
THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE TRANSCENDENCE AFFIRMING AND THE TRANSCENDENCE NEGATING WORLD VIEWS

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I foresee my role as a trouble maker rather than as a path breaker. I would rather be critical than constructive. I have come here with a plea rather than an academic statement which can always come later.

The intellectual conflict between traditional Islam which also comes in some forms in Islamism and modern secularism is getting vicious and out of hand. I do believe that there is a common ground between the modern world and Islam, even if we do have areas of disagreement.

Somebody said when the theological is lost so is the moral. And when the moral is lost so is the political. So I will try and re-assert that God is essential for governance. It is not an out dated idea. Of course God is a transcendent concept and its institutionalisation always creates problems.

The crux of the problem is that today we have two world views. One is the transcendence affirming world view and the others are transcendence negating world views. This means in terms of ultimate values there will be a conflict between persons who believe that the universe is self contained, available to us and we can reach it. Man is the centre of the universe. The others believe that there is transcendence and mystery. Islam will never give up its right to claim that the world is not totally accessible to man. The world has a dimension of mystery and transcendence.

But this does not mean that the Muslim cannot co-exist with other world views and even other types of communities. In order to this we have to have two kinds of analysis. One of modernity and its institutions and one of Islam. I think there has been some confusion in the order of values and priorities.

First we have to look at the myth of the state. I am using this word with care. Every theory of the state is also a myth. What does the myth of the modern state stand for? I do not see any problems if we turn the modern discourse on its head and make Islam a totally autonomous, self-referential system that is not in any need of corroboration or correction from other world views.

Now modernity and the adherents of secularism may in such a case enter into dialogue with Islam but only on Islamic terms and on the pre-condition of acknowledging the possibility of transcendence in human affairs.

Such a stance, when applied to modernity, would lead to certain kinds of observations and analysis of the modern state and civil society. The problem between state and society is not a transparent one. I will use the word "state" to begin with and I will return to civil society later.

My first observation is that modernity espouses the metaphysics of emanatism within which the state or secular body politic assumes certain attributes that theistic religions ascribe to the

transcendent God. The modern state is defined by a discernable territory, the actual locus of its sovereignty, to which the ruler and the ruled are equally subservient remains illusive and unidentifiable.

It differs from earlier polities where the actual person of the sovereign in his capacity as a deputy God on earth literally represented the body politic. The modern state does not reveal the ultimate seats of its authority. It remains hidden within the myth of the state, behind the mass of the nation, people or citizens.

The state as the embodiment of the spirit of a nation or a people is therefore as emotive, mystical and intractable an idea as God in the traditional discourse of theocracy.

Unlike God whose sovereignty often translates into a moral code that transcends indeed devalues, the purely political concerns of the political community, the nation as such is not the source of any absolute morality. It does not incarnate any categorical imperative beyond the preservation of the political self.

A theory of the state which does not have God idolises politics. Governance and the state becomes the be all and end of existence. This is the first observation. Muslims should not accept a theory of state which becomes the be all and end all of existence.

The second feature of the modern state, which devolves from the acceptance of territory as its body is the renunciation to all claims of universality. There are many polemics. We do not realise that the modern state, being territorial is not a universal state.

I am very happy that I am sitting here in Britain because this is where the problem started. One king had a problem with his wife so he said there is no common wealth. We have to have our own. So the universality of the commonwealth was challenged by the King and later on the ideals of parochial states emerged.

My moral observation is that because of the self imposed restriction on state sovereignty the political discourse of the nation state abandons the universal for the parochial. Instead of espousing common or universal norms it propagates a morality of thick and thin. This is the title of a recent book by Michael Walser. He claims that morality also has two sides, one for people close to us and the other for the others.

This is fine but we will see that from the Islamic point of view these are problematic assertions.

So in denouncing the ideals of the universal polity the secular state has managed to strangle the idea of a single humanity as well.

I can see that whatever I am saying does not belong to political science today. But as a Muslim I cannot give up my right to think in these universalistic themes even if they belong to the medieval period in European history.

A third trait of the modern state is that it reduces politics to economics. The main political discourse today is about money and how wealth is created. But there are counter trends. Modern man has a code of morality but there are problems with it from an Islamic point of view.

So the system of the modern state and the coercive world order that it has engendered cannot contain Islamic consciousness. It spills over. To be a Muslim is not to give total allegiance to a state or a theory of governance or world order.

When I say this it is quite clear that being a Muslim means transcending the practical concerns in some sense because we cannot give up the idea of "akhira" (hereafter), something that transcends all our understanding.

When I say that the claims of the universal demands of an Islamic consciousness cannot be appeased by a coercive order or a parochial state or the transcendent rationale of Islamic commitment cannot be compromised by the booms of a global market or the gadgetry of a civil society, it does not mean Islam must renounce historical existence as inauthentic or non-Islamic.

