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Islam and the Secular Age: Between Certainty & Uncertainty

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Modernity was birthed in violence. It produced the nation-state, nationalism and with it a myriad of other “isms” which serve as new idols or heroes competing for people’s allegiances. Liberalism, feminism, Marxism, individualism, atheism, agnosticism, extremism, communism, capitalism, socialism, fascism, totalitarianism, racism - all competing ideologies which attempt to answer the question of what does it mean to be human and accordingly how should we live. The quest for human fulfillment is expressed partly in these competing “isms” which themselves are the results of schisms that were produced when the old world, also termed the pre-modern world, was replaced with the new, modern world. In the West, the search for the answer of what it means to be human began in the mid-17th century with the re-formulation of the Greco-Christian understanding of the human being, the soul, the world, and God. George Makari articulates the context quite eloquently and is worth quoting at length:

Later when ancient Greek thought merged with the Christianity of the Church Fathers, a soul-based view of human nature became one of the ruling conceptions of Western belief. In Christendom, the soul was the “knot of the universe,” the unifying link between nature, man, and God, and the single most prized human attribute. By the mid-17th century, however, these same beliefs were seen as a rich source of corruption, unceasing strife, terrorism, and cruelty of vast dimensions. For decades, Christian sects waged war with each other over competing claims regarding the soul and its salvation...While the soul and the psyche were once understood to be synonymous, some thinkers now advanced a radical idea. What if the mind was not so much spirit as it was bodily? What if thinking matter existed within human flesh. An object, this mind would still somehow house human subjectivity. Endowed by God, it still would be material, and therefore sicken and die...Once modernity gave birth to the theory of an embodied mind, the implications were grave. If it wasn’t the soul but rather a fallible mind that made men and women think, choose, and act as they did, then long-standing beliefs were erroneous. Convictions regarding truth and illusion, innocence and guilt, health

*and illness, the rulers and the ruled and the roles of the individual in society would need to change.*¹

The last sentence is where I want to begin because the Enlightenment's embodied mind theory not only led to the jettisoning of the soul and the rest of the transcendent world, but also a loss of convictions about truth and everything else. A climate of doubt and uncertainty prevailed and as a result humanity entered into a new era called the Secular Age. Secularism was therefore the first product of modernity and the Enlightenment.

Understanding the Secular Age

If we carefully understand what the Secular Age is, then I believe we take one step closer to understanding exactly how it is that, although our Muslim predecessors before modernity possessed less knowledge about the material universe and resources than us, they had more conviction about their faith and *deen*, which enabled them to establish and leave a legacy of a profound civilization; and why, despite our currently having more knowledge and resources, we are plagued with less conviction about ourselves and our faith, and therefore contribute less to our communities and to civilization as a whole.

Most people understand secularity to mean different things. In Europe, the word “secular” indicates state control of religion and religious institutions. In the US, however, secularity indicates merely the separation of church and state. But this does not help us in comprehending what secularity exactly is. When we state that we live in a secular age or a secular time, what does that mean? It's helpful to consult Charles Taylor for a penetrating answer to this question. He indicates three components that comprise the secular age we live in. The first is that our public spaces have become stripped of any and all references to an ultimate or transcendent reality. This has produced devastating consequences for Muslims in particular and people of faith in general. In pre-modern societies, Muslim civilizations contained public spaces where seeking fulfillment beyond immediate

¹ Makari, George, *Soul Machine: The Invention of the Modern Mind*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2015, pg. xii-xiii.

human gratification was normal; where living meant being immersed in social, economic, political, and intellectual conditions that were conducive to a moral and spiritual life, and not simply theories that were subject to yearly and quarterly revisions. In those societies, people were actively and constantly engaged in the reinforcement of certainty in a moral and spiritual worldview that was externalized into various concrete manifestations such as art, architecture, clothes, motifs, literature, poetry, and even to a certain extent, music. Living with an active reference to God and the transcendent realm existed as a framework or a condition for living for which there was no real alternative. Secularity has evicted God and any reference to Him or any ultimate reality for that matter, from all public spaces. As Taylor points out,

whereas the political organization of all pre-modern societies was in some way connected to, based on, guaranteed based on some faith in, or adherence to God, or some notion of ultimate reality, the modern Western state is free from this connection...Or taken from another side, as we function within various spheres of activity - economic, political, cultural, educational, professional, recreational - the norms and principles we follow, the deliberations we engage in, generally don't refer us to God or to any religious beliefs; the considerations we act on are internal to the "rationality" of each sphere - maximum gain within the economy, the greatest benefit to the greatest number in the political arena, and so on.²

