

?Nationalism and Islam: Clash or Reconciliation

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The phenomenon of 'nationalism in religion' according to S. W. Baron is considered to be an obstacle that prevents religion from fulfilling its role in human life. The necessary balance between organized humanity's social responsibility and the right of each state would be gained through organized religion.

In Modern Nationalism and Religion, Baron attempts to show a way to achieve this aim. For the sake of this aspiration, he makes the proposal that "religion must try to purge itself of its nationalist biases." In this regard, he believes that "the impact of religious bodies can make itself felt most strongly and effectively."^[1] He further adds: The world religions have long represented large-scale approaches to the riddles of existence. While stressing individual beliefs and observations and, at times, overemphasizing parochial duties and attitudes, they also have taught man to think in terms of a universal godhead, the cosmic relevance of even minutiae of ethical behaviour and the essential nature of an all-human brotherhood.^[2]

The religions that Baron is speaking of here are the most dominant surviving religions in the West, i.e., Christianity and Judaism. Referring to the position of the Judeo-Christian heritage, Baron remarks that it "has been endangered by the rise of the neopagan forms of extreme nationalism and the idolization of race and state"^[3]

The negative impact of nationalism on the living religions of modern Western societies seems obvious. It should be emphasized, however, that the nationalist biases within a divine religion have never had their origin in the religion itself; rather, it is the adherents and followers who burden themselves with such prejudices. This will be made clearer when I later consider the Qur'anic teachings in this area and the philosophy of prophethood.

To fulfil the objectives of the present study, I should restrict myself to a description of nationalism in the mirror of Islam only. From a theoretical point of view, I can see that there are not many similarities between Islam as a divine religion which has its own especial doctrine of human life, and nationalism as, let us say, a political movement in terms of its fundamental elements.

A distinction between the attitude of Islam and the practice of its adherents has been suggested by Soekarno. He, criticizing nationalists' and Marxists' comment on Islam, remarks that: Nationalists and Marxists both blame Islam for the down-fall of the Moslem nations, their present backwardness and the fact that most of them are under Western domination.

But they are confused! It is not Islam, but rather its adherents who have been at fault. Seen from a nationalist and socialist perspective, it would be hard to find a civilization comparable in greatness to that of the early Islamic world. The downfall of national greatness, the downfall of Islamic socialism was not brought about by Islam itself, but by the moral downfall of its leaders. ... Once the "Caliphs became kings," the true nature of Islam was suppressed.[4]

Soekarno also says: "I am certainly not saying that Islam accepts Materialism; nor do I forget that Islam transcends national boundaries and is supra-national in character." [5]

Once the Muslim Ummah was established in Madina in 632 A.D., the leader of Islam proclaimed the message of Islam on a universal scale. In his Political Theory of Islam, Abul 'Ala Mawdoodi remarks: "A state of this sort evidently cannot restrict the scope of its activities.

It is a universal and all-inclusive state.

Its sphere of activity is co-extensive with the whole of human life" [6] Islam, from the very beginning, has been a monotheistic religion of "supra-national and universal human scope." Islam, rejecting racism and nationalism, "did not stop at the call to the faith. It rose to establish a state which embodied a new nation, which is that of the believers, Islamic Ummah or Ummah Muslima." [7] P. J. Vatikiotis, in paraphrasing this point, states: The very basis of this new nation and its nationalism, if you wish, has been the religion of Islam. The state has been and remains its instrument. The state, therefore, has no value in itself; nor is it set up temporally for a particular people, as a nation-state, to the exclusion of others. Rather, it is based on the universal principle of Islam to safeguard the religion and extend its message. [8]

The Muslim Ummah is built on the basis of the Qur'anic faith and certain self-evident truths such as the equality of all people before God, friendly relationships among fellow believers, and kindness towards people. Here are some words from Imam 'Ali b. Musa al-Rida (765-818) where he says: To be friendly with others denotes one half of wisdom.

