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Maulāna Waḥīduddīn Khān's views on relation between Islam and secularism

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Abstract:

The article explores views of Maulāna Waḥīduddīn Khān on relation between Islam and secularism as there is no specification of his thoughts on the above issue as critics and other scholars tend to show confusion when they approach Khān's thoughts from that specific angle. Maulāna Waḥīduddīn Khān is an Indian religious scholar and peace activist who is alive and known for his modern, cosmopolitan and peaceful thoughts. In this article the scattered and disjointed views of Khān on relation between Islam and secularism have been portrayed as to give context to his original views and show his actual stance which might remove the confusion prevalent amongst intellectuals and scholars as to spot Khān's basic stance on the above issue. The definition and different experiences of secularism has been shortly described along with projection of diversity of stance from other Muslim scholars as to broaden the very background of the issue. Later the views of Khān and his approach to the issue have been presented. The article will throw light that how Khān perceives the issue of relation between Islam and secularism and what is the point of convergence and divergence between Islam and secularism. This article will also highlight that whether he deals the topic on the basis of creed or philosophy or pragmatism and that whether he takes secularism as beneficial or damaging to the interest of Muslims and Islam. The article also shed light on the scheme of Khān that how Muslim should deal with the phenomenon of secularism.



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Before analyzing the perception of Maulāna Waḥīduddīn Khān about the relation between Islam and secularism it is imperative to give definition, general idea and experiences of secularism prevalent in different parts of the world.

General Definition of secularism:

In that connection it is true that secularism is the most heated and pumped debate of modern day fabric. It has been complex in context of its meaning. To some scholars it is dotted with such multiplicity of imports that it is impossible to determine its exact definition. The conjunction of Islam and secularism is also very complex, since Islam is such a historical and theological complexion that it could never be submitted to a simple definition.¹ At the same time, intellectual transparency to precisely detect secularism becomes confused when it is perceived with its different experiences into the Muslim world. Such experiences in Muslim world are not only different from Europe but secularism has dissimilar trajectories regarding its performance even amongst the Muslim countries. Such difference of experiences has yielded diverse responses and postures from the Muslim world, whenever a question of deconstruction of secularism is raised.²

Defining secularism one scholar writes that originally the Latin word *saeculum* is the very provenance of "secularism" which means "age" in a worldly sense. In common dialect it is referred to a worldly transaction. Etymologically "Laicism" has been derived from French *laicite*, which denotes lay people not clergy. In other words the terminology in English and French has two contrary features as this world not the otherworldly, and laity not clergy. The root of secularism or secularization was European historical experience, which redounded on gradual seclusion of worldly trade and thought from religious or church control. In sixteenth century England, secularism blossomed with shift of political authority from religious sphere to the state and corpus of law from religious to secular judiciary. As Charles D. Smith remarks that secularization did not mean an inevitable renunciation of religious belief. Conversely, religious ideals and ideas rather revitalized during the secularization of the state and later, following the French and Industrial Revolution, that of society.³

Different Muslims intellectuals and religious scholars have their own exposition of Islam and secularism. There are scholars like Maulāna Maudūdī⁴, Yousuf al-Qardāwī⁵, Syed Muḥammad Naqūb Al-Aṭṭās⁶, Seyyed Hossein Naṣr⁷, who tag secularism as antipodal to Islam. At the same time there are scholars who detect compatibility between Islam and secularism like Muḥammad Iqbāl⁸, Rashid Ghanoush⁹, Fazlur Raḥmān¹⁰, Abdolkarim Soroush¹¹ and Muḥammad Fethullah Gullen¹² etc.

After surveying definition, perspective, different experiences of secularism and consequent diverse responses from Muslim religious intellectuals now it is worthwhile to mention the views of Khān on relation between Islam and secularism.

