**The Legitimacy of the Religious Voice**

**in the Public Sphere**

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The place and legitimacy of the religious voice in the “public square” of discourse about the future of any given government and society seems to face a growing challenge. This matters because it risks becoming a point of profound and deepening cultural differ­ence between a West which seems ever more committed to secular­ism and a Muslim world where this is seen as fundamentally to at­tempt the impossible, namely a literal dis-integration of the state and the divine. Accordingly, some hard questions need to be asked about how needful this division really is. But in turn the issues will cut many ways.

If, on the one hand, there is reason to question the legitimacy of excluding *a priori* religiously informed opinion, there is, on the other hand also, a quite proper need for religious protagonists to explain the basis upon which those of another faith or none should be asked to consider their claims to insight. Moreover, there is a need to note that claims to some inner light not available to all, may not always be found where most expected. For example, the latest “cutting edge” interpretation of what is entailed by a general commitment to human rights need not be inherently exempt from an obscurity as deep as many a claim to private illumination in other domains. Merely proclaiming a view “self-evident” is hardly a guarantee of validity either – unless of course some privileged status akin to what in earlier times might have been called an ora­cle is also vested upon the happy proponent. The latest new liberal thinking in the West can also look rather like the latest guise of imperialism from the perspective of those elsewhere, unless of­fered with compelling justification. Why should any in the West feel they have a special claim to moral insight save insofar as they can articulate a basis for it that is available to all, and *vice versa*, why should not the same hold true for those in the Muslim world who would claim a unique and specifically religious moral insight?

Islamic thought finds it impossible to close off any area of life from submission to God. Accordingly, the very concept of exclud­ing the religious dimension from public life and social policy is likely to seem to most Muslims not merely wrong but actually im­possible. In the West, by contrast, society has become accustomed to a seemingly ever more accommodating church, so this can seem not only possible but proper. In part this is a legacy of the New Testament phrase of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of St Matthew “render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s“ (22, 2) Ἀπόδοτε οὖν τὰ Καίσαρος Καίσαρι καὶ τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ τῷ θεῷ perhaps reinforced in the Gospel of St John (18,36) where Christ states to Pontius Pi-late “My kingdom is not of this world”. Such language certainly helped to enable a distinction to be made between the sphere of politics and the sphere of religion, which is often spoken of as that between church and state, that remains alien within Islam. Though ironically, one of the criticisms sometimes made by Muslims of the West is that this distinction reflects an over-spiritualisation! Thus Mohammad Imara argued that the Church had erred through this dualism and by consequently allowing itself to be restricted to the salvation of the soul alone[[1]](#footnote-1). All of which brings out how important it is that these issues should be explored and addressed as part of Muslim-West dialogue.

One of the factors making this issue pressing is an increasingly ag­gressive and exclusivist secularism in the West where there can be a tendency to equate religion with the irrational and an unwilling­ness to take religion seriously, or to understand it in its own terms. The temptation is seemingly growing in certain circles, to view re­ligion as some sort of quaint personal hobby, akin perhaps to danc­ing or some other personal amusement, that should best be prac­ticed by consenting adults in private. Save that the occasional ex­ception can be tolerated at times when the use of colourful cos­tumes and quaint rituals can make for a pleasing spectacle deemed fitting to enlarge the general sum of human merriment. Though there is also the shadow of a secular Puritanism growing too, such that a parallel may soon be drawn by its zealots with such sinister practices as smoking. There is a growing band for whom passivity is not enough and whose hostility to religion in any form makes them seek active measures to discourage participation and to “pro­tect” others from contamination!

Religion has been often and variously analyzed as really being an expression of something else, such as a quest for identity, psycho­logical security or an oblique quest for power. But beyond that there are other often unstated thoughts at work that profoundly im­pede an adequate understanding, namely, that religion is somehow a relic of primitivism that we should now overcome; that it is divi­sive and thus best ignored or suppressed; or, most darkly of all, that it ultimately partakes of the irrational. (It often being oddly pre­sumed that somehow when mankind leaves God out of considera­tion it is inherently being more rational, which is surely a leap of faith in itself if ever there was one!) But perhaps the strangest curi­osity of thought in this area arises when these presumptions are made at the same time as arguing that religion is in decline and is, or ought to be, defunct. To be in denial about the power of a phe­nomenon so manifestly widespread can only impede effective en­gagement. It also ignores the fact that the last century has been the time of greatest growth in numbers for both Christianity and Islam.