Spaces and even time become stripped of the sacredness that for millennia had functioned as a reminder of the life to come. Because of this, the Secular Age is one in which humanity no longer searches for fulfillment outside of this world or beyond the human condition. Humanism itself is the locus of the search for meaning and goals. All drive and pleasures are reduced to the Quranic concept of the self and its whims, the *nafs* and the *hawa*.

² Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007, pg. 1-2.

The second component of secularity is an overall decline in belief in God and in religious practice among believers themselves. This phenomenon is a consequence of the first component. Belief itself has become subject to scrutiny in the “rational” sense and as a result it becomes juxtaposed with disbelief not only in theory but in practice. This does not mean that there were no disbelievers in pre-modern Muslim societies. It means simply that disbelief in Muslim societies in the past was not normalized at all. I am using disbelief here to indicate not diversity in faith, but the rejection of the notion of God or a transcendent, ultimate reality. Even in Western Europe, there was no conception of atheism until the 17th century. It was inconceivable in pre-modern Europe that someone would not believe in God. In the Secular Age, belief and disbelief in God not only is equally conceivable but equally acceptable. The mass acceptability in society of unbelief and of uncertainty of belief is normalized now. The Secular Age produces so many viable options for what it means to be human that Muslims themselves have accepted the multiplicity of options rather than questioning the options. Our engagement in a multiplicity of manners of thinking and being have pulled us into doubt. There are so many alternatives that certainty (*yaqeen*) in belief is no longer a given. We doubt certainty even exists because the majority of people are uncertain and appear perfectly happy living in conditions of doubt. Enter component three of the secular age: new conditions of belief.

This final ingredient is the presence of this doubt coming home to roost. Secularity involves living under conditions where doubt is the norm, and because it is normalized it becomes acceptable and okay. As Muslims, since the migration of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) from Mecca to Medina to just after World War I, we have always been a people who have lived in a society where belief in God was never seriously challenged. Now, there are few places on earth where that is the case. Faith in a higher power has simply become one of many possibilities. This phenomenon has been called the Nova Effect.³ Because the Secular Age has ushered in the equalization of the polar opposites of

³ Ibid, pg. 302.

orthodoxy and disbelief, a multiplicity of other options have emerged to fill in the gap.

I like to illustrate this with the analogy of going to the grocery store to buy cereal. In the past, there were simply two to three options of cereal. Today, in all grocery stores, there are so many options for cereal that all stores now have entire aisles for cereals. When you walk down the aisle and examine the options, the presence of literally dozens (and hundreds if you add the family sizes and small packs) of options is enough to either keep you dazed and confused for minutes on end, or to turn you off to the point where you walk away. Our predecessors would be horrified to find that the Secular Age has complicated things that used to be insignificant such as what to eat for breakfast. Insignificant matters have become so complicated that we are conditioned to reject simple submission to and acceptance of divine authority. The Nova Effect pushes us to explore new things based on the myriad of alternatives before us and thus the level of certainty behind the correctness of our choices is reduced.

The Quest for Certainty in what it Means to be Human

So what does all of this mean for the condition of Muslims living in a Secular Age? First, it means that we live without constant societal reminders of, or references to, God. Second, we live under social conditions where belief and unbelief are considered equal rivals, and this affects not only us, but the next generation. Third, the Nova Effect means that more and more options for alternative lifestyles that claim to provide a fulfilling life for the human being become available. The answer to what it means to be human and how to live accordingly become “all or any of the above” instead of merely “option a, b, or c.” We as Muslims live under different conditions from our predecessors. The difference between pre-modernity and modernity involves differences in not only the questions we ask but how and under what conditions they are asked. We ask moral questions just as our predecessors did, but the kinds of moral questions we ask are different because of

the conditions that give rise to the questions push us to cast doubt on the answer even before that answer is produced.

