

Blast From The Past

Secularism is not our enemy: A Muslim's open letter

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Note: This article/letter was first published in 1999. I'm not sure exactly where, but it first appeared in the Usenet Newsgroup, soc.culture.malaysia in March 1999. Strangely enough, most of the points made eight years ago seem to still be relevant today. — Yusseri ["The Other Malaysia", Tuesday, 02 October 2007].

An Open Letter To Malaysian Islamists Seeking A Project To Call Their Own.

Dear friends,

In the midst of the economic and political crises that have overtaken our nation over the past two years, there have emerged to the fore a number of debates and contentious issues that were once sidelined to the margins of the political arena. Issues related to the question of civil society, democracy and human rights, the trajectory of the nation's development and the ideological basis of the founding constitution, which were once regarded as the exclusive purview of intellectuals, party ideologues and academicians, have now resurfaced and come to the centre of the public discursive forum.

One debate in particular has taken on an animated life of its own. I am referring to the debate over the issue of Secularism and the question of whether the Malaysian state is fundamentally a secular or Islamic entity.

This issue has arisen of late in the vernacular Malay press, championed by the newspapers and journals (not to mention the webpages) of the opposition movement. It has now spread to the government's mouthpieces and private-sector controlled media, both of which amount to basically the same thing.

It is interesting to note how this debate has been structured and how the concepts 'Secularism' and 'Islam' have been constructed by the different parties concerned. It is also interesting to study the underlying logic which frames the contestation and confrontation between the two sides.

I do not wish to address the issue of PAS's opposition to UMNO here. Nor do I wish to look at the Reformasi movement and the role that it plays against the backdrop of the struggle between the two Malay-Islamic parties. What I wish to look at is the trajectory of the Islamic movement in Malaysia in general, its basic premises and worldview and how it locates and identifies itself in the context of its struggle against the 'menace' of secularism in the country.

If I may be forgiven for simplifying the scenario a little, I would venture that the Islamist opposition has identified its Islamic movement as one which is ideologically committed to pursuing a political agenda that is predicated on Islamist terms and is opposed to secularism in all its forms. In the

writings and commentaries found in many of the contemporary journals, newspapers and magazines that are partisan to the Islamists' cause, one sees a particular portrait of secularism being sketched. 'Secularism' is defined in the following terms: It encompasses ideologies and thought-systems that are man-made and thus anthropocentric, particularist, historically-specific, context-bound, arbitrary and historically contingent.

Juxtaposed to this is the Islamists' own view of their religio-political project which is predicated on the values, beliefs, ethics, cosmology and metaphysics of Islam, found in the sacred narrative of the al-Quran and Hadith, which are divinely-ordained and thus seen as fundamentally universal, essentialist, totalised, fixed (semantically and semiotically), hermeneutically sealed and exclusivist.

The contrast between the two is as clear as can be imagined. At no point is there any possibility of compromise, we are told time and again by some of the leaders of the Islamic parties and movements. Islam for them is a total discursive system that rejects any form of borrowing, interpenetration and discursive contamination, hybridity or cohabitation between discursive economies. The PAS party campaign to promote the slogan 'Only Islam is the solution- Nothing else can work' ('Islam sahaja yang boleh - Yang lain tidak boleh') seems to sum it up for many of the Islamists. (Needless to say, such unbounded optimism is not likely to be shared by those who do not subscribe to the worldview that is Islam's.)

But here I am not concerned with the problem of PAS's appeal to the non-Muslims. I am not interested in the practical problems that will inevitably arise when the Islamists of the various camps begin to forge instrumental coalitions with non-Muslim groups for the sake of toppling the National Front alliance. What concerns me the most is the manner in which the ideological frontier between Islam and Secularism is being drawn here.

Dear friends,

I hope that I will not have to continually restate my belief that Islamism is a genuine political project and that it deserves to be understood and acknowledged as such. I would be the last one to claim that Islam has no place in politics or that a religio-political enterprise is a contradiction in terms.

But I do have to express my utmost concern about the manner in which some Islamists in Malaysia have begun to construct feeble and simplistic caricatures of their opponents and their beliefs, and in the process of doing so have done untold damage to the understanding of 'secularism' within our society. This was only possible, I would argue, thanks to a neglect on their part about the manner in which discourses and narratives operate, both on an abstract and practical level.

Let us return for a moment to the beginning of things: Islam, we contend, is a divinely-ordained and inspired creed and civilisation. No understanding of Islamic civilisation is possible unless one looks into the religious, spiritual and metaphysical foundations that underlie every adjunct of Islamic life from its arts and letters to economics and politics. Everywhere there is the trace of the concept of the divine and the transcendental Other: God.