Secularism and the Muslim intellectuals:

Writing on the issues of Islam and secularism Maulāna Waḥīduddīn Khān pens at one place that one of the intellectual issue of modern times is the emergence of secularism. It is being ranked as a popular and authentic ideology for state policy. Secular state is generally billed a developed state and non-secular state is ranked as a developing state. One of the sections of Muslims especially the Islamists are bitterly posing counter to the mechanics of secularism. They brand it as antipodal to Islamic ideology. According to their perception secularism means the realization of a state on irreligious and material pedestals which is naturally against Islam because Islam dictates a state which is based on divine writ. Khān contends that such notion of the Islamists about secularism is wrong as far as the virtual situation of the issue is concerned. The fact is that those Islamists have cultivated such perception of secularism on the basis of rhetoric of extremist secularists. Khān argues that it is the same aberrance which is being perpetrated by some of the Western intellectuals where the whole picture of Islam is visualized on the basis of militant mind of Muslim youth.¹³

Definition of secularism:

Khān contends that academic definition of secularism is not very clear.¹⁴ The deconstruction of the word secularism offered by Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics is to the point. According to this definition secularism is not the name of any anti-religion ideology but it construes that the state must fashion the policy of non-interference in religious affairs of its citizens. Basically secularism is a workable mechanism and not a sacred ideology. In accordance with its spirit it is like a *Hudaybiyyah* peace treaty which was a practical solution and it was totally in favor of Muslims. For the first time in history it has offered opportunities to the Muslims to propagate their religion freely without any fear of persecution by the state. As far as the establishment of Islamic state is concerned it cannot be materialized with mere slogans as we can take the example of Pakistan (which was established for the promulgation of Islam but still there is no Islamic system in Pakistan). Secularism gives us the allowance to freely and peacefully preach Islam in the whole world. As a result of that preaching if a majority of the people of society gets prepare for establishment of Islamic state then it could be realized too. Islamic state could only be fructified on basis of social and societal demand but it cannot be erected on mere political protestations.¹⁵

Secularism and Hudaybiyyah Pact:

Khān contends that the pact of *Hudaybiyyah* was called by Qur'ān as "Manifest Victory". It is because of the fact in war man's ego and polarization becomes his shepherd. Conversely when the peace is prevailed then logic and reasonability takes over the charge. Islam is religion of peace and a medium of truth so war is

unwelcome to its essence. During the flow of odium and war people's thinking format is clouded by prejudice and partisanship. Such state of affairs stifles the virtues of Islam. The virtuous aspect of Islam becomes unnoticed for the masses. Even they advertently pay no heed to it due to their jaundiced vision and confrontation with Islam. In such situation if peace is nurtured then the irresistible appeal of Islam pierce the very nature of such people. They have nothing to withstand Islam but to bow before its teaching.¹⁶

Khān goes further and writes that it is not the mood of Islam to inspect things on its face value but to fathom the very base of its structure. *Hudaybiyyah* pact is the real example that how our Prophet spotted the very base of such event. The idolaters themselves fixed the clauses of such pact as to gain advantage over Muslims. In contrast, our Prophet eyed the hidden advantages of such pact. The apparent theme of the pact was disfavoring Muslims but in the essence it was favoring Islam. One aspect of such pact which crucially favored Muslims was that the arena of contest was changed between non-Muslims and Muslims. Until then both sides were fighting in field of war which helped the idolaters because of their material resourcefulness in the battlefield. After that pact the amphitheatre was changed from battlefield to the field of ideology and philosophy. In such ideological theater of action the victory of monotheism over polytheism was certain.¹⁷

Khān exhorts Muslim intellectuals that we should analyze secularism through such prophetic lens like our Prophet scanned the above peace pact. Here too in our age our rivals have stipulated the principles of secularism. The constitution of such principles for secularism has been enacted by our rivals due to one reason. The reason is that they want the non-interference of religion in their scheme of things as to march ahead in their cultural and civilizational enterprises without any hindrances. In turn such plan of action has incubated another manifestation which is loaded with advantages for today's Muslims that is the change of place of contest. Now Muslims are to fight their rivals in the field of ideology but not in the field of material power. Khān invites his readers to ponder deeply over such state of affairs which would clarify that the present secularism is an eternal *Hudaybiyyah* pact from one point.¹⁸