The believer who is endowed with a good temper will have the strongest faith. Perfection in intellect is primarily to have faith in God and secondly to behave well towards others.

To bear enmity towards people is the worst provision for the journey to the Hereafter. [9] The members of the Muslim Community, recognizing that humankind is endowed by the Compassionate Creator with certain inalienable rights, like the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, are encouraged to do good, to help the persecuted and to fulfil the desires of the needy. [10] As Majid Khadduri mentions: In the Tradition, Muhammad is reported to have conceived of the Muslim community as "a single hand, like a compact wall whose bricks support each other," and in the Qur'an it is often referred to as a distinct "nation"

(ummah) or a “brotherhood,” bound by common obligations to a superior divine authority.^[11] Thus, one finds neither inspiration nor encouragement towards nationalism within the constitution of the Muslim ummah. Regarding the attitude of Islam towards nationalism, there has been a very long discussion among the theoreticians of the political and social sciences. Those who express negative feelings towards nationalism are themselves divided. Some believe that nationalism is in conflict with Islam, but at the same time, they maintain, as a kind of justification, the existence of temporal secularism within the power structure of the Islamic nation. One such theoretician is Vatikiotis, whose attitude is clarified in the following passage. Nationalism (qawmiyya)^[12] as an ideology is incompatible with the world of Islam, for it implies a pre-Islamic kind of tribal particularism, or jahiliyya. In fact, nationalism is Islam’s deadliest, for it represents an attempt to separate Islam from polity and isolate it from the resolution of temporal matters. That is, it postulates the separation between religion and polity, religion and the state, or it denies Islam its central role in the regulation of Muslim earthly political affairs. The nation state in Islam is then an ideological, not a territorial concept. It comprises the community of the faithful or believers wherever they may be.^[13] Vatikiotis explains that the nation state of Islam implies “the structure of temporal-secular power.”^[14] The author justifies this kind of “temporal-secular power” as a means of safeguarding the ummah “against its external, infidel enemies and ensures that the believers can lead the life of observant Muslims.”^[15] This is in spite of the fact that the Qur’anic nation state of Islam by itself has nothing to do with secularism, even in its temporal form. Islam is a religion, and between it and secularism there can be found no harmony. From the genuine Islamic point of view, the believers are even taught not to accept an unbeliever ruler who governs not by the revealed Shari’ah of Islam.^[16] As Kohn mentions: From the very first Islam was not only a religion, but a political and social system as well. The Koran, the Sunna, and the systems based upon them, contain not only religious commandments but also the principles of private and public law.^[17]

Notes:

[1]. Baron, *Modern Nationalism and Religion*, (New York: 1947), p. 269.

[2]. Ibid., pp. 270-271.

[3]. Ibid., p. 269.

[4]. Soekarno, Nationalism, p. 47.

[5]. Ibid., p. 48.

[6]. Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdoodi, The Political Theory of Islam, (Hind: Delhi, 1964), p. 40.

[7]. Vatikiotis, Islam and State, p. 10.

[8]. Ibid.

[9]. Imam Rida, Eighty Eight Aphorisms, (Iran: Mashhad: 1992), pp. 72-73, 87 & 92.

[10]. "The best and most respected virtue of a man is to do good, to help the persecuted man and to fulfil the desires of the needy", Ibid., p. 10.

[11]. Khadduri, War and Peace, pp. 3-4.

[12]. For more details see also the author's article on Kawmiyya (Nationalism) in The Encyclopaedia of Islam, new edition, edited by E. Van Donzel, B. Lewis and Ch. Pellat, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), v. 4, pp. 781-784.

[13]. Vatikiotis, Islam and State, pp. 10-11.

[14]. Ibid., p. 11.

[15]. Ibid.

[16]. Perhaps it is understood from the verse: "Allah never gives by any means the unbelievers a way against the believers", The Qur'an, 4: 141.

[17]. Kohn, A History of Nationalism, p. 40