If such points seem at first somewhat abstract, it can quickly be shown that the intellectual understandings we use to frame the mat­ters at hand will in fact be critically important to the ways in which we succeed or fail to understand the problems and, in turn, the pos­sible solutions.

**Modernity, Secularism and Religion**

There was at one time a “modern” view that as societies developed and industrialized religious faith and observance would decline. In support of this thesis some argued that doctrines of religion are in conflict, in one way or another, with science and that as the pres­tige of science rises with the reach of technology based upon it, then so, religious belief might be expected to decline. Alterna­tively, some argued from the perspective of sociology that, as lo­calized community life eroded in the face of globalization then re­ligion (understood in these terms as an expression of identity rather than of conviction) could be expected to decline. But whatever the rationales put forward, there was a clear implication that the intel­lectual “high ground”, so to speak, could not belong to those who are religious and that with the march of progress the assorted phe­nomena of religion should appropriately retreat and wither. By way of underscoring the privileged status given to this perspective, such views were often seen as the fruit of “The Enlightenment” – no matter that to make such an exclusive attribution is to slight the Classical precursors of such radicalism among some of the ancient Greeks, who would rather have asserted that “Man is the measure of all things” than ask “What is man that thou shoulds’t regard him?”

Initially, there may seem plausibility to part of the sociological ar­gument. As the recent work of Philip Jenkins has made clear, many of the areas in the world with the most developed economies, such as Western Europe, are ones of declining religious observance, whereas the most rapid growth is in the third world and in Africa especially. Yet, in North America, religious observance remains strikingly high as compared with Europe, so there is clearly noth­ing inevitable about a decline in religion following a rise in eco­nomic development.

Then again, there is also the challenge of the “post-modern”. How­ever hard it may be to define, this movement would seem to entail an hostility to the very possibility of objective, external or tran­scendent truth, preferring to think of worlds where everything is about meaning or where, to put it another way, to be is to have meaning. Moreover, the act of conferring meaning can be analyzed in terms of an exercise of power and subjugation by virtue of being an act of picking out what is meaningful from what is otherwise uncategorized. On such a view, the world as it truly is, can be deemed no more than a ‘collection of subjectivities’ beyond which we can have no basis to think we can reach. The availability of ob­jective facts and the possibility of an explanation of such facts by means of a testable theory is, in this perspective, liable to condem­nation as an exercise of positivism and even just raw power to the point of mere imperialism: thus at once, can hermeneutics and poli­tics combine to radical effect.

One point of ironic interest to note, however, is that the post-modern critique can be as damaging to secularism as to religion. More specifically, insofar as it undercuts the possibility of access to the objective and the way things are independent of ourselves, it undermines too the force of secularism’s common attack on relig­ion as legitimizing the holding of unwarranted beliefs. What, after all, in such a perspective grounds secularism as somehow more warranted than anything else, unless it is an implicit claim of privi­leged access to the real, albeit in the ‘real absence’ so to speak of divinity?

Which brings into relief the matter of just what secularism itself is. As a term it goes back to the world of Rome where a *Saeculum* was an epoch of about one hundred and ten years (conceived as the longest span of a human life) the end of which was usually the oc­casion of large-scale celebrations in the form of games and sacri­fices conducted by the Roman state[[2]](#footnote-2). In later mediaeval use, from the twelfth century onwards, there came to be a distinction made among Christian clergy between those who were “Regular” in that they were members of a religious order and followed a “Rule of life” and those who were “in the world” and thus “secular”. How­ever, in its modern sense, the term seems to have been first em­ployed in the middle of the nineteenth century by G.J. Holyoake (d. 1906) who used it for an intellectual system which seeks to inter­pret and order life on principles taken exclusively from this “secu­lar” world and without reference to belief in God and any future life after death. However, the concept was apparently only later developed in a much more systematic and explicitly atheist direc­tion by Charles Bradlaugh (1833-91) who at that time felt it was actually a reason to leave the Church of England that he had be­come an atheist and succumbed to “free thinking”. He served as President of the then novel London Secular Society from 1858­1890.

It is worth noticing that the word “secular” can be used independ­ently of the word “godless” in English, whereas in some languages, notably Arabic, the two concepts tend to combine. This has the ef­fect of immediately preventing any sense of the word “secular” be­ing somehow neutral in regard to religion and the existence or non­existence of God. This gives an immediately hard and atheistic edge to secularism as a concept, which many of its proponents in the West often seem to wish to avoid.