Breaking the above issue ahead Khān contends that in the days of Prophet the stated pact exorcised the situation of belligerency between Islam and polytheist government for about ten years but today's secularism has vaporized eternally the tussle and violence between religion and government machinery. In other words *Hudaybiyyah* pact temporarily changed the battle of sword to the battle of intellect while today's secularism has done the same with eternity. During the days of Prophet his companions distilled their magnificent gains from the peace pact by propagating their faith without confronting the then political system. Today's Muslims can get the same pickings under the umbrella of secularism up to the time when God's rule also get established on the earth like it is engraved in hearts.¹⁹

Secularism in service of Islam:

Khān contends that secularism is very beneficial to Islam and Muslims as it is offering opportunities to the people to work for the objectives of Islam in both kind of countries whether Muslim or non-Muslim. The organization and establishment of seminaries, mosques, other constructive organization, Islamic upbringing, preaching of Islam and like *Dawah* enterprises are such localities which are open to Islam. By using such kind of spheres Muslim could establish the empire of Islam in all states although apolitical in nature but that empire could indirectly pervade political system too. The Muslim leaders of present time discerned secularism on the basis of idealism thus rating it an enemy. Otherwise if they had spotted it on the basis of practicality then they would have found it as a bounty from God and utilize it with rich pickings. Now the same people who dismissed secularism as un-Islamic spectrum are living a good life under the same secularist umbrella. In plain words in principal they could not adapt to the secularism but conversely now they are fashioning it hypocritically in their lives.²⁰

Charting another dimension of services of secularism, Khān argues that modern religious freedom ensures two kinds of religious latitude as one is religious practices and second is religious preaching. Modern secular states are loaded with both kinds of religious concessions. Such genre of freedom is so veritable that citizenry of such states change their faiths without any ban or bar from the concerned governments. Exemplifying his contention ahead Khān argues that in India due to such situation roughly one lac of pariah embraced Buddhism and every year around one lac American citizens are won to Islam. From that vintage point if secular policy is investigated then it propounds the fact that any religious class in conjunction with offering its own religious observances can also extend its ideology to other classes. Resultantly it can shepherd the followers of others religions to its own creedal mould. If such change as Khān concludes is actuated on mega scale then it hints the possibility that majority margin of the specific country might change their religious credos. In other words the present religion with marginalized canvass can potentiate itself to become the collective religion of people in that specific state in future.²¹

Difference of secular philosophy and secular policy:

At other place as Khān filters out the filigree duct of difference between secular philosophy and secular policy. He argues that without pocketing such difference it is impossible to clutch firmly the very key plank of the phenomenon of secularism. Secular philosophy was the intellectual product of those people which were intellectually the captives of atheistic mentality. Later on as Khān argues secularism was separated from philosophy and got attached to the democratic system as an agency of its practical policy. Consequently practical policy purports that religious affairs would be dealt as the matter of individual freedom and collective material services would be the constituency of the state. Time has morphed the spell of religious persecution of the past into the modern

age of irrevocable religious freedom. In other words secular policy constitutes the part of such religious liberty. The primal need of every societal milieu is activation of peace and secularism as a policy actuates the needful. It is that nostrum which has shielded the developed states from being mired in the pristine religious conflicts. From India to USA and Britain all are using policy umbrella of secularism. In those states all religious groups are free with their creedal praxis with only one condition that violence must be warded off.²²

Separation between religion and politics:

Khān argues that goal of Islam is Islamization of man but not Islamization of system or society. This difference of individual and society is not the creedal dictation of Islam but it is based on practical wisdom. Qur'ān dictates the religious requirement of an individual from both ends whether it is practical or theoretical. Conversely Qur'ān is mute on the societal model or political life. In other words it could be concluded that religion of an individual and religion of a society are two different matters which must be separately dealt. There is no single or similar criterion for them. The demand of Qur'ān is that an individual must tread the path of Islam in his own individual capacity. In one tradition of the Prophet (Mishkāt Almaṣābīḥ: 197) where the last sentence speaks of the same fact. According to that Tradition society could not be gauged on ideal criterion. In other words society would be fairly dealt in accordance with its level of acceptance. In other words man of faith must be ideal in his individual domain but he must be the practitioner of pragmatism when it comes to society. The tradition also shows that collective and societal or political affairs are subject to latitude. The believers are required to make their way in accordance with the prevailing situation of the society.²³