Yet there is a solution to this apparent malaise. The solution is to ignore the options and search for certainty itself. In the first revelation of the Quran, we are informed of the paradigmatic state of the human being as one who learns - a prerequisite to exiting doubt. The Quran says, “He taught man that which he did not know.”⁴ The Prophet peace and blessings be upon him said, “Leave that which makes you doubt, for that which does not make you doubt.”⁵ Doubt, termed *shakk* in Arabic, is a stage that is two steps away from certainty in Islam. When one leaves doubt, one then enters into the stage of belief (*zann*). This is a thorny area because belief may or may not be properly justified. As belief increases in intensity it becomes conviction (*ghalabat zann*). Conviction is mathematically described by some scholars as being between 75-98% sure about the validity of one’s belief. When one reaches 99%, certainty (*yaqeen*) is achieved.

Reference to certainty appears in three different ways in the Quran. The first is certainty based upon knowledge and learning. This is termed in the Quran, *ilm al-yaqeen*.⁶ Learning involves accurate conceptualization of and proper judgment about a thing. In order to accomplish this, we need to ensure that we understand and define the relevant constructs properly, a feature that is normally the central facet in any course on Aristotelian logic. The ability to properly conceptualize concepts leads to our ability to precisely define terminology, and this in turn enhances our ability to speak and formulate propositions and thereby reason correctly. This is central to knowing and understanding. We live in an era now in which the Nova Effect has produced so much uncertainty and doubt to the point where many no longer understand and reason. Essentially, we have become a society that no longer “knows” anymore. The Secular Age has conditioned us to think differently. Consequently, achieving certainty becomes a tall order of business.

⁴ Quran 96:5.

⁵ Nawawi, *The Complete 40 Hadith*, London, 1998, Hadith 11.

⁶ Quran 102:5.

The second form of certainty is based upon observation and is called in the Quran, *ayn al-yaqeen*.⁷ This level of certainty arises from a high degree of conviction that emerges from witnessing a phenomenon. The overwhelming majority of sensory input is visual. Witnessing phenomena facilitates conviction in their validity or reality. However, if the environment and phenomena that we witness on a daily basis, such as architectural structures, social media, and even art are bereft of sacred references then we reduce ourselves to a certainty in only material phenomena. Furthermore, the problem is that the understanding of reality is actually undermined because in the Secular Age we have now become so skeptical that we scrutinize even our witnessing of things to such an extent that we lose any conviction about having witnessed something in the first place. Therefore, nothing but doubt remains and reigns. This goes back to the damage done by the Secular Age in taking references to God and the transcendent realm out of public spaces. It de-facilitates certainty based upon witnessing spectacular events.

The third form of certainty in Quranic terms is *haqq ul-yaqeen*.⁸ This refers to certainty that arises as a result of personal experience. Our experiences have drastically shifted from those of our predecessors. The Secular Age has altered our reliance on spiritual and in many cases interpersonal and natural experiences. We go to see a horror movie to get scared because we crave the artificiality of a horror film. But people who believe in possession and *Jinn* don't need to watch movies about paranormal activity. We struggle and even travel to obtain the simplest experiences that were daily phenomena for our pre-modern predecessors. We are cut off and detached from spiritual experiences and have traded them for rationalized routine. What's worse is that we have accepted this condition of affairs of depriving ourselves from experiencing what is beyond this temporal life. We are content in living life to the fullest extent materially but not experiencing its spiritual depths. The Secular Age is an age in which self-sufficient humanism, defined by frequently shifting standards, is enough. This means that there has actually been a shift in the object of experience. The Secular Age no longer wants

⁷ Quran 102:7

⁸ Quran 56:95

people to engage in spiritual, transcendental, profoundly intellectual experiences. The object of experience now is the human person herself. It's a radicalized version of individualism. Not only am I concerned with me, but only the trinity of me, myself and I alone can suffice me. It is the ultimate inversion of the Islamic eschatological system: I reward myself and I punish myself. Life is essentially about me ascending into higher degrees of pleasing myself and finding comfort in myself - nothing outside of me matters anymore. Self-sufficing humanism not only is an option in the Secular Age, but it is a widely available and arguably the dominant option. Any goal or objective beyond human flourishing becomes very difficult to conceptualize. This shifts the goal away from certainty to something entirely uncertain, for the self is prone to instability.

We are now living in an age where these three forms of Quranic certainty have been eroded and this begs the following questions: How can we reclaim certainty and its forms, as articulated in the Quran, in the Secular Age? What are the possibilities and impossibilities of certain kinds of experiences in the Secular Age?

