

Muslim Political Thought; Secularism and Democracy: Meanings and views

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I- Secularism

'Secularism' is defined by Merriam-Webster Online dictionary (Merriam-Webster, 2002) as: "indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations". Collins COBUILD Dictionary (1988: 1306) defines 'secularism' as "a system of social organisation and education which believes that religion has no part to play in the problems and events of everyday life"

From an etymological point of view, the word 'secular' derives from the Latin expression 'saeculum', whose lexical meaning is "this age" or 'the present time', temporal (opposed to eternal). The ethics of secularism, therefore, are almost synonymous with immediate material interest. Ultimate accountability in front of God is completely absent in the secularists' worldview, and consequently, relativism becomes the core of their worldview (Al-Attas, 1993: 18).

Holyoake held the view that secularism is based simply on the study of nature and has nothing to do with religion, while Bradlaugh claimed that secularism should start with the disproof of religion rather than deny. (Tamimi, 2001: 109)

Whatever is meant by secularism, it may well be argued that it is a Christian outcome (Al-Attas, 1993: 25), and has sometimes been depicted as the consequence of apostasy from the Christian faith. That was the view of, for instance, the great Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth. According to Barth, modern culture has been a revolt against the Christian faith aimed at putting the human being in the place of God (Michaud, 2003).

Tamimi (2003: 53) argued that the birth of secularism in Christian Europe was due to the obstruction caused by religion to its delivery from the Dark Ages. The same view is held by many other Muslim thinkers as Rashid Ghannouchi (Tamimi, 2001: 108) and Yusuf al-Qaradawi (Qaradawi, 1999).

The fact of the matter is secularism will result in the marginalisation of religion and end up with an atheist society. This becomes clearer when

we see a secular state such as France, where everyone in the eyes of the Republic, is supposed to be equally French regardless of ethnic or religious differences. The issue of the Islamic veil in schools, which is considered as a religious symbol, has dominated media, public and political debate for several years. It is to be banned despite the opposition of leaders of the French Catholic and Jewish communities to the legislation (Henley, 2003).

Despite a good deal of semantic variation of the word in different places, times and societies, the essential philosophy underlying any form and shade of secularism, whether in education system or government, remains constant. The great weight that is given to the temporal and materialism at the expense of the eternal has remained the biggest guiding factor of secular systems.

II- Democracy

Although, Democracy is a commonly known word all over the world and most of the political movements in the world have made it their goal to establish this system in their respective countries. Yet, the term has become so flexible. Democracy comes from the Greek root words *demos*, meaning 'the people' and *kratia* meaning 'to rule'. So the basic definition of democracy is 'rule by the people' (Dahl, 1989: 3).

In the dictionary definition (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2003), democracy is: "the belief in freedom and equality between people, or a system of government based on this belief, in which power is either held by elected representatives or directly by the people themselves." The same definition is held by Weale (1999: 15). Furthermore, Esposito (1996: 34) considered democracy as a tool to protect people's rights and liberties and recognise their freedom to express their views.

Ghannouchi (Tamimi, 2001:86), however, criticised the style of the Western democracy as inadequate and far from the ideal model of democracy and very different from ancient time's model. Since the elected representatives represent people who have the power to influence the voting mechanism

and the public debate. These groups of people are often minorities who have more financial influence or the ability to mobilise a large number of motivated people through religious or ideological means. It is, therefore, according to him "nothing more than the rule of the elite in the name of the people". Many other Muslim thinkers such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi (Qaradawi, 1999) share the same view. Ghannoushi further highlighted the point that, while the West preaches democracy and freedom of speech at home, it has done little to advance these values outside its borders. The real problem according to Ghannoushi lies in some aspects of philosophy as those of Darwin and Hegel who provide justification for using force against the weak (Tamimi, 2001:87).

Mahathir, outgoing Malaysian prime minister, (Esposito, 1996: 142) bitterly criticised the Western democracy that, the Bosnian Muslims were suppressed by the Serbs in the majority's name.

What people would appreciate, therefore, is a more sympathetic and even-handed West that exercises what it preaches. In terms of contemporary experience, Abu-Diyak (2003) argued that Washington will support its views on democracy after Saddam's capture and prove that using power against any political system is a lawful mean in order to restore democracy.

The problem that the West is facing for restoring democracy in the Muslim world knowing that the real oppressors of the Muslims are their oppressive and corrupt governments. If they promote democracy in the region and facilitate democratic elections then - as in Algeria - the people are likely to elect Islamist parties committed to Islamist law (Esposito, 1996:171).

These governments will almost certainly turn their faces even more strongly against Western foreign policies and turn their military objectives against Israel. In Saudi Arabia their precious oil supplies will be threatened. This Gordian knot is the challenge for liberal Westerners.

In this context Taslima Nasreen (Salles, 2002), a Bangladeshi writer, argued that the true Islam is against democracy. Therefore, there is a great need to combat Islam in order to create

a moderate Muslim society because Islam itself is not moderate.

In contrast to this view Turabi, a Sudanese Islamist leader, (Esposito, 1996: 92) argued that the Islamic movement is highly democratic and everybody should participate on the basis of *Shura* (consultation). Contemporary Islamic parties and Islamic scholars think of a political system in which government will run the country through parliament. Yet, there exists some difference of opinion among the Islamic groups on democracy. Abu-al-Ala al-Mawdudi (Esposito, 1996: 23) criticised Western democracy because of its secularism and the concept of the sovereignty of the people which contradicts with the sovereignty of God.

Al-Qaradawi (Qaradawi, 1999) accepted the idea of democracy in Islam under certain conditions, where Islamic principles cannot be violated in the name of democracy. Kabuli (1994: 11) argued further that democracy is fully compatible with Islam and is also required. According to Iqbal (Ali, 1978: 269) Islam prescribes democracy under the law of Allah. Iqbal views democracy as the best political system had it been founded upon spiritual and moral values.

Democracy varies according to the places and circumstances where it is practiced. It is evident from the above discussion that many Islamic thinkers conditionally accepted the term 'democracy'.

In my view, democracy could reach its peak of perfection and bring even more happiness to humanity with the adoption of Islamic principles of equality, tolerance, and justice.

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