Religion and Public Life

Recent developments in the political discourse on the relevance of religion to public life have reinforced the general impression, shared by scholars the world over, that religion is making a comeback to the public sphere. One example of this renewed interest in religion is the new Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, announced by President Bush. These initiatives are presented as a way to enhance the welfare and social programs of the United State government, which were challenged in the late eighties, and were seriously disrupted in the nineties.

The revitalization of religion in the last few decades, and the increased recognition of the need for acknowledging the vital role played by religion and religious consciousness in maintaining the moral cohesiveness of public life, have ignited a new public debate in the West over the extent to which religion can be allowed to venture into the public square without violating the principle of separation of church and state.

Muslim scholars, on the other hand, are adamant on the inseparability of religion and state in an Islamic society, where an organized religion is absent. Needless to say, such a position is usually received with great amusement and suspicion by western scholars and thinkers, often concerned about the possible stifling of the rational debate of public policy and the likely infringement of the rights of religious minorities. The conflicting positions of Muslim and western scholars is at one level a problem of incommensurability between two political cultures. On a deeper level, the incongruence between the two positions reveals a need for more profound analysis of the relevance of religion to public life in a globalizing world that is increasingly yearning for meaning and direction.

Incommensurability and Political Maturation

Muhyiddin Bin Arabi, the famous Andalusian Muslim mystic-scholar who lived in the fifth century of the Islamic era, (twelfth century of the Christian era), wrote the following statement in his voluminous work, Al-Futuhat al Makkiyyah [Makkan Insights]:

None of the conceptual knowledge is acquired by pure reason. For acquired knowledge is but relating one concept to another. Indeed, relating [one concept to another] is in itself a conceptual knowledge. Therefore, when it appears that acquired knowledge is conceptual, this is because when one understands the meaning of a coined term, one must already be familiar with the referent of that term. When one inquires about a term whose meaning is not apparent, a satisfying answer must relate the term to something known [to the inquirer]. The inquirer will fail to understand the meaning if the term cannot at all be related to something already familiar. It follows that all meaning must be first internal, before it becomes luminous bit by bit.

The above statement points in particular to one important dimension of knowing and understanding, viz. that understanding the meaning of a term presupposes an experience of a sort of the object to which the term refers. The relationship between knowledge and experience gives rise to a series of questions with regard to understanding of the two grand concepts of "religion" and "politics," and the way one relates to the other.

In light of the foregoing statement about knowledge, one may wonder whether social knowledge is ever possible apart from the social experience it presupposes. Can a person who has never had to endure poverty, one may ask, appreciate the pain of deprivation? Can an honorable person understand treason? Can an honest individual understand wickedness? Can a child understand sexuality? Can a living human being understand death? Can a person who has never experienced affection understand the meaning of compassion? Can a self-righteous community ever recognize the equal freedom of others? Or can a people who never fought tyranny understand the meaning of democracy?

What I am referring to above is not simply the problem of incommensurability among different worldviews, but the issue of process and maturation as well. Can a person mature without going through adolescence? Is interdependence possible prior to independence? Can there be a true unity prior to plurality?

I am not suggesting here that Muslims and western secularists cannot understand each other without sharing an identical consciousness. Nor am I claiming that Muslim society must arrive at political participation or economic development by emulating western experience. I am rather saying: terms such as religion, state, and politics are not fully interchange-able across cultures and civilizations, and misunderstanding results from

extrapolating one's experience across cultures. I am also saying that superimposing the experience of a historically determined being on another —be it an individual or a community— is bound to stifle or even destroy the latter's chance to develop and mature.

Interplay of Religion and Politics

Although a deep understanding of the interaction between the political and religious spheres requires a systematic and elaborate examination of their meaning, I will limit my statement to delineating their boundaries and identifying a few areas of friction between the two.

Religion refers to those aspects of life that relate to the determination of the total meaning of existence. It is concerned, in particular, with three grand questions about human existence: its origin, its purpose, and its destiny. Although the above three questions can be raised from a philosophical point of view, the religious response to them is distinguished from the philosophical by the degree of conviction one enjoys over the other. That is to say, a religious conclusion with regard to the above grand questions is not only supported by rational arguments, but by emotional attachment, and possibly spiritual experience as well. This difference gives religion an advantage over philosophy in that it makes religiously based convictions a better springboard for action. It is a fact of history that people with deep religious conviction are willing to endure greater difficulties and make greater sacrifices in pursuit of their religious ideals than those whose attachment to their ideals is based on purely rational calculations.

Paradoxically, though, religion's source of strength is also its source of weakness. For it is always easier to dissuade people from erroneous points of view when the latter are based on theoretical arguments rather than religious convictions. And while shared religious conviction can create more harmony in the public sphere, the possibilities of interpersonal and inter-communal conflicts are bound to increase in multi-religious societies.

The question we need to address here is not whether religion and politics stand in conflicted or harmonious relationship, but rather how and under what conditions religious commitment can strengthen and improve the quality of social life.

Degrees of Secularism

Politics is about organizing the public sphere, i.e. regulating action and

deciding direction. As such, both the convictions and interests of a people influence public regulations. In its drive to develop a social order in which religion and politics strengthen one another without suppressing individuality and creativity, Europe went through two interrelated processes: religious reformation and secularization. Reformation involved a struggle to liberate the individual from the control of religious authorities, viz. the Catholic Church. Secularization involved the liberation of the state from control by particular religious groups, to ensure that public policy was based on rational arguments, rather than religious injunctions.

But while religion ceased to have a visible influence in the public sphere, it continued to be an important force in shaping public policy and public life. This is true because rational arguments about the nature of public order have to start from a transcendental understanding of the meaning of public life and social interaction. The notions of right and wrong, good and evil, and the tolerable and the intolerable are the result of both religious conviction and political compromise.

It is important to realize that secularization is a multi-faceted phenomenon. One facet of secularization, and the one that was initially intended by its early advocates, is the separation of state and church. But because it was achieved by negating history and tradition, it gradually led to the "death of god," i.e., the erosion of religious values and convictions in western society by the turn of the 20th century, and later to the "death of man" at the dawn of the 21st century. The secularism of the post-modern age is ruled by the ideas of self-interest, self-indulgence, and excess.

Tradition and Modernity

In the Muslim world, the relationship between religion and politics has not been articulated in clear and unambiguous terms, but is still a matter of experimentation and debate. Historically, Muslim political order was established by a community that rejected the idea of conferring any religious status on the head of the state and political authorities. Political succession was based on a notion of choice (*ikhtiyar*), but this was later transformed into a de facto domination by powerful clans beginning with the Umayyads. This prompted Muslim scholars to limit state power to the realm of defense and maintaining intercommunal order, and to limit legislative authority within juristic confines, away from the dictates of the state.

The rise and expansion of the West has created a novel situation in Muslim society. Modern political ideas have displaced traditional views of

politics and society. This ironically has not generated modern political practices and institutions in the Muslim world. Democracy, constitutionalism, and the rule of law are no more than a show, a political facade in most Muslim societies. The roots of the problem can better be understood when one realizes that modern political structures are super-imposed on an intrinsically traditional political culture.

There is a dire need to evolve a new understanding of how religion relates to the public sphere from within the Muslim experience, instead of relying on notions borrowed from the historical West and superimposed on society. The western world, which continues to experience an erosion of the moral and transcendental core of its social life, stands, on the other hand, to learn a great deal by opening itself to the remarkably different mode of interplay between religion and public life in the world of Islam.

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