

SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SYSTEM: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Under the impact of the Western civilization, religion has been made to assume a very limited role in human life and society. The spell cast by the, West has held the sway for over two centuries, Things have, however, now begun to change. The dominant Western view of religion, allegedly regarded as the modern view, is now being challenged, both from within the West, and from the outside. There are strong pointers which suggest that the "post-modern" view of religion may turn out to be nearer the vision of religion held by the "pre-modern" cultures and ideologies.

From time immemorial religion represented THE WAY for man, regulating his relationship with God, the Creator, with the universe, with himself, and with the human beings and institutions around him. Man used to see himself in the context of the Divine Reality and his relationship with the entire creation depended upon the way he related himself to the Creator. This has been the concept of religion expounded and lived by all the prophets as the authentic version revealed through them by the Creator Himself. As such religion became the most decisive force in fashioning the personal attitudes and the moral conduct of the individual as well as the social norms and collective ethics of the society. There was no separation between faith and society, between ethics and politics, between morality and economy, between spiritual and material, between this-worldly and that-worldly. It was a comprehensive vision of man and his role in society and a destiny that extended beyond death.

In contra-distinction to the above concept the contemporary Western view of religion, in the making of which some four hundred yours of secular thought and practice have been consumed, is that religion at best represents a private relationship between man and God and is not relevant to the socio-economic, political, scientific and technological aspects of human life. God and His revelation are not relevant to these realms of human existence. If some people want to dispense with God even in their private life, they are free to do so. In a way this would represent the logical consequence of secularization. Yet, even those who regard religion relevant to their belief system and their private life by and large believe that faith and ethics given by religion have no decisive role to play in the political and the socio-economic fields of human activity. The whole fabric of the Western civilization has been built on this, premise. With the expansion of the overt and covert influence of the Western civilization in other parts of the world this approach to religion has also made heavy dent in traditional culture systems of the non-Western world.

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Three Contemporary Responses

This invasion of the Western approach to religion has created three major reactions;

First, a number of people have adopted this approach and become so-called representative of Westernization and modernization in non-Western societies;

Second, a large number of people while consciously ignoring this new approach, have, for all practical purposes assimilated this approach and have tried to readjust their own traditional attitudes, norms and institutions to a state where religion plays only secondary role in life. The new society and its institutions are cast more and more in the shadow of the West. This has shaken the traditional societies and initiated a process of change, which is undermining all the traditional values and institutions even though there may not be an open revolt against them;

Third, a creative counter-attack from the non- Western world has also emerged to challenge the Western approach to religion and to re-assert the concept of religion which different cultures and civilizations of the Non-Western world have represented over the ages.

While all these three re-actions can be seen in the Muslim world, the most significant response relates to the last category. In some substance the contemporary Islamic resurgence represents a creative effort on the part of the Muslim society to redefine its position in the context of a Western approach to religion and its actualization in society.

Islamic Approach to Religion

Islamic concept of God, man and the universe constitute the key to the understanding of the Muslim faith and civilization. Allah is the Creator, the Master, the Sustainer and Nourish of the universe and all that is in or around it, the universe has been created with a definite design and purpose. Man has not appeared on the firmament of existence simply as a result of any historical accident or as a result of a clash of for tuitions forces. He has been created as God's Vicegerent and Deputy (Khalifa) with the mission to structure human life and society in accordance with the guidance revealed by God. Man and universe are not arrayed against each other as rivals, one trying to overwhelm the other, and the other reacting by striving to conquer it. Both have been created for each other and are partners in the common struggle to achieve the Divine purposes in history.

The Islamic view is that the entire creation is gound by the Divine law and as such is Muslim i.e. submitting to the Divine Will: Man has been created with a certain degree of freedom and volition. He has been given the faculties to think and choose. He has not been made subservient to the Divine Will by compulsion; instead in the area where he enjoys freedom he has been invited to discover his way to the Creator and to become Muslim by choice and discretion. By becoming Muslim through voluntary choice he makes a moral decision and commits himself to the path of Islam i.e. a life-long process of striving to conform his will to the Divine V/ill, and his conduct to the

norms of behavior laid down by the Lord. This involves acceptance of the Divine guidance as the source of light and commitment to follow the Divine law to regulate individual and social life and to restructure society and fashion history under this mandate. It is by striving to conform to the Divine law that man becomes in harmony with the whole creation and is able to actualize his destiny in space and time.

