

# **Politics And Religion - Can They Be Separate?**

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## **Contents**

<i>Introduction</i>	3
<i>Rise of the Secular Society</i>	3
<i>What is Religion?</i>	4
<i>The view of Islam towards Religion and Society</i>	5
<i>The Meaning of Politics</i>	6
<i>Keep Your Religion To Yourself</i>	6
<i>Evidences</i>	7
<i>Diversions</i>	7

## **Introduction**

The gradual development of the modern secular society in the West has led to the separation of religion from the state. Religion has become a matter of personal choice for the individual. Therefore, religion has no role to play within the affairs of the state or the society at large. This is the perception of religion by the current secular societies which exist throughout the world. In any secular society the role of religion is subservient to the interest of the state. Secularism is at its strongest in the West and this is only natural since this is its birth place. The West, through military and/or economic colonialism and propaganda, have forced most other nations to adopt this course.

In order to understand why such a course has been taken by the West, we first need to analyse the historical events, because it is only through a series of historical events, that our present situation has come to existence.

## **Rise of the Secular Society**

Throughout the Middle Ages Europe was ruled by a ruthless feudal system, which was upheld by the Monarch, Nobility and the Church. The principle philosophy was that man's position in this life was pre-destined by God, so a blacksmith was born as a blacksmith and a king was born as a king, their destiny being fixed and decided. This only helped to maintain the status quo, and oppression over the mainly poor class prevailed at large. The situation naturally led to conflict between the subject and the state, and this struggle continued to gain momentum throughout the Middle Ages. Thus the term Middle Ages was often used synonymously with the Dark Ages because to a European this is the darkest period in their history.

The Church continued to justify the feudal situation of the country, and through corruption, it became very powerful institution in terms of wealth and influence. It is well known just how wealthy the Catholic Church grew through 'donations', a place in the heavens was sold by the Church in exchange for gold. This type of corruption led to dissatisfaction and eventually a revolt by Martin Luther, who later commented that the Pope was a glowing worm in a cowpat. It was this revolt that led to the reformation, which in turn led to the formation of the Protestant Church. This was a crippling blow to the Catholic institution.

At the same time a period of discovery and science started to take place in Europe. This often led to confrontation with the Church's teachings, for example the discovery by Galileo that the earth revolved round the sun and not the reverse as proposed by the clergymen. Similarly the discovery of the fourth continent, namely Australia, caused friction as the Church taught that there are only three continents. One can continue to quote many more examples, but the Church and the Monarch did its best to suppress this knowledge to maintain its grip on society. The society on the other hand was moving away from the dogmas of the state, particularly the Church. This was the period of Renaissance, when Europe began to open its horizon. Scientific discoveries led to the Industrial Revolution, and the balance of power in the international arena shifted towards Europe. The industrial revolution provided her with heavy industries, which provided powerful weapons and thus period of conquering and colonisation began.

The intellectuals also began to move against the Church. Niccolo Machiavelli, in his book *The Prince*, set out the cause for a nation state rather than a Christian state. Europe was turning away from the Christian state to the concept of a nation state. Due to the suppression by the ruling power the call for freedom became very strong, religion was beginning to be perceived as superstitious and backwards. Prominent thinkers and politicians like John Locke, Thomas Hubb, Montisque and Rousseau called for the individuals to be free and not in chains. Jean Jacques Rousseau, in his book *The Social Contract*, stated "Man is born free but he is in chains everywhere". This expression meant the man has the will to decide his own fate and it is not pre-determined by God, so man is free and man in essence is good. It is the state that has enslaved him, so that he is in chains and the state exists without man's consent. So there was a turning away from the feudal system and moved

towards a more free society where all citizens could decide their destiny. It was Rousseau that eventually inspired the French revolution which led to the downfall of the oppressive Monarchy and the Church. The Parliamentary system was setup, the Monarch was simply reduced to figurehead, and the Church was stripped of its power. Thenceforth a secular society was formed. A similar process took place elsewhere in Europe and the Monarchs became only a figurehead and the role of Church was confined to matters relating to rituals of worship. The real power now laid in the hands of the Parliament which was mostly backed by big businesses. The Church now had very little to do with the state and its role was to concentrate within the sphere of personal worship and morality. Christianity was personalised, it was now a personal matter concerning individual morality and worship.

