

# Secularism vs religion in politics:

## by Abul Mansur Ahmad

Today marks the 122nd birth anniversary of writer-politician Abul Mansur Ahmad (1898-1979). This is an abridged version of an article written by him and published in the ‘Concept of Pakistan’ magazine in 1964, during the reign of Gen. Ayub Khan.

Secularism is the most misunderstood word in Pakistan. Though not apparent to the casual observer, secularism versus religion in politics is the most important problem in our country. Its correct appreciation is thus the most pressing need of the hour. Ignorance by itself is bad enough, but ignorance of ignorance is definitely worse. We seem to be utterly oblivious of the evident injury we have been causing both to our people and the country, and indeed our religion, by pitting religion against “worldism” as equals.

This has occurred mainly due to our unthinking rejection of secularism as a principle of ethics of our political life. How defective our political thinking is will be evident from the fact that none of our political parties have found it necessary to speak out in support of secularism. On the contrary, all the parties, including those with the “bad

creative, and commercial rather than industrial. All politicians, active and inactive, including the politically thinking section of the intelligentsia, are under the spell of the very engrossing notion that the people of Pakistan in general are strongly averse to the idea of secularism. So, unless they openly profess their unflinching devotion to Islamisation of politics, they would lose their popularity and also the votes. This has, therefore, become the conventional way of doing politics in our country.

Secularism, however, does not merit the treatment it has so far received in the hand of politicians. It has, wrongly and unjustly, been pitted against religion. There is nothing inherently inimical between the two. History abounds with instances where deeply religious-minded statesmen and philosophers have advocated secularism in politics. Lord Salisbury and Sir Stafford Cripps

worldly gains by whatever means necessary, without any regard for moral and ethical values of life. The secularists are, therefore, regarded as those who do not believe in any religious moral or ethical principles of life and so are not to be tolerated.

This misunderstanding is entirely due to the improper definition of the word. In my view, however, it is safer to describe rather than define secularism. Better still, to understand it. So let us try to understand what secularism is. In layman’s phraseology, secularism is nothing more than the separation of practical religion and practical politics. This predicate—“practical”—is necessary because there are many things common to religion and politics in their theoretical and academic aspects. Now, this separation has taken place as a result of human experiences gained through centuries. Let us open a few pages of history to see how it happened.

Since the dawn of history, monarchs used to be both temporal and spiritual heads of their subjects. It then suited everybody because the rulers and their subjects belonged to the same faith, the kingdoms were compact geographical areas, and the statehood was very simple autocracies. With the growth and expansion of trade and commerce, colonisation became the order of the day, and building up of empires followed. With this, complications arose. Subjects of the kingdoms and those of the empires could not be expected to be of the same faith. So naturally, the necessity of the emperors’ declaration of impartiality in religious matters arose in the interest of empires themselves.

Queen Victoria’s famous declaration is an instance in point. This was strictly in line with the earlier declaration made by Emperor Akbar. But this convenient liberalism abroad did not apply in the case of the subjects of the monarchs’ own race at home. There, they continued to remain both temporal and spiritual heads. This continued up to the middle of the nineteenth century. During this period, the entire globe was roughly divided into three religious worlds: the Christian world comprising Europe and America, the Muslim world comprising the greater part of Asia and Africa, and the Buddhist world comprising Eastern Asia. In all these worlds, most of the kings and emperors claimed to be, and were actually regarded by their subjects, as temporal and spiritual heads. In the Christian world, they were pontiffs; in the Muslim world, they were Amir-ul-Mominins and Khalifa-tul-Muslimims; and in the Buddhist world, they were Tein Tzas in China and Mikados in Japan. Although England fell out of papal jurisdiction from the sixteenth century and set up her own autonomous Church of England, the Pope of Rome remained the overall pontiff of the continent exercising jurisdiction either concurrent with or supervisory over the monarchs of all regions.

As regards the Muslim world, the combination of the temporal and spiritual headship in the Khalifa practically ended with the first four

Caliphs known as Khulafa-i-Rashidin. After that the Church and the state tended to fall apart into Khilafat and Imamat. The great Imams fought with their life for the independence of the Church from the interference of the temporal monarchs. Imam Abu Hanifa was imprisoned, Imam Malik was flogged, and Imam Jafar Sadiq was threatened with death and his property confiscated by no less a Caliph than the illustrious Khalifa Mansur, and all this for the simple offence of not agreeing to surrender their religious belief to the whims of the temporal lord. The Imams’ suffering bore fruits and the Imamat could maintain at least a semblance of its independence from the interfering hand of the most autocratic of the emperors. Later on, the Ottoman emperors tried to regain spiritual authority over their subjects but their success was nominal. Even that nominal sovereignty over Muslim Church, if it may be so called, came to an end with the advent of the nineteenth-century wave of Renaissance in Europe which penetrated into the Muslim world through Lebanon and Egypt. Arab and Egyptian nationalism rapidly grew as an inseparable adjunct to their struggle for independence from the yoke of Ottoman, British and French imperialism. This was quickly followed by the rise of nationalism in Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. The common ground underlying this rapidly growing nationalism was the basic concept of separation of religion from politics. Mustafa Kamal gave this idea a practical shape by dismantling the institution of Khilafat for good.

