompatible with their own and try to build their system on their own teachings and values.

- 6- Therefore the achievements of Western political approaches may give a fruitful experience to pose their own system.
- 7- The favorite system may not be resulted from general teaching of Quran and Hadiths alone. There must be long attempts for understanding the reality of spatio-temporal situations and the needs of contemporary man and try rationally to find a favorite political system compatible with Quranic fundamental teachings, which is called in Islamic culture as *Ijtihad*. However, being neither a jurisprudent or *faqih* in the traditional sense, nor an advocate in the modern one, but rather a student of Islam and Islamic civilization in its intellectual and spiritual aspects, we feel it our duty to confine ourselves to the analysis and clarification of the general principles which underlie the very issue implied by the subject of this essay.
- 8- This is a continual attempts and the system must be improved continually.
- 9- There have been a lot of innovative scholars who tried to pose a kind of Islamic political system that were not successful. A truly Islamic system is

limited to some boundaries that can not accompany with every kind of innovations.

10-Thus, the renewal of religious discourse can be successful when it can reach to a kind of acceptance among Muslim thinkers as an Islamic one not as a foreign thought in an Islamic cover. And so we find such well-known modernists as al-Zahawi, Tahir al-haddad and many others pleading for the legal equality of women in the European sense within a secular law and apologists like Sayyid Amir 'Ali feeling ashamed of the Islamic conception of the status of women because it does not agree with the modern European view. During last century we saw some innovation among Muslim thinkers that accepted the dominant Western thought and tried to introduce an interpretation of Islamic thought in the frameworks of that dominant thought. We remember the scientific interpretation of Islam in about five decades before and Marxistic interpretation of Islam in three decades before both of which can not remain alive in Muslim territories. 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 secularization 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 secularizing of Islamic society.

11-There are some advantages for a democratic and liberal system of state that can bring good experiences for fruitful forms of a political system; and Muslim thinker can gain benefits from it but the Western liberal democracy based on Western secular humanistic view will have a lot of problems to be compatible with Islamic models of state.

12-In the field of government, there has been no uniformity of action. Each Muslim land has a political form peculiar to itself.

13-The Muslim thinkers who want to pose their own political system independent from dominant systems must continually oppose the contemporary imperialistic imposition of other system of value imposed by their mass media. It is the only way of real freedom.

14-The best renewal of religious discourses must be supported by reason and can be defended rationally. Some of these discourses are posed ideologically as a subjective model of political attitude. The best way for improvement of these models is continual dialogues among who bear the

reasonability of their thought. Every discussion of Islamic Law involves the most basic religious beliefs and attitudes of Muslims.

15- There are a lot of similarity between Islamic political system and others that can be good basis for a kind of international interaction. In differences there must be an equal dialogue for finding some practical solution for some interaction, just like those differences between all societies.

16- Dialogue among scholars who have enough knowledge of both Islamic teachings and contemporary needs of Muslim believers is the best way to find the best political system in Islamic society. The appeal to forcible power for establishing a kind of political system leads to annulment of the system.