But while the foundations of Islam lie in the sacred narrative of the al-Quran and Hadith, we cannot deny that the daily reality of Islamic life, culture and society is infested by men and their machinations. While God is the creator and the prime mover of the universe and all that is in it, it is Man who inhabits the Islamic world here on earth as its primary agent and character. Man plays the central role in the divinely-inspired drama and it is man who is both the supreme hero and the most dastardly villain - All else is scenery, albeit crucial and indispensable scenery.

The fact that Man is at the centre of the profane universe is of crucial importance here, for it must

be noted that practically every avenue of Islamic thinking has been predicated upon a broad understanding of humanism. Ibn Khaldun regarded Man as the centre of the socio-political universe, as the primary agent responsible for the emergence of society and the rise and fall of civilisations. Generations of Islamic mystics and metaphysicians grappled with the central question of freeing Man's soul from the chains of worldliness and the Body, where again Man was the axis of the struggle for liberation and emancipation, caught between God and beast. Islamic politics and economics were founded on notions of rational agency, free choice and liberalism, once more predicating its basic values and concepts on the category of the Human.

And thus it cannot be denied that while the founding sacred narratives of Islamic civilisation were divine, its interpretation and *modus operandi* were invariably coloured by the hands of Man. In short, from sacred text to the objectification of the ideas and values within the texts, there was (and is) invariably the rational agency of Man at work.

This in effect means that the practice of Islam throughout the ages has always been 'contaminated', if you will, by the clumsy hands of men and women. It is not enough to say that the essence of Islam lies in the al-Quran and Hadith: Islam is also what we Muslims have made of it. Islamic civilisation is thus the sum total of the greatest feats and the worst disasters caused by us and visited upon us. It includes the *Mantiq-al-Tair*, the *Shahnameh*, the *Javidnama*, *Kushrau va Shirin*, *Layla wa Majnun*. It includes the works of al-Ghazalli and al-Biruni, Ibn Rush and ibn Khaldun. It also includes the Taj Mahal and the Alhambra, the Dome of the Rock and the towers of Al-Azhar. But it also includes the tragedies ranging from Karbala to Chaldiran, when Sunni and Shia blood was spilt, the murder and regicide of countless Kings, tales of betrayal and ignominious defeat. It includes countless episodes of defeat and self-hate and countless examples of apologies and rabid paranoia and hatred for all things alien and new.

If we accept as a premise the very basic and simple idea that Islamic civilisation (like all other civilisations) was created by Muslim men and women, then we need to accept the simple fact that much of what has happened in the course of Islamic history has been the result of human agency as well.

Even a cursory reading of Islamic history will show that Islamic nations, dynasties and governments have always been aware of the fact that they live in a world populated by human beings and different cultures and civilisations. They have had to interact with these different cultures and societies on a practical and pragmatic level. Not all of their actions were motivated solely by religious beliefs and ethics, though they may have been influenced and shaped in part by them. The Moghul Emperor Akbar's attempt to forge his syncretic creed (the *Deen-ilahi*) was motivated by realpolitik considerations more than anything else. Likewise his ancestor Babar's conversion from Sunni to Shia Islam was a result of strategic considerations and not a genuine change of belief and worldview. Countless Islamic nations and kingdoms such as the Ottoman dynasty practised a division between religion and state, long before the concept of a non-religious state system was introduced by the West: This is why the Ottoman Sultans ruled with a Vazir (Vizier, or Prime Minister) and a Sheikh-ul-Islam (Grand Imam) on either side of the throne.

What does all this prove? For a start it shows that Islamic societies have always developed along two parallel tracks. On the one hand, they derived their basic ethical norms, moral values, cosmological and metaphysical worldview from the creed of Islam. But on the other hand, the application and practise of these values and ideas were left to mortal hands that worked in a profane (and more often than not, less than ideal) world.

This accounts for both the splendours and disasters that have dotted the pages of Islamic history. There have been times when the understanding of Islam was beautifully translated into concrete

forms such as architecture, philosophical treatise, systems of law and government, that managed to capture the spirit and intention of the sacred narratives of the al-Quran and Hadith in such a way that it had relevance and resonance to the Muslims themselves. On the other hand, there were also monumental mistakes and aberrations such as the hybrid Deen-ilahi of Sultan Akbar.