This is a revolutionary concept of religion, which on the one hand, produces real commitment to and consciousness of the Divine, of binding oneself to his Master and Creator and to seek true sublimit by becoming the servant and slave of the Lord, and, on the other to awaken in this servant and slave of the Lord, a new man to re-create the World as the trustee of the Divine mission. This approach is unique in a number of ways: It ensures to man spiritual purity and humility vis-avis the Creator; it does not produce an attitude of life- negation and world-renunciation. It does not make man withdraw into the realm of private isolationism, monasticism or asceticism of any kind. Instead, it prepares him for a new socio-historical role to share the Divine light with-the entire human race and to re-structure human society to achieve his goals in history. Power no longer remains a dirty word, relevant only to the world-seekers and self-glorifiers. It now becomes relevant for the saint and the savant to see that the whole social and political life is reordered to glorify God and establish justice amongst human beings. The result is that power is tampered with virtue and justice. Prayer is not confined to the Mosque or the temple or the Church but becomes the order of the day for the entire human existence. God's worship and obedience no longer remains the hallmark of the prayer- chambers but the entire domain of human existence hums with piety and godliness. Sacred and secular no longer represent two autonomous categories; they become subsumed into each other. Prayer and progress become two sides of the same coin. Fulfillment of the Divine mission and establishment of a just order become the vocation of every believer. Faith influences the mainstream of life and fashions the character of the community and the society. Religion becomes the most effective force for the development of culture and civilization.

This is the Islamic approach to religion and society. Islam does not claim to have originated with the Prophet Muhammad (Peace and blessings be on him) but claims that all the Prophets of Allah from Adam to Muhammad (peace and blessings be on all of them) have brought the same message. The uniqueness of Muhammad (peace be upon him) lies in being the one through whom God perfected His religion and completed His message. Now the Divine revelation has been fully protected and preserved in the form in which it was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and a new process has been inaugurated in history which is capable of influencing and restructuring the temporal in the light of the eternal.

Islam aims at establishing a just social order. It purifies man from within. It provides him with a network of norms and values which fashion individual and social life, aiming at achieving proper equilibrium in society. It establishes social institutions to act as catalysts for the evolution of the social and. Economic order it wants to establish. It expounds principles of social relationships and laws to regulate the more sensitive areas within this framework. Islam also provides a vast area for

experimentation and innovation, nonetheless, the framework ensures the establishment of justice in human society which, according to Islam, has been the paramount objectives of all the Prophets of God. In this framework 'power' becomes as much an instrument in the service of the Lord as is prayer or charity or suffering in the pursuit of truth. The ideals, principles and law that Islam has provided eternal value framework that is capable of meeting the demands of all times and peoples.

We would like to conclude this brief essay on the Islamic approach to the social, political and economic system by suggesting that while Islam aims at establishing a unique social order, this social order is not tied to any historical context. It represents a new approach and lays down well-defined ideals, principles, norms and values, which are relevant for all times. It has also established such institutions which are capable of evolving with the passage of time. The purpose being the establishment of a just social order. As this approach to historical change is at odds with most of the dominant social philosophies of our times it would be worthwhile to conclude this brief presentation by highlighting the uniqueness of the Islamic system in simultaneously meeting the needs of permanence and change in society.

The elements of permanence and change co-exist in human society and culture and are bound to remain so. Different ideologies and cultural systems have erred in leaning heavily towards anyone of these ends of the equation. Too much emphasis on permanence makes the system rigid and robs it of flexibility and progress; while lack of permanent value and unchanging elements generate moral relativism, shapelessness and anarchy. What is needed is a balance between the two - a system that could simultaneously cater for the demands of permanence and change. An American judge Mr. Justice Cardozo rightly says: "that the greatest need of our time is a philosophy that will mediate between conflicting claims of stability and progress and supply a principle of growth." Islam presents an ideology which satisfies the demands of stability as well as of change.

Deeper reflection reveals that life has within it elements of permanence and change - neither is so rigid and inflexible that it cannot admit of any change even in matters of detail nor is it so flexible and fluid that even its distinct personality has no permanent character of their own. This becomes clear from observing the process of physiological change in the human body: every tissue of the body changes a number of times in one's life-time, but the person remains the same. Leaves, flowers, and fruits of a tree change, but the character of the tree remains unchanged. It is a law of life that elements of permanence and change must co-exist in a harmonious equation. Only that system of life can cater for all the cravings of human nature and all the needs of society which can provide for both these elements. The basic problems of life remain the same in all ages and climes, but the ways and means to solve them and the techniques of handling the phenomenon undergo change with the passage of time. Islam brings to focus a new perspective on this problem and tries to solve it in a realistic way.

The Qur'an and the Sunnah contain the eternal guidance given by the Lord of the universe. This guidance comes from God who is free from the limitations of 'space' and 'time' and as such the principles of individual and social behavior revealed by Him are based on reality and are eternal. But God has revealed only broad principles and has endowed man with the freedom to apply them in every age in the way suited to the spirit and conditions of that age. It is through the Ijtihad that people of every age try to implement and apply divine guidance to the problems of their times. Thus the basic guidance is of a permanent nature, while the methods of its application can change in response to the peculiar needs of every age. That is why Islam remains as fresh and modern as tomorrow's morn.

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