So it is clearly seen from the analysis or the historical events above that separation between religion and state was effected by mutual consent in the interest of both. Religion separated itself from the state because as a partner of state powers, it could no longer maintain its right to divinity. The state, on the other hand, separated itself from religion because that was the only way to safeguard its right to the undivided loyalty of its subjects. Another aspect of this separation was that everywhere it was wanted by the weaker of the two parties. In the case of Muslims, it was the Alevis, later known as Shias, who conceived the idea of Imamat as distinguished from Khilafat at a time when they were being oppressed by the Sunni Caliphs. In the case of Christians, it was the Catholics of France and the Protestants of Germany who wanted this separation. Pope Pius, when he accepted the political sovereignty of the king of Italy, was a virtual prisoner in the Vatican City.

Subsequent experiences throughout the world have amply justified this separation of religion and state and have strengthened the grounds on which it took place.

Admittedly, there are three fundamental differences between religion and the state. Firstly, religion in its true sense is a unifying force, whereas the state is definitely a dividing force. Religion has no territorial boundaries whereas the state has and must have

one. Secondly, religion is more directly concerned with the moral and spiritual progress of humanity at large, whereas the state is more directly concerned with the material and social progress of its own citizens. Thirdly, religion is based on the willing submission of its adherents, whereas the state is based on force and coercion applied on its citizens, willing or not.

This observation is related to two undisputed facts: one is that whatever may be the form of government, the politics of a country is governed by either the strength of the arm of the powerful or by the force of the votes of the majority. The other fact is that whatever may be the form of religion, its faithful devotees are in hopeless minority compared to their erring brothers of the same faith so far as its devotional forms, moral precepts and ethical injunctions are concerned. Considering these two realities, it will be unsafe for a devoted faithful to entrust his religious affairs with either the mighty or the majority. To allow politics to interfere in religion will mean either this or that or both.

I have no hesitation in admitting that those who want to introduce or rather reintroduce religion into politics do so with the best of motives. What I do not agree with is that religion can control politics by becoming a partner in the affairs of the state. Instead of controlling politics, it will itself be controlled by politics. From the angle of politics, the life of an individual, as also that of a society, state and nation, has become far more complex than what it was, say, in the nineteenth century. So the reason for which France, Germany and Italy had to separate the Church from the state do apply today with much greater force. No state can permit a divided loyalty in its citizens. In the Muslim history, the Khilafat, which was originally designed to be a unified institutional hegemony transcending territorial and national boundaries to be headed by only one Khalifat-ul-Muslimin, had to be divided country-wise into as many Khalifas having the Khutba read in as many names, instead of one. This division was an unavoidable political necessity to prevent the divided loyalty of the citizens.

There is another point, no less strong, which makes the separation of politics and religion irresistible. The complex nature of the life of a modern nation-state is reflected, amongst other things, in its division into religious majority and minority. The basis of modern politics being counting of heads, no religious minority can afford to subject their faith to the majority interference. This was resisted in the ninth century in the Muslim World, in the nineteenth century in the Christian World and in the twentieth century in the Buddhist World. Now this separation is an internationally closed question.

So let religion succeed where politics fails. Let religion begin where politics ends. The two must not meet. If they do, politics will make religion corrupt and religion will make politics unreal. We can ill-afford either.



Abul Mansur Ahmad (1898-1979)

name” of being leftist, seem to be anxious to conceal their inclination towards secularism. They, more hypocritically than honestly, talk of Islamic republicanism and Islamic socialism, and of their determination not to do anything and not to pass any law against Quran and Sunnah. Even President Ayub and his companions—some of whom are evidently men of enlightenment who, in the beginning of their “revolution”, rightly condemned past politicians for their “exploitation of religion for political purpose”—have now adroitly effected a volte-face and have started talking of Islamic republicanism. This will apparently seem to be a surrender to “public opinion”.

This is so because political thinking in Pakistan is deductive rather than inductive, opportunistic rather than

of England, Bismarck of Germany, Emerson and John Dewey of America are the last persons to be graded as anti-religious persons. On the other hand, it will be seen that those who are opposed to secularisation of politics, because of their love for religion and hatred for secularism, are actually *secularising* religion itself. Secularism is neither anti-religious nor irreligious.

The worst that can be said against it is that it is not pro-religion. In fact, it is neither for nor against any particular religion in a very limited sense. Secularism is full of moral and ethical principles of its own, many of which are akin to religious injunctions. This is what is generally overlooked. It is generally believed, at least in our part of the world, that secularism is sheer materialistic opportunism for achieving

# Fighting racism: Building coalition among racial minorities

REZWAN MASUD and HAIDER KHAN

THE protests in the wake of George Floyd’s murder by four Minneapolis police officers rightfully reflected waves of anger and activism in the United States and beyond. Then, the atrocious incident occurred on August 23 in Kenosha, Wisconsin—where a white police officer shot Jacob Blake, an unarmed African-American man, seven times in front of his kids—proves that the heartbreaking assertion of “I can’t breathe, officer!” was not just the plea of Floyd to survive. These words also symbolise historical demands of the black people to be treated fairly and equally in the United States.