But underlying these triumphs and disasters was a common concern: To translate the message of the al-Quran and Hadith to a realisable and practical level where it could truly become a living faith in a profane world that is governed according to the vicissitudes of time, space and innumerable contingencies.

There has never been a time when a 'pure' Islam was realised on earth. This is a simple fact that most Islamists fail, or do not want to, address.

Islam may be pure conceptually, but once its message is read through the eyes of Man who is inevitably a creature born and living in time and space, conditioned by history, blinkered by his ethnocentric and culture-bound biases and prejudices, it will invariably pass through a filter which re-constructs and distorts at the same time. Nor will there ever be an intellectual class that is somehow free from such solipsistic perspectivism: Being in time means residing in a world that is shaped by historical contingencies that we cannot elude or escape from entirely.

This is why countless generations of progressive and enlightened Muslim thinkers like Maulana Muhammad Iqbal were wont to advise and remind Muslims, again and again, that Islam was not a simple blueprint formula that can be taken out of a book, drawn on a blackboard, and applied to any given situation. The al-Quran, as Iqbal was never tired of pointing out, is not some guidebook or ideological manifesto. Its reading requires intelligence, sensitivity to prevailing circumstances (as well as the circumstances of its revelation) and a genius to translate its universal intent within particular circumstances.

Every reading of the al-Quran and Hadith is therefore particular, historically-specific, context bound and finite. Ironically, these are exactly the very same features that some Islamist groups in the international Muslim movement have ascribed to the phenomenon known as 'Secularism' as well.

But has not the time come for us to accept that our reading of Islam in the immediate present is bound to be configured to the needs that we face at the moment? Can we not accept that our understanding of the sacred narrative of Islam has changed and that it will continue to change as the years go by? Must we always keep to the belief that ours is a pure discourse that somehow escapes the rules of narrativity, discourse and language use? Will we always regard Islamic discourse as something totally fixed, closed, hermeneutically sealed and synchronic, and by doing so neglect the polysemic over-abundance of the Sign in Islamic discourse in general? Will we never evolve an understanding of Islam that is diachronic, dynamic and evolutionary?

This may well be the case if the Islamists of the present continue down the road towards constructing an Islamist discourse that is closed upon itself, exclusive in its referents and fixed in its interpretation. In the long run, we know where this will lead to: An increasingly insular and pedagogic reading of Islam that opens the way to theoretical hair-splitting and conflicts within increasingly fragmented schools of thought. One is reminded of how the dogmatism of Maudoodi led him to being criticised by some of his own followers for not having a beard of the right length and shape, and thus not meeting the ideal Islamic criteria!

Dear friends,

Islamic civilisation is and remains a reality on a number of levels for a vast section of humanity

today. Islamic teaching continues to shape the development of art, culture, architecture, law, economics and politics in the Muslim world.

By the promoters and defenders of the Islamic movement have also taken upon their shoulders the task of interpreting Islam for others and defending the name of Islam on their own terms. I would argue that in their zeal for doing so they have created enemies both within and without, some of whom are real while others are undoubtedly imagined.

‘Secularism’ as defined by some sections of the Islamist movement in Malaysia today, is rapidly being turned into an ideological nemesis just so that the Islamists have a convenient target to direct their combined forces. I have tried to argue that this is not only strategically wrong, but also conceptually erroneous. For the fact remains that everything which the Islamists claim about the so-called ‘secular’ trends is also true of the rest of society as well, and this includes Islamic society too.

Secularism is not the enemy of Islam in the way that some Islamists have imagined it to be. If by ‘Secularism’ they refer to the tendency to base our cultural, social, economic and political considerations upon genuine pressing needs of the present in the profane world around us, then this tendency was there even before the Islamic world fell under the yoke of Western imperialist domination from the eighteenth century. And if by ‘Secularism’ they refer to all human worldly phenomena that is time and context-bound, particular and anthropocentric, then practically all Islamic societies have been ‘secular’ on similar terms for the simple fact that they exist in this world and not some ideal realm.

Secularism is thus not evil or antithetical to Islam per se. It is the particular definition and interpretation of secularism as being fundamentally anti-religious that is. But Secularism is too big a concept to be reduced to such simplistic features. Islamic civilisation, which has grappled with major ideas and revolutionary concepts before, ought to rise to the occasion once again and address the challenges of secularism for what it is, rather than battling with its own imagined enemies in an internal war governed by a monochrome ethical logic of heroes and villains. There is more at stake here than a simple drama.

P.S.

* From “The Other Malaysia” website.

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