Editorial

Muslim Leadership and the Challenge of Reconciling the Religious with the Secular

The "return to religion" is a worldwide reality shared equally by the followers of different religions. Now that secularism, as a social ideology, has failed to provide a moral foundation for modern society, religion is reasserting its authority in all cultures. Intellectuals and religious leaders are increasingly rethinking the place of religion in modern society.

Nowhere is the challenge of reconciling the religious and the secular more intense than in Muslim societies. Unlike western societies, Muslim cultures have experienced secularism not as a structure designed to prevent the imposition of one religious tradition on another, but as modern faith promoted by many political leaders eager to offer an alternative to religion. For many years, Muslim secularists looked at religion with contempt and tried to use their political authority and commanding social positions to undermine religion and religious sentiment. Most recently, however, secular leaders have had to step back from their anti-religion posture in the face of the rising tide of religion in Muslim societies. Still, secularism and the secular state are widely associated with corruption, intolerance, and authoritarianism because of the archaic and bankrupt manners by which the self-proclaimed prophets of secularism in the Muslim world have exercised their power.

But while secularist excesses have led to its retreat before a newly founded religious spirit in the Muslim world, the new religiosity, in its effort to compensate for secularist extremism, is in danger of committing its own excesses. Finding a creative space between the stagnant traditionalist outlook and the dogmatic and power-prone attitude of many Muslim

ruling elites is a daily challenge that continues to confront Muslim intellectuals and leaders throughout the Muslim world.

The emerging Muslim community in the West has brought a new reality, one that does not lend itself easily to the above categorization, and hence requires special attention. This particularly applies to those members of the Muslim leadership who tend to display religious postures and use religious symbols to mobilize the larger Muslim communities in the West. The religious nature of community leadership can be understood only by examining the relationship between the religious within the Muslim context, and how Islam, as a religion, relates to both the identity and aspiration of Muslims.

Leadership is about developing a forward-looking vision for a community, and having the stamina to move ahead of others in implementing it. More specifically, leadership is about advancing a vision that can overcome today's problems. It is about overcoming a community's shortcomings and hence ensuring a better future. In this regard, the adjective *Muslim* adds no new elements to the concept of leadership.

On the other hand, the religious, has a markedly different meaning and connotation among Muslims than the ones we usually encounter in western society. In many ways, for most Muslims the term *religious* signifies what the term *civic* denotes in western society. The *religious* is often juxtaposed with the *secular*. And, hence, while *religious* points to civility and moral character, *secular* is increasingly equated with imposition, corruption, and authoritarianism. Secularism has indeed developed a quite negative connotation, not because of any theoretical divergence with the one upheld by western society, but due to the Muslim secularists' sheer callousness. For over five decades now, Muslim secularists have used secularism to expand their power and fortunes, and to justify oppression in the name of change and progress. Secular governments in the Muslim world are infamous for their brutality and tight control over society, and secularized Muslims have long been associated with anti-religion.

The markedly different uses of religion and secularism in Muslim and western societies reflect the types of experiences that these two words signify in both worlds. However, this should not be confused with an outright rejection of the essence of what Americans, and some Europeans, understand by secular. Secularism in the West operates on two different levels: the political and the social. While political secularism in the American context involves the concept of denying the state the power to impose a particular religion on society, or for that matter interfering with the reli-

gious practices of any religious group, social secularism involves all of the efforts designed to undermine the religious foundation of public morality. In fact, social secularism has gone far and deep in undermining both religion and morality, and we now see the result: a new form of religious reassertion in the rise of neoconservatism. While most Muslims would be open to embracing political secularism, they would reject the position of social secularists.

The previous remarks underscore the difficulty of analyzing religious leadership among Muslims in western terms. If the term *religious* is used to refer to those whose basic values and attitudes are formed by religion and who advance a religiously inspired vision of reform, religious leadership immediately acquires a broader meaning. In the Muslim world, religious leadership is not limited to those who are trained in traditional Islamic subjects, but extends to a larger group of individuals who are trained in medicine, engineering, and the humanities.

Indeed, most of the leaders of Islamically oriented groups have little formal religious training. Although most people in the West are usually amused and puzzled by this realization, students of history find this aspect of religious leadership understandable and in line with the patterns of cultural change. This is because cultural change has always been led by religious sentiment and conviction, and was always inspired by leaders who delve deep into the religious foundation of morality to effect change. After all, the concepts that led to the secularization of the modern West were developed during the religious Reformation in Europe.

The differences in attitude toward religion and its relation to societal change are at the core of many of the problems that have plagued the Muslim world in modern times, and are behind the recent polarization between Muslim and western societies. Interestingly, many western democracies have given – and continue to give – unquestioning support to dictators and autocratic rulers in the Muslim world because both groups share the façade of secularism. Western governments continue to stand behind authoritarian regimes and against Islamic reformists out of fear that the latter may bring theocratic governments to power. This has led them to marginalize the forces of social reform and entrench authoritarian regimes, both of which engender the rise of radical Islamic groups.

Muslim leaders in the West have been working hard to reconcile Islamic values with modern democracy, just as they have been struggling to bridge the deepening divide between the Muslim world and the West.

Leaders of national Muslim organizations in America and Europe have embraced both political secularism and democracy. Yet, 9/11 has awakened powerful voices that are calling for the marginalization of Muslim leadership in the West. This is bound to complicate the role of Muslim leaders, challenge the burgeoning Muslim community in the West, and determine whether modern society is going to overcome this recent polarization or whether it will fall into a state of postmodern tribalism.

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P.S. This is my last editorial in the capacity of AJISS editor. I have spent three wonderful years editing this unique Islamically oriented academic journal, and have enjoyed every moment. Now it is time for me to move on and make room for a new editor to step in with fresh blood and renewed energy to carry on this important work. I am grateful to all those who have helped make AJISS a world-class publication: the writers, the reviewers, the editorial board members, and the subscribers and contributors. And I am particularly thankful and appreciative of the outstanding contributions of Katherine Bullock, Layla Sein, and Jay Willoughby. Their hard work and sense of perfection have been crucial to producing this journal in a way that makes all of us proud.