Islam and the Bulwarks of Certainty

Certainty is mentioned twenty-seven times in the Quran. The Prophet Muhammad peace and blessings be upon him, and by extension his followers, are urged in the Quran to “worship your Lord until what is certain (*al-yaqeen*) comes to you.”⁹ What is certain, in this verse, indicates two things, according to scholars of Quranic exegesis.¹⁰ The first indication is death.¹¹ Death is the ultimate answer for what it means to be human. For no matter what we build and what we do, we must all deal with death in general and individually we will all pass away. Therefore, the initial meaning is to be consistent believers and hold on steadfast to your principles, your practices and your convictions throughout your encounters with the deaths of others and until we ourselves pass away.

⁹ Quran 15:99

¹⁰ See the two views in *Tafsir al-Tabari and al-Bahr al-Madid* (Ibn Ajiba).

¹¹ Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Al-Jami al-Bayan fi Ta'weel al-Quran*, Beirut, Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, vol. 7, 1971, pg. 554.

The second indication in the verse is certainty itself.¹² This means that the role of constant ritual worship (*ibada*) in Islam on a daily basis is to facilitate and reinforce certainty in all its forms. First, we must learn how to perform ritual worship, what validates it, what invalidates it, how we may improve upon the quality of our ritual performances, and the like. We must also learn about Who it is we are worshipping and why; what exactly it is that differentiates God from the world, and what the last revelation has to say about all of this. This facilitates certainty at one level. Then we must practice what we learn and witness others practice as well. This will bring about our witnessing a level of our own conviction and that of others that will inspire us as well, thereby facilitating certainty in witnessing spectacular events.

Conclusion

The Secular Age has shifted the focus from the afterlife to this present life. Al-Attas analyzes this shift very nicely, as he explains,

*The term secular, from the Latin saeculum, conveys a meaning with a marked dual connotation of time and location; the time referring to the “now” or “present” sense of it, and the location to the “world” or “worldly” sense of it. Thus saeculum means “this age” or “the present time,” and this age or the present time refers to events in this world and it also then means “contemporary events.” Secularization is defined as the deliverance of man first from religious and then from metaphysical control over his reason and his language. Secularization encompasses not only the political and social aspects of life, but also inevitably the cultural, for it denotes the disappearance of religious determination of the symbols of cultural configuration.*¹³

This last sentence is important for us to reflect on. The effect of secularism being cultural means that it affects change in values that are constructs that define good and evil; that it affects identity and symbols; and that language itself is affected as

¹² Ibn Ajiba, *Al-Bahr al-Madid*, Beirut, Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 2005, vol. 3, pg. 414.

¹³ Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib, *Islam and Secularism*, IBFIM, Kuala Lumpur, 2014, pg.17.

well as our understanding of gender roles and now even of gender. Yet in addition to all of these, what is most serious is that consciousness itself is affected. American Muslims have a different notion from our predecessors of what it means to be Muslim. All of this is rooted in the fact that there has been a dramatic shift causing a change in the conditions of belief. Public spaces, a decline in belief and practice, and new conditions governing belief have contributed to our inward turn to humanism in order to navigate the numerous choices that currently exist which have slowly eroded our sense of confidence in faith and religion to determine our values for us.

The principles by which we determine what to believe or do must in the end, so it is often held, be principles of our own making. Once the Enlightenment has undergone the notion that they are imposed on us by a higher-being, and the Scientific Revolution shown that they cannot be read off the fabric of the world, which is now seen to be normatively mute and devoid of directives, the conclusion appears inescapable that we alone must be their sources. The authority of any principle of thought and action is an authority we bestow upon it ourselves.¹⁴ Because we rely on ourselves, we doubt more and certainty becomes more distant.

Certainty is achieved through knowledge acquired from learning, not through sound bites, gossip, and rhetoric. Certainty is enhanced by proper religious practice, not from an idiosyncratic posture of disengaged-inclusion. Certainty reaches its zenith with truly profound, reflective, transcendental experiences, not episodic encounters with others on social media and productions of fiction. These forms of certainty and the pursuit of certainty itself must endure, until our certainty meets what is ultimately certain about our existence - its end.

¹⁴ Larmore, Charles, *The Autonomy of Morality*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2008, pg. 1