

**Religious Fundamentalism And Secularism:
With Special Reference To Islam**

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Religion as a concept

Religion is neither a logico-mathematical nor a scientific concept that could be defined precisely and without any ambiguity; nor is it a physical object whose properties can be delineated and described without any room for controversy; thus there can be no final and commonly agreed upon definition of religion. Like justice, love and beauty the term religion may mean different things to different people. So the answer to the question "what is Religion?" can never be simple. The individual assimilates the language of a particular linguistic group at a particular stage of history and along with the language he/she assimilates the ideology that is woven in the very fabric of the language, so usually the individual remains unaware of the fact that his concept of religion is informed by a particular ideology that gives birth to certain particular models and those particular models happen to be only a few among many other possible models. Synchronically the semantic field does not only differ from one linguistic group to another linguistic group, but also from one individual to another individual within the same linguistic group depending upon the relative maturity of the individual concerned. Diachronically also it differs at various points of linguistic evolution within the same linguistic group.

Within these linguistic parameters let us propose a definition of the concept for the sake of discussion. Religion is a set of beliefs, values, and practices that form a vision or world-view that is not amenable to any empirical verification. But this is an abstract definition and the moment we attempt to give some content to this abstract formula we find ourselves immersed in a sea of difficulties. The reason for this is that one's concrete understanding of religious concepts is an essential part of one's basic world-view which, as has already been pointed out, is a product of cultural conditioning. The individual assimilates the interpretations current in his own culture and usually accepts them as true. The very concept of religion differs from culture to culture, but each religion has various aspects and elements that constitute it as a vision or world view and translate it into a plan of action in various spheres of human life. Now the question as to which of the elements are most important that constitute the foundation of a particular religious tradition has definitely more than one answer. The answer may vary from one group to another group belonging to the same religious

tradition at a particular stage of history depending upon their relative socio-politico-economic and spiritual evolution; it may also vary from one group to another group belonging to the same religious tradition but at the different stages of history. It may also vary from one individual to another individual belonging to the same tradition depending upon their relative maturity and spiritual evolution.

Fundamentalism

Literally speaking, a religious fundamentalist is one who believes in and would like to realise certain principles of a religious tradition which he considers to be fundamental to the tradition. In the opinion of the present writer a fundamentalist may not necessarily be a fanatic or a dogmatic. On the contrary, he might have selected the principles after due comprehension, consideration and critical evaluation. They might be quite broad based and may have a universal appeal, like the principles of: service to mankind, universal brotherhood, peace, truth, love and *ahimsa* (non-violence). We have a galaxy of religious and spiritually evolved individuals belonging to different religious traditions for whom some of these principles were the foundational principles of their religious creed and consequently the guiding forces of their lives. Thus, the problem is not fundamentalism, but any uncritical, unexamined and dogmatic fixation upon any particular gestalt of religion. Take the instance of Mahatma Gandhi. He had great admiration for all the religious texts, but at the same time he urged a rational and critical approach to their understanding and interpretation. Mahatma was a fundamentalist of sorts; remember the incident of his son's sickness when the doctor had prescribed chicken soup for the ailing child. Gandhi risked his son's life but did not compromise on his principles. He believed in the sanctification of all life. "Politics divorced from religion", was for him "a corpse fit only to be burned". Thus, for him there was no separation between religion and politics. Truth and *Ahimsa* were fundamental principles of Gandhi's creed and all his life and he strived for their realisation at the cost of his life.

Secularism as articulated in the Indian Constitution implies that religion is a relationship of a personal nature between the believer and the God. It leaves the individual and society free for structuring and restructuring all other spheres: social, economic, political, cultural etc. Secularism also includes religious tolerance. Thus according to this conception the role of religion is essentially inspirational and spiritual rather than legal and/or institutional. Thus, the conception of religion enshrined in the Indian Constitution does not harmonise with Islam, as understood by the average Indian Muslim. But there is an urgent need to develop a unified Islamic perspective which would resolve the conflict between the traditional concept of Islam as a complete code of life and the contemporary secular revolution; and keeping in view the spiritual depth of Islam, this is not an impossible task. But for this we shall have to reinterpret the basic concepts and values of the Islamic tradition. Professor Jamal Khawaja comments:

The Muslim reservations about secularism and the modern conception of religion as a personal relationship between man and God are perfectly natural and understandable. These reservations should be viewed with sympathy rather than anger or negative despair and at the same time all efforts should be made by Muslim intellectuals to educate the Muslim mind in its basic task of cultural self evolution. Muslims as a body must be helped to liberate themselves from a rigid fixation upon the medieval gestalt of Islam as distinct from its essence as such. They must be helped to realise that while the essence of Islam is eternally valid, no particular interpretation of the basic essence should be regarded as immutable, such that the slight departure from it amounted to disbelief, disrespect or disloyalty to God and the Prophet.[1]