Thus religion took on a new meaning as it had been almost totally reduced of its influence over the state and society at large. The people started to adopt new values and gain inspiration from intellectuals, politicians, thinkers and writers. So this is precisely why if anybody mentions religion now, it is seen as a purely personal matter. Whereas it was only natural for the people to move away from the Church due to its collaboration with the Monarch and its upholding the feudal system of Europe. This movement away from the Church and the feudal system was further enhanced by two other factors.

Firstly as mentioned earlier the scientific discoveries led to direct conflict with the teachings of the Church, this put grave doubt on the authenticity of the Bible. As a result people began to lose confidence with the Church. Secondly, a new form of secular government, coupled with the new scientific discoveries and the Industrial Revolution, led to a stronger and a richer Europe. Consequently a period of ruthless colonialism started which meant that Europe became very rich and powerful at the expense of the other nations.. The case for secular society was now well established.

This experience meant that Europeans in general adopted a very hostile attitude towards Christianity and religion. The Church not only upheld the oppressive feudal system but also kept Europe back from progress due to its religious dogmas, which by now were proven to be based on conjecture and superstition.

So this is how the modern mind of the Europeans took shape. The question that now arises is whether it is reasonable to judge all religions merely based on the experiences of Christianity. Unfortunately, this is exactly what the West did. Should they have looked for a better alternative rather than simply abandoning Christianity and coming to a compromise solution? Compromise, because the existence of the Creator was not categorically denied, merely the religious institutions put a side from life's affairs. The Church, representing religion, was given a limited role within the society and the government given its role separate from the Church. So the political role became distinct from the role of the Church, and politics became separate from religion.

## **What is Religion?**

It is not fundamental to have an academic discussion about the precise definition of religion, but it is important to understand how society understand religion. As has been stated, the development of a secular society in Europe resulted in the loss of power and influence of the religious authority. These events subsequently led to the Europeans gaining world leadership through colonialism, which in turn created more wealth and luxury at the expense of the other nations. The mention of religion to the modern secular person conjures up the following ideas.

a) Religion is purely a personal matter between man and his Creator. This means that religion has no role as far as society is concerned, it must be kept separate from politics. This idea resulted from the gradual marginalisation of the Church.

b) Religion is primarily based on superstition, conjecture and fear, because man was unable to explain the natural events and his existence along with the universe. It is only by the use of science and intellect that man can progress.

c) Religion means that there is no room for difference of opinion and this means subjugation of freedom of speech and thought. This in particular resulted from the behaviour of the Catholic Church during the Spanish Inquisition in the last 15th century CE, the mass murder of Protestants and any other opposition to its teachings, and the bloodthirsty crusades. It is only the wishes of the clerics that can suffice regardless of what the masses think. The system does not serve the people but only the elite who are in authority.

These are the ideas that prevail in the minds of the Western secular society and the secular elite within the Muslim countries.

## **The view of Islam towards Religion and Society**

The above understanding is totally incompatible with Islam. All the prophets of Allah (swt), from Adam to Muhammad (saw), were sent not only to reform individuals but to reform the society at large. They all came with the Message to believe in one Creator and brought laws and regulations to govern society and individuals. As the society grew more complex a new set of laws were given by Allah (swt) to successive prophets. No prophet ever taught that religion is only a personal belief and that actions are separate from beliefs.

With regard to religion being based upon conjectures and superstition, it is true for many religions where the original scriptures were lost or corrupted by men. The Qur'an testifies to this fact and what is more, the Qur'an has never been contradicted by sound scientific discoveries. It instead challenges mankind to find contradictions within it.

"Do they not consider the Qur'an? Had it been from any other than Allah they would have surely found therein much discrepancies." [TMQ 4:82]

No society allows absolute freedom to express different points of view. Hence, for any society to claim that it allows freedom of speech is an outright lie and hypocritical, since for any society to function it must have restriction and limits, otherwise chaos will result. People in society are not homogenous and different people has different capabilities, a tendency towards a free society will lead to oppression of the weaker members by the stronger ones. So to prevent this, society needs rules and regulations. Hence the idea of a free society is a myth and has never existed in reality and will never exist in the future. The very idea of the free society goes against human nature, a free society functions like the jungle, survival of the fittest, without compassion or mercy, suited more for animals than human beings. Democratic societies in the West, although claiming to have freedom of speech or other types of freedoms, is no different from any other types of society, be it a dictatorship, a monarch or a theocracy, since all these types of societies have rules and regulations, and freedom is available as long as one observe the laws and regulations laid down. So one can say that the post Middle Ages era allowed greater freedom to express difference of opinion, but this is not absolute and it never is. The truth of the matter is that every society allows difference of opinion to exist as long as those opinions do not threaten the existing power structure. So the reason for greater divergence of opinion on religious values after the Renaissance period was because the existing power structure was not based on religion. Likewise under Islamic rule, there is freedom of opinion within the boundaries of Shari'ah, as seen by the historic developments of different Schools of Thought on fiqh (jurisprudence), usul al-fiqh (foundations of jurisprudence), science, history etc. Furthermore, great debates and discussions were held in Baghdad, Kufa, Madinah, Grenada, Qirawain, Fez and Samarqand.