In fact, these demands for equal rights extend beyond the United States as well. During the Algerian revolution, Franz Fanon referred to this suffocation in his book *Toward the African Revolution*: “We revolt simply because, for a variety of reasons, we can no longer breathe.” In the recent protests, there have been widespread calls for systemic and structural changes. Cornel West saw signs of hope in a broad coalition of protests in the recent times. The theme that being black should not itself be a death sentence echoed in different parts of the world.

We have seen that different communities of colour as well as white allies participated spontaneously in protests supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. However, in many other communities of colour, there

is a lack of consciousness about the historical and systemic injustice against the black people. The recent incidents of discrimination against the black people have pointed out an important but often ignored aspect: the questionable attitude towards the black people among other communities of colour.

The fact that of the four police officers involved in the killing of George Floyd, one was an Asian American, led to some introspective discussions of a complex dynamics of Asian Americans vis-à-vis the black people. Of course, the incident should not lead to a generalised conclusion that all Asian Americans are anti-black, that they do not face discrimination themselves. Especially after the Trump administration’s rhetoric of calling the Corona virus “China virus”, different types of racist incidents have taken place against Asian Americans. Likewise, there is an urge inside the Hispanic community to confront racial stereotypes. There is a growing call for discussion among South Asians as well to tackle their own anti-blackness. With the rising xenophobic atmosphere against immigrants and Islamophobic incidents, the Hispanic and the South Asian communities are also subject to racial slurs and attacks.

That being said, it cannot be denied that there is a problem of anti-blackness within these communities. It may be uncomfortable for many to admit but being judged by the colour of one’s skin happens in many parts of the world. A darker shade of skin can decrease one’s

likelihood of getting married or having a good job in many countries. Recent discussions of commercial products to whiten the skin and colourism within Bollywood are a glaring example of that.

One essential step towards building progressive coalitions would be to understand the plight of the black people in historical context. Data show that black men are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by the police than white men in the United States. More than eight-in-ten black adults view that they are treated unfairly by the criminal justice system. George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Elijah McClain are not exceptions—they are the latest additions in the list of black people who have been murdered by the state.

Studies have shown that inequality is not colour-blind. Black people are discriminated against in accessing equal opportunities for education, health, and job. Consequently, the Coronavirus has also hit the black people harder in a lot of US states. Data show that on average the mortality rate among black people are 2.4 times higher than white people in the United States.

Speaking of change, one positive aspect of recent times is that young people from other communities of colour are increasingly showing signs of solidarity by taking part in protests for the Black Lives Matter movement in different ways. The young Asian-Americans are calling for change, while some South Asian groups have also taken active stance in recent times.

To make this more sustainable, every conscious individual should make active efforts to bridge any existing gap between them and the black community. Rights that the immigrant communities enjoy today are due to the advances made by the civil rights movement spearheaded by black political activists in the sixties. A multiracial, multi-ethnic movement from below can make the progress truly feasible.

There is a lack of consciousness about the history of the black people in the current education curriculum in the US. One way to redress the situation is that all schools, colleges and universities should offer courses on the history of racism emphasising the plight of the black people. This will help fight anti-blackness in other communities and help remove racial stereotypes. If Germany and South Africa can address their histories of holocaust and apartheid in their education systems, so can the United States to highlight its own records.

Academic departments and educators should make active efforts to incorporate the work of African American writers while reviewing the topics of national history, legal and criminal justice system, and policing related studies in their course design. The black people have voices, but often institutions choose not to hear. Christina Sharpe has brilliantly demonstrated in her book *On Blackness and Being* how the black people have been denied agency throughout history and how violence against the black people cannot be detached from being black.

Changing anti-black attitude within other minority communities can begin with their leaders’ organising public awareness campaigns to get rid of the stigma associated with darker skin colour. International students’ associations in different campuses can arrange dialogues and organise activities with the black students’ groups. Different solidarity groups can increase their visible support for the black people through real life and social media campaigns.

More deeply, there needs to be honest soul-searching as to why the current national and global structures do not speak for the black people. Achille Mbembe argues in his book *Necropolitics* that liberal democracy and racism have actually been compatible in the American context. Neoliberal capitalist policies aggravated the plight of the black people in many ways. Academicians and policymakers should look for ways to redress the structural discrimination against the black communities.

These suggestions are not exhaustive, but they can be a stepping stone for building broader coalition of solidarity to address racism in the United States and elsewhere. No nation can progress by putting its minorities in the back seat. Other communities of colour, while fighting their own battles, need to address these biases and build solidarity with all oppressed groups.

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