It is this fixation upon a particular interpretation of Islam, this conditioning with a certain inherited model that creates problems. The uncritical and unexamined acceptance of certain principles as fundamental to a religious creed and an ideologically informed interpretation of these principles makes fundamentalism an undesirable phenomenon. Theoretically, the problem can be addressed at two levels. Firstly, at the level of choosing and selecting the fundamental principles of a particular religious tradition, and secondly, at the level of interpretation of these principles. How a particular gestalt, a particular interpretation of a religious tradition becomes a dominant one has varied and complex reasons, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper. Our task is to explore the possibilities of deconstructing the ideologically informed, traditionally inherited and accepted models. Indicating the possible role of vested interest and ideology in the interpretation of Religious Texts, Prof. R.S Bhatnagar writes:

Like all information, religious information can assume the form of a commodity – a commodity which could be withheld, released partially or in adulterated form, which leads itself to commercialization (and today its political misuse can not escape attention of any serious citizen). The exclusive custody and right to interpret, “the word of God” is more or less a monopoly.[2]

But for the perceptive and discerning minds there are many openings in the prison house of language, although the ideological structures are the hardest to break. Regarding the interpretation and reinterpretation of religious texts the author further writes:

It is important to note that we are not saying that the original texts are to be rewritten or can be rewritten. No letter needs to be altered. But this does not imply that the understanding of one reader can not differ from the understanding of another one..... yet claims to some favored interpretation are institutionalized. Any deviation is frowned upon, nay invites severe indictment. [3]

Ijtihad in Islam

In principle, Islamic Shariah is always open to *Ijtihad*, that is reinterpretation and deduction of laws in the light of the fundamental principles. We have to comprehend and interpret the Qur'an and Sunnah in accordance with the epistemic level attained by the contemporary society. Presently there are four Sunni legal schools and one Shia school. But this is a historical fact that there have been many more schools that have become extinct due to politico-historical exigencies. There have been restrictions on *ijtihad* on the part of various rulers to restrict proliferation of these schools and to maintain the status quo. But these restrictions have been purely political and have little to do with the spirit of Islam. Shaykh Aga Buzurg Tehrani writes:

Adherence to any madhhab (legal school) was not known to Muslims from the time of advent of Islam up to the period when the four madhahib gained currency, and this was nearly after two centuries. But even then, though the concept of madhhab had developed among them, the restriction making it obligatory to follow one of the four madhahib and proscribing others, as mentioned earlier, took place in 7th -13th century at the caliph's order for political reasons. Otherwise the ability to deduce the 'ahkam' (orders) from the Qur'an and the Sunnah is neither confined to any particular country, nor limited to particular persons to the exclusion of others.[4]

Rejecting the limitation on legal schools or Madhahib and calling for the revival of *ijtihad*, Abu-al-Tayyib Siddiq Hassan Khan comments:

One who limits the grace of God to some of his creatures and confines the ability to understand the sacred Shariah to those of the past eras, is guilty of insolence towards God Almighty and His Shariah, which has been laid down for all his servants who adhere to the Qur'an and the Sunnah. If adherence to the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah is limited to the people of by gone ages and if there remains nothing for those who came after them to do except imitate their predecessors and if they can not deduce the knowledge of God's law from the Qur'an and the Messenger's Sunnah, what are the grounds of this false distinction and this spurious dogma.[5]

While discussing the concept of *Ijtihad*, a contemporary writer Mohammad Farid Wajdi observes:

When the Muslims were afflicted by the malaise of social stagnation and affected by the inability to understand the secrets of the Shariah, they took resort in the closure of the gates of Ijtihad and legal inference to conceal their own weakness. The truth is that this door remains open as affirmed by express statements of Qur'an and the Sunnah, till the day of resurrection.[6]

Thus it is amply clear that there is no bar on reinterpreting the Qur'an and the Sunnah in accordance with the epistemic level attained by the contemporary man and a

systematic conceptual framework can be built that will give rise to an Islamic perspective that will harmonise not only with the contemporary knowledge but also with the socio-political realities of the times.

Here the writer would like to touch upon briefly the exclusionist claim that has been traditionally made in the name of Islam. The Qur'an has thoroughly condemned such claims:

And they say none shall enter paradise unless he is a Jew or Christian, these are their vain wishes, say "Bring your proof if you are truthful", yes! Whosoever submits himself to Allah and is doer of good, for him there shall be his reward with his lord, on such shall be no fear nor shall they grieve (al-Quran: 2:110:111).

According to Islam, God's grace is unlimited and there is always room for hope that even those considered most wicked may, by the grace of God, find the way to true repentance and salvation:

"And that grace is in the hand of Allah, He bestows it on whom He will and Allah is lord of Mighty Grace". (al-Quran: 57:29)

To conclude the paper, here is a quote from Legenhausen, Muhammad, a contemporary religious scholar:

As for those who honestly accept an invalid creed it must be admitted that this invalid creed itself may be the vehicle through which God extends to them His grace and leads them to salvation.[7]

References

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