



Is “Islamic Secularism” an Oxymoron?



An expression often fails to properly capture the meaning it is intended to convey, particularly if it portrays an evolving political ideology or a new situation. The use of the term “Islamic Secularism” became fashionable after the recent Turkish experience in which conservative Muslims participate in a governing process, but state decisions are secular and therefore neutral in matters of belief. At a conference organized in Morocco under the slogan “Our Development and the Global Human Message,” several Muslim thinkers attempted to explain the dichotomy of the phrase “Islamic Secularism” and advocate for a politically secular state that would still retain an Islamic guiding frame.

Those attending the conference, sponsored by the association of “*Khalid Al-Hassan*,” at the ISESCO¹ center in Rabat February 1-2, concluded that under Islam, people should be free to choose the political regime that is most adaptable to their time, while remaining faithful to the Islamic *Shari’a*. The process was explained as “Islamic guided secularism” and was advocated by Moroccan scholar ‘*Abdallah Belkaziz* and the Iranian *Muhammad Sadiq Al-hussayni*.

In his opening statement, *Belkaziz* emphasized that the Quran established general principles for political governance and left it to Muslims to organize their affairs and adapt to the particular period in their history, and warned that, as of late, theories on the Islamic *Shari’a* theories have lacked such temporal relevance. A minority of scholars at the meeting, such as *Nasr Muhammad ‘Araf*, rejected the notion of any separation between Islam and the State, maintaining the fundamentalists’ position on the issue. For them Politics is simply one of the branches of Islam.

The representative of Islam Online, *Hisham Ga’far*, agreed that Islam is the guiding principle for politicians, but, in his view, there is confusion about who should be responsible for religious matters and who should engage in politics. He emphasized that, if Islamists want to engage in politics, they must be aware of and abide by the distinctive characteristics of that role. Egyptian philosopher, *Ibrahim Bayyumi*, observed that the Turkish experience of the “Justice and Development party (AKP)” is proof of that principle.

It is readily apparent that Muslim Arabs, like their Turkish counterparts, are struggling to find a process by which they can maintain their religiosity while engaging in modern political participation. Some of these moderates also believe that Islamists are inadequately addressing the need for political adaptation to the changing times. While many analysts suspect those who

¹ ISESCO: The Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

advocate moderation are opportunists who are not to be trusted because their sole aim is to obtain power, there seems to be a genuine attempt by some thinkers at true reform.

All those advocating for “Islamic Secularism” are confronted with two challenges, one philosophical and one practical. The philosophical challenge is how to logically accept the expression “Islamic Secularism,” which appears to be an oxymoron. Islamists like *Sheikh Al-Qaradawi* have totally rejected the notion,² but looking at the report of the conference posted on his website, Islamonline, it appears possible that he has modified his stance. Ultimately, to resolve that issue as the West has done with Christianity, moderate Muslims are trying hard to redefine Islam by shedding rigid *Salafi* interpretations of the *Qur’an* which have been the source of sectarian differences among Muslims and animosity towards the others. Their goal is to transform Islam into a “rational religion” (similar to Kant’s secularization of Christianity), *i.e.*, one in which there is a rational basis for religious doctrine.

On the practical side, by using the phrase “Islamic Secularism,” moderate Muslim scholars are not so much trying to explain an existing situation as they are attempting to create a self-fulfilling prophecy, articulating the concept to make it a reality. In support of their idea, they point to the experience of several European countries like Norway, Iceland and Denmark, which are known for their progressive views but have constitutions that establish a link between church and state. In the United States, they would probably be close to the political views of Mike Huckabee, and to a lesser extent to George W. Bush. Like Huckabee, these reformists envision a secular government that is guided by God’s will, with the caveat that God’s will must be interpreted in accordance with the Quran. Nevertheless, the introduction of rationality into the process is another step toward finding common political ground between Islam and the West.

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