The Debate on Secularism in Contemporary Societies of Muslims’

The ‘Islam and secularism’ debate began a century ago and does not seem to have proceeded. Prevailing attitudes, both ‘pro’ and ‘con’, are apparently locked in a stalemate of positions. What are the actors of different trends resting more or less the same formulations on this issue? Is it possible to find a likely interpretation for such a phenomenon?

The Misunderstanding about Secularism

The issue of secularism is addressed in different ways depending on the context. The text is Muslim or Christian. In the latter case, it is treated as a process, i.e. a set of historical changes supposed to have affected the regulation and the morality and performed the rituals of the word, as alienation. Hence, the turn taken by the debate in the public arena, with the small exception of some academic circles. Secularists found themselves, except during some short intervals, as, for example, when nationalism dominated on the defensive. Their enthusiastic and vibrant apologetics of rationalism, progress, development, freedom, democracy, etc., as by-products of secularism, were often successfully faced by accusations from their opponents of unbelief, disrespect for the ‘authentic’ values of society and sometimes, implicitly, if not openly, of treachery.

Secularism vs. Secularization

The consequence of this evolution may be described as boldly paradigmatic in a double sense. On one hand, one cannot avoid superficial surprise at the fact that Islam, which potential- ly has less to oppose secularist worldviews and ideals, would come to be seen as the most resistant to secularism. As E. Gellner says: “The high culture of Islam is endowed with a num- ber of features – fanaticalism, a rule, ethic, individualism, scripturality, puritanism, an egalitarian avarice to mediation and hierarchy, a fairly small load of magic – that are con- gruent, presumably, with requirements of modernity or modernisation.” The consequence of this evolution may be described as boldly paradigmatic in a double sense. On one hand, one cannot avoid deep surprise at the fact that Islam, which potential- ly has less to oppose secularist worldviews and ideals, would come to be seen as the most resistant to secularism. As E. Gellner says: “The high culture of Islam is endowed with a num- ber of features – fanaticalism, a rule, ethic, individualism, scripturality, puritanism, an egalitarian avarice to mediation and hierarchy, a fairly small load of magic – that are con- gruent, presumably, with requirements of modernity or modernisation.”

The reasons for an Impasse

The ideas of All Abderraouq were strongly opposed. He was finally silenced, as were other voices. One can only question the accuracy of this formulation: although seculariza- tion has, in a way, happened (or at least achieved many of its effects), secularism is seemingly rejected by the majority of the popu- lation. The call for implementation of the sharia, which constitutes the main slogan of fundamentalist movements, shows how conserva- tives feel the disruption of the orthodox tradition and its drifting from what they consider to be the religious norms.

It was Al-Abdennaz (1888-1966) who, in the mid-twentieth, proposed what may be the best approach to bring to a match the prevailing conceptions and the actual situation within societies of Muslims. His main idea, which he exposed in his famous essay, Al-Hilal wa-Usof al-Hilal (Islam and the Foundations of Political Power. Cairo, 1925), was to introduce a clear distinction between Islam as a complex of beliefs, moral norms and rituals, which can be traced to sacred texts (first ‘meaning’), and Islam as the history of a community who attempted to live up to its beliefs and to imple- ment the morality and perform the rituals which stem from them (second ‘meaning’). The community has thus always been considered to be the religious norms.

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3. Even in academic circles, most approaches address the question from the framework of the divide between Islam and Western values, modernity, democracy, human rights, secularism... strengthening the reduction of line of followers in the subsequent years, espe- cially in the academe, the direction he explored remained neglected. Thus one may nowadays wonder whether the impasse of societies of Muslims is due to the continuous presence of small groups of determined activists who, in the absence of the intervention of political authorities, exert a strong censorship on public discourses and blackmail political authorities. The recent events in Iran offer a strong case for this inter- pretation: although the majority of the popu- lation has shown a clear option for liberal atti- tudes (through the election of Mohamed Khatami), a small group succeeded in blocking the way to any real and durable progress in this direction.

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Notes

1. We opt for this expression instead of ‘Muslim society’ for its greater accuracy.


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