

Notes

Towards an ‘*Almani* (secular) Pakistani State: Some Reflections

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In the wake of the recent killings of Ahmadis in Lahore some writers have hinted at the desirability of a secular Pakistani state. Sometimes the idea is mooted without using the word secular; proposing that ‘the state must not legislate in matters of faith’ or that religious parties should have ‘no business to be in politics’. Ahmadis are perhaps the biggest victims of sectarianism in Pakistan though they are not the only one. In recent years people of different interpretations of Islam as well as non-Muslims have increasingly suffered violence, large or small.

It is time to undertake a serious soul searching about what role religion should play in the country’s public life. What should be the relationship between state and religion? These are delicate issues and one must be clear about the terms being used.

State and society are two different bodies. Both are very complex and there is no settled definition of either. In general we can say that the state is a body of institutions with authority to rule over a defined territory. It has powers to create and enforce laws and collect taxes. A society, on the other hand, is the name of patterns of relationship and associations whereby individuals are bound by roles, interdependencies, memories and traditions. It is a place in which we live. Hence a secular state is different concept then a secular society.

What about the idea of secular? In Pakistan, and the Muslim world generally, many people baulk at the very mention of the term secular. Partly this is because of the meanings attached to the term since its use in the Muslim societies in the 19th century. Secular has been translated as *dahriya* (materialist) or *la-dini* (nonreligious) – which in turn is taken to mean atheist or, worst, anti-religious. These are bad translations. A better translation is ‘*Almani* or *Dunyawī* (pertaining to this worldly, temporal). Essentially, secular means aspects of life –

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individual or collective – in which one does not rely directly upon religious authority or command.

In this sense, we may note that almost all of us are secular in at least some aspects of our lives. Hardly anyone will be able to claim that his/ her entire life – traffic laws, doing business, choosing a digital camera, colour of the dress or flavour of the ice cream etc - is governed by religious prescriptions. Generally, all of us have parts of our life where we do not draw directly from religion and these parts by definition are secular. Life necessitates secularity in our everyday lives making us live religio-secular lives rather than purely religious or purely secular lives. The main point here is that being secular in parts of our lives does not mean that we become atheist or anti-religious. Being secular also does not mean being immoral. If we do not consult religion about how to drive a car it does not mean that there is no moral responsibility accompanying driving.

And now the idea of a secular state. A secular state is not under the control of religious leaders or groups. Such a state does not tell people what to believe in, how to pray and or how to judge people's religiosity. In a secular state no religion is privileged but all religions can prosper. It does not stop people, or society, from being religious, in-fact it protects people's right to practice freely whatever religion they wish to practice – as observed in Jinnah's well-known speech on August 11, 1947. Under a secular state there can be genuine freedom of conscience for no one has to feign or fear religiosity or practice *taqiya*. It guarantees a free space for religion; not its erosion. [To be precise, it is liberal, welfare, secular state that we are referring to but there is no need to go into various types of secular states here].

Gai Eaton (also known as Hasan Adbul Hakeem) in his book, 'Islam and the Destiny of man' makes a valuable distinction between theocratic state and theocentric society. He points out that what is needed is a theocentric society, not a theocratic (or religious) state. A theocentric society is God-conscious and in its everyday life reflects this through its practice of moral ideas. People in such a society are good by choice and disposition rather than by law and coercion. Leaders chosen by such a society will reflect high morals which will shape governance. In the final analysis, a state can only be as moral as the collective morality of its people.

But why not a religious state, it may be asked? A religious state is not a logical contradiction. Such states have existed and do exist but they fail to meet a very important requirement of our ethical sensibilities. We wish the state and its laws to treat every citizen equally. People get agitated when they believe that some countries – even non-Muslim

countries - do not treat Muslims as equal citizens. The desire for equal citizenship is deeply ingrained. Now, because no country today is religiously homogenous, a religious state will end up privileging some people over another and hence will not treat everyone of its citizens equally. Even when 100% of a country's population is Muslim – which in fact is not the case anywhere – we do not have a religiously homogenous population because of the internal diversity in Islam. This means that an Islamic state in Pakistan is really a Sunni-Hanafi state; an Islamic state in Iran is basically a Shii-Jaferi state and a Saudi Islamic state is actually a Sunni-Hanbali state.

But above all, an Islamic state can never be an Islamic state in the way most of its sincere proponents wish it to be. Many people support the idea of an Islamic state because they believe that all the laws in such a country will be according to the Will of God. But this is precisely what will not happen. Why? Because a contemporary state has to address a huge range of issues; trade, transportation, science, education, health, tax, defence and so on. On most of these issues, there are no direct and categorical commands in the Quran or Sahih Ahadith. So how will an Islamic state make laws in all these areas? In reality, the laws, policies and regulations of an Islamic state will always be based on the understanding and interpretations of religious leaders. But the realm of interpretations is a realm of limited human comprehension, fallibility and subjectivity. Thus, an Islamic state will end up making laws about matters of gender, bioethics, personal relations, schooling, banking etc not on the basis of the Will of the Creator but on the basis of the understanding of certain sections of religious groups. It will be their will that will get imposed on the society, not the Will of God.

Issues around the relationship between religion and politics are not new. They can be found across time and place; from Sophocles' *Antigone* to *Mahabharata* and from the ninth century *Mihna* in Baghdad to the wars of religion in the seventeenth century Europe. For the last 63 years Pakistanis are facing this tension. It is tragically visible in the failure of many to swiftly condemn the killing of Ahmadis. Family discussions, debates on TV and even on the National Assembly appear to suffer from hesitancy. But tragedies also carry opportunities. The question is will we be able to unearth the concealed opportunity in our recent tragic history.