## **The Meaning of Politics**

Now that we have gained some understanding of the meaning of religion, let us analyse the meaning of politics. Politics is generally understood purely in terms of the struggle for power and government, and is therefore associated with ruling or governing a nation. The definition of political party is one which is struggling for power, thus this is the name of the game. It is largely people like Machiavelli who inspired the modern politician. According to his book, *The Prince*, a politician should be deceptive and struggle for power. Today it is not surprising that a politician is someone who is thought of as very shrewd, cunning and deceptive; the very word conjures up various meanings in our minds such as false promises, cheating, back biting etc.

The real essence of politics is concerned with the affairs of society and how it is to be regulated. The function of any government is to look after the affairs of society. It is not merely a struggle for power and self glory, although this has become the prime motives of most of the politicians of today. In Arabic the word for politics is *syasa*, which is derived from the root word *sasa*. *Sasa* means looking after the horses and this word gradually evolved to mean look after the affairs of people and hence *syasa*.

Islam expresses a view point as to how society should be organised, and so the idea that religion is separate from politics is purely artificial, and it is the product of the unfortunate history of the Europeans rather than the product of the intellectual thought. All the prophets of Allah (swt) came as leaders to reform society. Prophet Muhammad (saw) established a state in Madinah, after migration. There he organised the affairs of society, established various treaties, implemented Shari'ah, declared war and peace, and sent and received ambassadors.

## **Keep Your Religion To Yourself**

It is now very common to hear the phrase "Keep your religion to yourself, don't bring it into politics." This has resulted from the secular dogma that religion is purely a personal matter. This is the definition that the politicians, intellectuals, writers and the media use to dominate the masses and the Muslims worldwide. This understanding is sacred to the progressive mind and cannot be questioned.

The above definition is clearly false since the nature of religion has been to reform and regulate the whole society. To reform society one needs to acquire political authority, so politics is always integrated into religion. Thus politics is like the child of a family and the family is the religion.

Secondly to assert that religion must be kept separate from politics so that one can not impose one's belief on someone else is clearly false. To even say that religion must be separate from politics, is in itself a view point, a new 'religion', which is imposed on others. The only difference is that this religion does not involve itself in the belief in a Creator and different terminology is used for it, such as secularism. It is like saying that there should be no laws in society, although this in itself constitutes a law.

Another argument put forward by the secular community is that religious laws are outdated and can not be applied to the modern 'progressive society'. This is used to justify the separation of religion from politics. There is a fundamental underlying assumption to this statement, which is that something old becomes outdated and something new is progressive and it should be accepted without any hesitation. Time is the only criterion used but this is clearly not an intellectual argument. If we observe, the air we breathe is as old as the planet itself, and is vital for our survival, similarly new diseases like AIDS are hardly welcomed by the society. So just because something is old does not make it obsolete or just because something is new does not make it good and acceptable. Similarly laws do not become outdated simply because a certain amount of time has elapsed, as in essence the human being remains the same in nature. Laws are to regulate man's nature.

## Evidences

Not only is the separation of religion from politics intellectually weak, there are also many clear-cut evidences in the Qur'an and ahadith referring to political matters.

In the Qur'an we see many rules and regulations covering marriage, divorce, inheritance, jihad, zakat etc., all of which could not ever be implemented in society without political authority. How is one going to cut the hand of the thief, stone the adulterer, declare jihad, collect zakat and kharaj without political authority? The Messenger of Allah (saw) himself implemented rules related to these matters 1400 years ago, thus demonstrating that politics is very much part of Islam. There are explicit evidences in the Qur'an and ahadith relating to ruling by Islam.