In Arabic the normal term for secularism is 'almaniyya and accord­ing to the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo this word is derived from 'alam (world), and not from 'ilm (science), as has sometimes been supposed, a point of etymological exactitude that matters, since the latter could be taken to give the impression that science is somehow opposed to religion.[[3]](#footnote-3)

At some level the rise of secularism in the West does seem, typi­cally, to reflect unease about the legitimacy of religious claims and their warrant for shaping society and its laws and structures. In par­ticular, it usually seems to be the product of a belief that, in es­sence, religion seeks a freedom for people to believe things on in­adequate or no evidence. Thus there does seem to be a rationalist engine driving the secularist agenda. But it at least merits consid­eration that the self-understanding of those who are religious may not always fit this analysis. For example, many religious people would not feel it adequate to their experience to understand reli­gious belief as reducible to decisions regarding the balance of probabilities according to a rationalist calculus even if they do not exclude the possibility of such an enterprise. Moreover, how does the secularist derive a warrant for defining religion on secularist terms? By what authority does secularism warrant its normative ambitions? And what about a person’s claim to self-definition? Why should a secularist be granted the privilege to decide that the self-understanding of the religious person is wrong?

Such considerations make it harder to see secularism in the guise of religious neutrality that it often seeks – as when it claims merely to be providing a “safe space” in which most religions may with equal advantage engage. It may seem on the one hand merely rea­sonable neutrality to suggest that it is not the place of the state or civil society to support the advocacy of any religion. But if it turns out that this position is based upon a prior judgment that, religion is an exercise in believing the intellectually unwarranted, then the “safe space” may look altogether less inviting.

There is nothing neutral about any judgment, howsoever implicit, that religious beliefs can have no right to claim truth. Surely most religious believers would claim not that they hold their beliefs be­cause they are religious, but rather, because they are true. Accord­ingly, religion is surely engaged at some levels in the contest for truth with all the rights and risks that this entails, just indeed as secularism is too. There is every reason to question whether secu­larism should be granted a trans-cultural standing seemingly denied to all else. And there are many other complex questions that invite to be addressed at this point, such as whether it is possible to be a pluralist without being relativist, or indeed, a liberal *and* a pluralist, but such must be left for another occasion. For the present, it is enough to say that if the intent behind the advocacy of secularism is to provide protection *for* religion that is one thing, but if the in­tent is to provide protection *from* religion that is quite another. It is certainly very hard to see why the state should grant to secularism a special right to adjudicate the nature and content of religion and yet exactly that, it would seem, may well be involved in granting the Western secularist case.

Fazlur Rahman has well expressed how alien such a perspective is from the Muslim mind:

*“The central concern of the Qur’an is the conduct of man. Just as in Kantian terms no ideal knowledge is possible without the regulative ideas of reason (like first cause), so in Qur’anic terms no real morality is possible without the regulative ideas of God and the Last Judgment. Further, their very moral function requires that they exist for re-ligio-moral experience and cannot be mere intellectual postulates to be “believed in”. God is the transcendent and anchoring point of attributes such as life, creativity, power, mercy, and justice and of moral values to which human so­ciety must be subject if it is to survive and prosper… ….secularism destroys the sanctity and universality (tran­scendence) of all moral values – a phenomenon whose ef­fects have just began to make themselves felt, most palpa­bly in Western Societies. Secularism is necessarily atheis­tic…”*[[4]](#footnote-4)

The words of a frequently quoted phrase are even more specific: “Islam is a religion and a state” (Islam din wa dawla) and in the words of Tariq al-Bishri, "secularism and Islam cannot agree ex­cept by means of talfiq (i.e. the combining the doctrines of more than one school, and thus, falsification), or by each turning away from its true meaning.” [[5]](#footnote-5)

Yet it is surely apposite to make the point, that if all Muslims were entirely of one mind on this matter then how could secularism be so controversial, as it clearly is *within* the Muslim world? In the words of Fauzi M. Najjar “if there is no secularism in the Arab-Muslim world, what is the ado all about?”