I also say that it is not to carry out a spurious ideological transaction whereby we Muslims barter the inauthentic or ignoble presence for an authentic and glorious past. I am advocating neither a politics of cultural despair nor an orthodoxy of Christian faith. When we want to look the modern world in the eye these are not the only options available.

I am saying this because unfortunately much of the revivalist Islamic thought sees the world very pessimistically. It thinks the only option is to create an autonomic Islamic order without any connections to others. I am against this and I think a middle ground is possible.

To be the children of today's world, the modern world, it means we have to make some sort of compromise with the existential political reality. Whatever charity and generosity we have has to start in the present. So we have to start with the modern world despite the fact that it cannot appease our conscience fully.

Here I have strong reservations about those who would reduce Islam to an ideology. By ideology I mean a pure theory of governance. I would say that Islam is definitely more than a theory of governance. Actually it is something transcendent, a theory of governance may be a result of this belief in the ultimate but it is not the be all and end all.

Now for my plea. The separation of church and state for which there are no Islamic models simply because Islam lacks a church can in my opinion be accepted by an Islamic conscience. Even the classical fuqaha (jurists) accepted a division of the sacred law into obligations that are indispensable and incumbent for salvation and obligations that may be dispensed with or delegated to others.

This classification actually paves the way for the beautification of the sacred law into the civil in a public sphere and into a religious and private sphere. So I think that without falling into the secularist ideology we can still claim a kind of separation. It is possible on authentic Islamic grounds. What militates against such a development in Muslim societies is not any Islamic propensity for violence or fundamentalism as the anti-Islamic rhetoric so brazenly proclaims but the refusal of current regimes to grant their Muslim citizens the most fundamental of rights which the secular state grants, namely freedom of conscience and religion. These freedoms are taken for granted in a secular state.

Islam in the Muslim context is construed not as a formal separation of church and state but an absolute ban on Islamic political conscience and a denial of its right to partake in public debate and propose public policies no matter how peacefully and democratically this civic conscience articulates itself. In the final analysis it is not an issue of Islamic militancy or oppression but that of the despotic, absolutist, undemocratic nature of the secular Muslim regimes.

A democratic Muslim state, in my view, is able to meet all the challenges of secular morality and human rights and appease all the demands of the Islamic conscience.

I will conclude with my plea. There is a way out for Muslim thought to come to terms with secularity. Not secularism as a claim for truth or a world view for emanatism as the ultimate scheme of things, but secularism as a way of dealing with the other.

There are problems with the liberal theory as well in which citizenship is taken to be universal. But citizenship is limited by territory. Refugees are confronted with this problem. "The other" is always a problem but I do believe Islamic universalism is a way out of it. Islam has its own moral

resources for creating pluralism and acceptance of others. When Muslims are maligned so much we should realise that the Muslim state was the first pluralist state in history in that sense that it gave the right of existence to the foreigner who was a citizen of the Islamic state.

I am not saying that these provisions and injunctions are acceptable today. We have to work on them. Islam has its own means and resources to come to grips with pluralism.

But in many cases the Muslim state has been a disaster. It has given us a model of a political order which is a travesty of Islam. Religiously it is a heresy and politically it is a totalitarian nightmare.

The problem comes from two different systems - one based on territoriality and the other based on a community. When a square is imposed on a circle the result is a carton.

Civil society provides a more attractive approach for the Muslims. All the Muslim states are territorially based, part of the United Nations having signed the Conventions on Human Rights etc

It is impossible to by pass this system. What the Serbs are doing is reprehensible. This is from a by gone era.

As far as plural society is concerned all the thoughts and visions of Islam can be applied. To do this we have to leave aside the classical fikr (thought), at least fikr should accept that muamalat (dealings amongst people) should be discussed in addition to shurah.

If we want democracy in the Muslim world we have to ensure that the Muslim methodology of fikr is not used as a totalitarian method. It does not claim its legitimacy everywhere. We have to set up an an assembly where the Muslims, as lay men, not as fukha, can deliberate, discuss and reach decisions. I call for the popularisation of fiqh. I think there are models within the Islamic system which itself can be applied.

Al Ghazali the great philosopher, Sufi and thinker, really polemicies against the fuqaha'a (jurists) . He says this kind of discourse may have something to do with salvation. It may have something to do with you but you are fooling yourselves.

It is clear that the discourse of fikr is not the ultimate aim of Muslims. Civil society presents a more palatable and more attractive body for Muslims to interact with. So we are given a new challenge. Let this challenge be met not through the exercise of jurist reason or the cognition of fikr that is reductionist and parochial but through the cultivation of visionary and utopian discourse that is fully alert to the moral demands of Koranic universalism. Let Islam struggle for a just temporal order in Muslim homelands. Islam's quest for an eternal peace in the soul of man and the city of humanity should not be eclipsed.

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