"Those who do not judge by what Allah has revealed are the disbelievers." [TMQ 5:44]

"But nay, by thy Lord, they will not believe (in truth) until they make thee judge of what is in dispute between them." [TMQ 4:65]

"Obey Allah, obey the Messenger and obey those in authority from amongst you, and if you differ refer to Allah and his Messenger." [TMQ 4:59]

Majority of the scholars from Hanafi, Shafi'i, Hanbali etc. Schools of Thought agree that the above verse referring to "obey those in authority" refers to the Khaleefah. After the death of the Messenger of Allah (saw), the Sahabah got together and chose a Khaleefah from amongst themselves even before burying the Messenger of Allah (saw). They were the closest to the Messenger of Allah (saw) and they agreed about the fard of appointing a Khaleefah, and hence from the onset the political authority was recognised and implemented.

Then there are many ahadith pertaining to the Khilafah. Nafi'a reported saying, " 'Umar said to me that he heard the Messenger of Allah (saw) saying, Whoever takes off his hand from allegiance to Allah (swt) will Him (swt) on the Day of Resurrection without having any proof for him, and whoever dies while having no bay'ah on his neck (to the Khaleefah) die a death of jahiliyyah." Muslim reported on the authority of Abu Hazim, who said, "I accompanied Abu Hurayrah for five years and heard him talking of the Prophet's saying: The Prophets ruled over the children of Israel, whenever a Prophet died another Prophet succeeded him, but there will be no Prophet after me. There will be Khulafa'a and they will number many. They asked: What then do you order us? He said: Fulfil the bay'ah to them one after the other and give them their due. Surely Allah will ask them about what He entrusted them with." Ibn 'Abbas narrated that the Messenger of Allah (saw) said, "If anyone sees in his amir something that displeases him let him remain patient, for behold, he who separates himself from the sultan (authority of Islam) by even so much as a hand span and dies thereupon, has died a death of the days of jahiliyyah."

This should be enough proof for the Western secular society and the educated Western elite that politics and Islam can never be separated; indeed politics is an integral part of Islam.

## Diversions

Today the existing governments in the Muslim world are using various means to keep religion and politics separate.

(1) The first method used is to promote the idea that religion is purely an individual matter for personal salvation. This is done through television, radio, newspapers, magazines and books, and the government scholars who are groomed at government institutions.

(2) Many Islamic movements have been set up or are being funded by the governments of the Muslim world (who in turn are controlled by the West), to promote the idea of secularism in Islam. These groups tend to confine themselves only with individual aspects such as salah, fasting, hajj and morals. They remain silent towards the injustices carried out by the governments towards the Muslim Ummah. Thus they encourage the Muslim Ummah to remain passive and tolerant towards

the existing brutal and barbaric regimes in the Muslim world. They totally ignore politics and even go as far as to classify it as causing of fitna (division) and should not be discussed. This is despite the clear commandment from the Qur'an,

"Seek the Hereafter in which Allah has given you and do not neglect this portion of the world." [TMQ 28:77]

"You are the best of nations that has been raised up for mankind. You enjoin the ma'ruf (that which is good) and forbid the munkar (that which is evil) and you believe in Allah." [TMQ 3:110]

(3) By bribing and funding some so-called Islamic groups, the Muslim governments try to neutralise the call for the re-establishment of the Khilafah. These groups are offered various posts within the existing governments, and they set up programmes for 'Islamicisation' in the country and label the country as a pseudo Islamic state, which proves to be a dismal failure and hence drives the Ummah away from the notion of the Islamic State. These types of states do not resemble the Islamic Khilafah in any way whatsoever; there is no Khaleefah but instead there are Presidents or Prime Ministers or a Spiritual leaders. They implement few laws of Shari'ah and they accept the present nationalistic borders that were originally carved by the colonialists, all of which are totally contrary to Islam.

Mosque funding are another means used to curb the activities of the Islamic movement. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Egypt provide finance and pseudo-Imams to mosques around the countries like Britain, France, USA and Germany to suppress the activities of the Islamic youth.

The clearest example of the importance of politics and religion can be seen from the functioning of the Islamic State over a sustained period of time, for more than 1300 years from the establishment of the State in Madinah by the Messenger of Allah (saw) in 622 CE until its disbanding at the hands of the colonially inspired Mustafa Kemal in 1924 CE. It was the system of Islam which guaranteed peace and tranquillity for Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and where affairs of the people were managed according to the laws of the Creator, rather than the laws that were built upon man's mind with all its biases, contradictions and self interests.