

Islam Rejects Both Secularism and “Political Theology”

In the 20th century, a German thinker called Carl Schmitt popularised the term “political theology.” The phrase was used in reference to the relationship between theology and politics. It was Carl Schmitt’s belief that the nation state was actually founded using religious concepts from the Christian tradition. These concepts, Schmitt posited, were transferred from the Christian tradition and reworked into what we now call secular politics. In his own words, “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from [Christian] theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts.”

For Carl Schmitt, the theological concept of an omnipotent God whose authority is unquestionable was transposed onto the structure of the nation state. Now, it was the state whose authority could not be questioned. Another idea that was used relates to how God’s existence is not accidental or contingent, but rather, is necessary, so now the existence of the nation state has become necessary. Now, whether or not you agree with Carl Schmitt’s analysis of the nation state, it raises an important question. Why is it, that in the Western intellectual tradition, theology and politics are considered something separate? Implicit in Carl Schmitt’s discussion is the assumption that theology and politics stand apart and that theological concepts first had to be secularised in order for them to be transposed onto the nation state.

In his book ‘Two’, Roberto Esposito, an Italian philosopher, discusses the inherent conflict present in the phrase “political theology.” The tying-together of the political and the theological, Esposito explains, traces back centuries to when Christianity and Roman law came into contact. The two both had an influence on each other, giving us what we today call the Roman Catholic tradition. However, this merging of the purely theological (or basically, Christianity) and the legal-political (or, Roman law and statecraft) was not perfect. As Esposito explains, the theological and the political both tried to incorporate the other and it is the conflict between the two of them which has defined much of Western history. This division between theology and politics in the Western tradition is embodied in the gospels’ words: “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.”

This conflict between theology and politics has unfortunately, become a problem for the Muslim World. With the era of colonialism came the abolition of the Khilafah State, and the division of the Muslim world into nation states. With the rise of the nation state came the forceful imposition of secularism, which led to the exclusion of the shar’ia in the political realm. However, such a separation between politics and theology is not translatable to an Islamic context. Even the use of the word “theology” becomes problematic when we try to find its equivalent in the Muslim tradition. Western academics sometimes equate “theology” to the Science of Kalam. However, that is a faulty equivalence. Within Muslim history, Kalam, as an intellectual discipline, was always deeply intertwined with the many other sciences of the Muslims, such as *usul-ul-fiqh*, *tafseer*, and *shurooh-ul-hadith*. These latter sciences are used to derive the Shariah laws from the Islamic sources, the primary ones of course being the Qur’an and Sunnah. These laws instruct Muslims on all affairs, whether private, public, or ‘political’.

It is within the Book of Allah ﷻ dnif ew taht ﷻ tehporP eht fo hceeps dna tcudnoc eht dna ﷻ guidance on all matters, whether they are ibadat, hudood, or mu'amalat. So where can the line between theology and politics be drawn in the Islamic tradition? Simply, it cannot. Politics in Islam is siyasah, taking care of the affairs of the people according to the laws given to us by Islam. The famous scholar and historian, Ibn Khaldun (rh), makes this point very clear when he wrote in his Muqaddima, السياسة والملك هي كفالة الخلق وخلافة الله في العباد لتنفيذ أحكامه فيهمفالسيسة، والمَلِكُ هي كفالة للخلق وخلافة لله في العباد، لتنفيذ أحكامه فيهم، وأحكام الله في خلقه وعباده إنما هي بالخير ومراعاة المصالح كما تشهد به الشرائع “Governance and authority are the guardianship of the creation and the vicegerency of Allah over His servants, to implement His Shariah rulings among them. The Shariah rulings of Allah regarding His creation and servants are all for the good and consideration of their interests, as guaranteed by the divine laws” Therefore, Shariah laws have as their purpose to cause human beings to follow such a course in all their dealings with Allah and their fellow men.

The contradiction between Western Christian beliefs and Islam becomes even more clear, when we compare the Christian saying “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's” to Islamic texts. The Noble Quran clarifies the matter. Allah (swt) said, ﴿الْيَوْمَ يَسِّرُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ دِينِكُمْ فَلَا تَخْشَوْهُمْ وَاخْشَوْنَ ۗ الْيَوْمَ أَكْمَلْتُ لَكُمْ دِينَكُمْ وَأَتَمَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ نِعْمَتِي وَرَضِيْتُ لَكُمْ الْإِسْلَامَ دِينًا ۗ فَمَنِ اضْطُرَّ فِي مَخْمَصَةٍ غَيْرِ مُتَجَانِفٍ لِإِثْمِهِ ۗ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ﴾ **“This day I have perfected for you your religion and completed My favor upon you and have approved for you Islām as religion. But whoever is forced by severe hunger with no inclination to sin - then indeed, Allāh is Forgiving and Merciful.”** [TMQ Surah Al Maidah 5:3]. This establishes the comprehensive nature of Islam.

There is no aspect of our lives that is not covered by Islamic law. Allah (swt) said, ﴿وَأَنْ اَحْكُم بَيْنَهُمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ وَاحْذَرْهُمْ أَنْ يَفْتِنُوكَ عَنْ بَعْضِ مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ إِلَيْكَ﴾ **“So judge between them by what Allah has revealed, and do not follow their desires over the truth that has come to you.”** [TMQ Surah al-Ma'idah 5:48]. This ayah makes it clear that Muslims are obliged to only follow Islamic rulings.

Allah (swt) said, ﴿أَفَتُؤْمِنُونَ بِبَعْضِ الْكِتَابِ وَتَكْفُرُونَ بِبَعْضٍ ۗ فَمَا جَزَاءُ مَنْ يَفْعَلْ ذَلِكَ مِنْكُمْ إِلَّا خِزْيٌ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا ۗ وَيَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ يُرَدُّونَ إِلَىٰ أَشَدِّ الْعَذَابِ ۗ وَمَا اللَّهُ بِغَافِلٍ عَمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ﴾ **“Then do you believe in a part of the Scripture and reject the rest? Then what is the recompense of those who do so among you, except disgrace in the life of this world, and on the Day of Resurrection, they shall be consigned to the most grievous torment. And Allah is not unaware of what you do.”** [TMQ Surah Al-Baqarah 2:85]. This warns the believers of what will happen if they pick and choose, ignoring aspects of Islam.

As Muslims, we must shed this opinion that politics and theology stand in tension and opposed to one another. Instead, both are intertwined through the most important ideology, which is our Deen. As Muslims, we understand that whatever endeavors are made in the “theological” sciences or in politics are made with the intentions of fulfilling our purpose, which is to obey Allah (swt) and His Messenger (saw).

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