The noted Egyptian literary figure and poet, Ahmad Abd al-Mu'ti Hijazi argued that secularism is not incompatible with the “essence of Islam.” In explaining this conclusion, he gives a very specific definition of secularism as meaning “that man is the master of his earthly fate, and that reason is his primary means to controlling his destiny, and achieving progress for himself and for mankind. Free­dom is the condition of a rational human existence.” Thus he can go on to conclude that Arab secularists can therefore defend their secularism “not only by its indispensability for progress, democ­racy, liberation of thought and reason, and the assimilation of the culture of the age, but also by its compatibility with the essence of Islam, which glorifies human life, rejects priesthood, encourages ijtihad, and makes the public interest the guiding principle of in­vestigation and choice.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Perhaps the key to the possibility of feeling able to be both a Mus­lim and a secularist in this sense, lies precisely in the careful use of language, with the result that being secular in this sense, is not at all the same thing as being irreligious. If so then the contest over secularism so defined is a false battle. On this approach to secular­ism the legitimacy of religion is not in doubt, rather what is being affirmed is the place of reason and freedom in this world. By con­trast, in the West, the issue with secularism is that it can seek to deny religion the freedom to reason and the right to be heard and to make its case about what is good for mankind at all.

In the West, there is a perceived problem in the minds of some about the fact that most religions (and certainly the Abrahamic ones) dare to make claims to truth when some would prefer to view religion as about mere emotion and aesthetics instead. And cer­tainly at some stage, this point about truth-claims gives rise to the challenge of how it is possible to claim to be right, or to believe what is true, and yet claim no privilege over those consequently thought to be deeply mistaken. (Yet, as was pointed out earlier, this is not in fact a problem unique to religion, rather it is a problem for the project of making truth claims at all. So in the end precisely the same implicit problem arises for secularism.) After all, the more something is felt to be true, the more it may be felt desirable that society should recognize this truth.

The questions raised at this point are too many and too large even to cover let alone resolve here, but it may at least be suggested that in fact no one perspective – including that of secularism – can properly be privileged. Much difficulty must arise in the face of any claim either to privileged status (as when a proposition is said to be self-evident) or privileged access to the basis upon which par­ticular claims are made (as when they are held to be revealed) when they are of import for social, legal or moral policy. An im­portant challenge for any religious tradition that wishes to claim unique insights arises here, since, insofar as the basis for those in­sights cannot be shared, then why should there be any expectation that others, who are not believers in that particular religious tradi­tion, should find them compelling? It may be objected that if the basis for any particular claims can be fully shared and set out to anyone regardless of their beliefs, then there will be no basis to claim that the insights are uniquely Christian or Muslim or what­ever. Yet this does not have to follow. The particular religious *per­spective* may be unique, as Faslur Rahman seeks to explain above, yet it is likely that when it comes to an explanation of why this or that moral precept is proposed, for example, then sooner or later it may well be held to be in conformity with what is conducive to human flourishing. If this move is made, it can offer the basis for a debate and grounding that is in principle open and indeed common to all. This need be no surprise, since a benevolent God might be expected to will that which is best for mankind, with the result that the moral and the legal should ultimately all coincide (with what is indeed conducive to human flourishing). This should all, at least in principle, be open to reasonable discussion. Accordingly, even these few brief considerations may suffice to adumbrate the point that insofar as religious traditions have unique proposals to make, there cannot be a legitimate basis for a blanket exclusion of them *a priori* from the debate of the “public square” upon a mere pre­sumption that they somehow *must* be sub-rational – unless perhaps that view itself is claimed as a revelation.

1. al-'Almaniyya wa Nahdatuna al-Haditha, Cairo, 1986 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. on sources, G.B. Pighi, *De Ludis Saecularibus Populi Romani Quiritium*, Milan, 1941. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Some writers suggest the Arabic term ‘alamaniyya in order to avoid possible confusion while others prefer dunyawiyya (worldly) in contrast to dini (religious). It is of interest to note that in Coptic liturgy, the term ‘almaniyyun is used to con­note laymen as distinct from the clergy. Cf. Fauzi M. Najjar, “The debate on Islam and secularism in Egypt” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Spring, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Islam and Modernity*, Chicago 1982, p. 14-15; the writings of Abd al Wahab El-Messiri and Tariq Al Bishri on secularism are also relevant here.. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Al-Ahram, 12 December 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “al-'Almaniyya Faridat al-'Ilm wa al-Hurriyya,” *Al-Ahram*, 26 July 1989, quo­ted by Fauzi M. Najjar, op.cit [↑](#footnote-ref-6)