

Islam as a Way of Life

In “A Secular Age,” Charles Taylor explores the connection between Protestantism and secularism. His argument is that the transformations the Protestant movement presented to society inadvertently opened the way for modern secularity. The initial impetus of the Protestant movement was based in its rejection of monasticism. In Latin Christendom, it was accepted that a minority of religious “virtuosi” (monks and nuns) followed the “counsels of perfection” to achieve a high spiritual rank while ordinary people followed a less demanding path. The Protestant Reformation rejected this distinction, insisting that there were no “special vocations” for religion and that every Christian must be 100 percent dedicated to their faith.

In contradistinction to monasticism, the Protestants promoted “ordinary life” – the life of work and the family – as the primary site of worship. However, this focus on “human flourishing” i.e. of being successful, disciplined, and well-behaved eventually allowed for what Taylor refers to as “exclusive humanism.” That is, the focus of the Protestants was narrowed to the private sphere of human life – where religion was a matter of individual choices - to the point that eventually, the idea was encouraged that humans could sustain successful lives through self-sufficiency and unaided powers. The idea of God as a benefactor became less essential for them to the point that eventually, the “Protestant Ethic” developed without any reference to God – opening up the doors to secularism.

The Protestant Reformation can thus be seen as a warning for those who limit religion to only the private life. Of course, this does not mean that the monasticism promoted by Catholicism is the solution.

One of the clearest examples we have of Islam’s rejection of monasticism is in the narration of ‘Umar (ra). It was narrated «أن عمر مرَّ بقوم من القراء فرأهم جلوساً قد نكسوا رؤوسهم، فقال: من هؤلاء؟ فقيل: هم المتوكلون، فقال: كلاً، ولكنهم المتأكلون، يأكلون أموال الناس. ألا أنبئكم من المتوكلون؟ فقيل: that Umar b. Al-Khattab (ra) passed by some people, who were known as readers of the Quran. He saw them sitting and bending their heads, and asked who they were. He was told, ‘They are those who depend (Al-Mutawwakiloon) upon Allah (swt).’ Umar replied, ‘No, they are the eaters who eat the people’s properties. Do you want me to describe those who really depend upon Allah (Al-Mutawwakiloon)?’ He was answered in the affirmative, and then he said: ‘He is the person who throws the seeds in the earth and then depends on his Lord The Almighty, The Exalted’” [Mentioned by al-Sarkhasy in al-Mabsut].

To understand that Islam is a deen i.e. a way of life, is to understand that it belongs in all spheres of life. It belongs in our homes and our work places just as much as it belongs in our political and economic institutions.

“And We have sent down to you the Book as clarification of all matters, and as guidance, mercy, and good tidings for the Muslims” [TMQ Surah An-Nahl, verse 89]. Ibn Kathir stated in his Quranic commentary, (وقوله: (ونزلنا عليك الكتاب تبيانا لكل شيء) قال ابن مسعود:

[و] قد بين لنا في هذا القرآن كل علم ، وكل شيء. وقال مجاهد : كل حلال وحرام . وقول ابن مسعود أعم وأشمل ؛ فإن القرآن اشتمل على كل علم نافع من خبر ما سبق ، وعلم ما سيأتي ، وحكم كل حلال وحرام ، وما الناس إليه محتاجون في the Book as clarification for all matters,' Ibn Mas'ud (ra) said, 'He has clarified for us in this Qur'an every branch of knowledge and everything.' Mujahid said, 'Everything lawful and unlawful.' Ibn Mas'ud's statement is broader and more comprehensive, for the Quran encompasses every beneficial knowledge—including accounts of the past and knowledge of the future—as well as the rulings on all that is lawful and unlawful, and everything people require regarding their worldly lives and their religion, their livelihoods and their Hereafter."

Thus, when we speak of the Shariah ruling governance in the past, we recall a time when Islam was not relegated to the private sphere but instead permeated the fabrics of society.

We should consider the words of the Mamluk Sultan Baybars in a letter addressed to the Mongol leader Abagha Khan, where he said, "How can agreement be achieved [between us]? The yasa [here, it would seem, referring to a law code, evidently to the Shar'ia] that we have today is greater than the yasa of Chinggis Khan [Genghis Khan]. Allah has given us rule over 40 kings" [Amitai-Preiss, R. (1995). *Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamluk-Īlkhānid War, 1260–1281*. Cambridge University Press, pg. 122].

Let us also consider the letter written by Harun al-Rashid to his governor Harthama b. A'yan, the governor of Khurasan, as reported by At-Tabari in "The History of Messengers (as) and Rulers (تاريخ الرسل والملوك) Tareekh Ur-Rusul wal Malook)," هذا (هذا) ما عهد هارون الرشيد أمير المؤمنين إلى هرثمة بن أعين حين ولاء ثغر خراسان وأعماله وخراجه؛ أمره بتقوى الله وطاعته ورعاية أمر الله ومراقبته، وأن يجعل كتاب الله إماماً في جميع ما هو بسبيله، فيحل حلاله ويحرم حرامه، ويقف عند متشابهه؛ ويسأل عنه أولي الفقه في دين الله وأولي العلم بكتاب الله، أو يرده إلى إمامه ليبريه الله عز وجل فيه رأيه، "This is the mandate Harun al-Rashid, Amir ul-Mu'mineen, entrusted to Harthama ibn A'yan when he appointed him governor of the frontier region of Khurasan, its districts, and its Kharaj revenues. He commanded him to fear and obey Allah, to uphold Allah's ordinances, and to remain ever mindful of Him. He instructed him to take the Book of Allah as his guide in all his affairs—observing what it deems lawful and what it deems forbidden, and reflecting cautiously before its interpreted texts; regarding the latter, he must consult the learned in Fiqh (Shariah jurisprudence) in the Deen of Allah and the learned in knowledge of the Book of Allah, or else refer the matter to his Imam (Caliph), so that Allah—Mighty and Majestic—might reveal the correct course of action and guide him toward the path of right judgment."

May Allah (swt) hasten the return of the Khilafah Rashidah (rightly guided Caliphate) and the resumption of Islam as a comprehensive way of life.

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Khalil Musab – Wilayah Pakistan