Khān, in order to clear the situation on the above issue ahead posits that such division in Islam between individual's religion and societal religion must not be confused with Western principle of separation between religion and politics. The Western chapter of such division was the result of tussle between science and church. In that connection such split was invested on the basis of absolute separation or ideological separation. In contrast in Islam there is no such division. In Islam the difference between an individual's faith and societal or collective faith is the yield of natural principle of "possible or impossible". In fine such principle is the same which is in modern day called as the "Politics is the art of the possible".²⁴

Charter of Medina and secularism:

Khān equates today's secularism with Charter of Medina. Such charter projects that how Muslims should order their lives when they are in such society where they are accompanied by other non-Muslims or they don't have enough authority. In that Charter Jews were declared as one nation with Muslims despite the fact that they were disbelievers. It was also declared that they would be free to practice their own religion. The freedom of religion to Jews in the Charter of Medina is the point where Khān banks on his theory that secularism is the

product of Islam to the world. According to Khān it is the same right which has been enunciated under the banner of today's freedom, democracy and secularism. Today under the stated umbrella such freedom of religion is offered to every sect and nation.²⁵

Enlarging the same argumentation Khān contends that the freedom of religion offered in the said Charter keep continued its frequency in history at last culminated in the emergence of charter of United Nation Organization (UNO). In such charter of UNO all the nations were adorned with the freedom of religion as inviolable right of every individual with the approval of world community. Khān believes that principally the contemporary secularism is the same which has been offered in the charter of Medina. This ideological revolution has morphed the very fabric of religious competition for power and ushered in the competition of peaceful ideologies amongst religion. This change is great mainstay for Islamic cause as undoubtedly Islam is an ideological superpower which would eclipse others religions thus being triumphed without having any material power.²⁶

Scribbling the conclusion of his construction Khān pens that in the same connection democracy is the Western version of "Shuracatic" ideology of Islam, which with the passage of time consummated in the emanation of modern democracy and secularism is the by-product of this political revolution.²⁷

Divine plan, secularism and renaissance of Europe:

Khān argues that Qur'ān speaks of two main phases of religious history in the world. One phase could be called as pre-Islamic revolution time and other phase is branded as post-Islamic revolution time. The time before the Islamic revolution was the era of *Fitnah* (religious persecution). At that stage people were persecuted on the basis of religion. In that period it was considered the prerogative of government to determine that which specific creed or religion should be professed and practiced by the citizens. It was the age of intolerance. Such situation of religious persecution was against the creation plan of God. According to the divine plan the world is the place of test and trial. Such state of affairs presupposes the freedom of choice to the human. Without such freedom, the test and trial of a human is meaningless. Later, Prophet and his companions were destined by God to fight such persecutors in government.²⁸

In that regard as Khān writes that Prophet and his companions have been enjoined by Qur'ān with the following words: "*Fight them until there is no more Fitnah (religious) persecution, and religion belongs wholly to God (8:39).*" In that verse of Qur'ān the Arabic word "*Fitnah*" means religious persecution which was deeply grounded in the world from thousands of year. This oppressive mechanism was against the creation plan of God so it was ordered to be extirpated even with the use of sword as to flush the world with religious freedom and that human beings should be able to live freely in accordance with their religious convictions. It was nothing but an epochal change which could not be prosecuted all at once. It postulated a long-drawn historical process. Later

due to the endeavors of Prophet and his companions the said operation was carried out in human history and in due course it culminated in Renaissance of Europe.²⁹

Going ahead with his package of argumentation Khān believes that in political system the principal of secularism is the result of the same above mentioned revolution. Due to the constant endeavors of secularist reformers today secularism has become internationally accepted norm. It has the sanction of UNO. Principally all the governments of the world have attested to it as a policy. This modern ideology has finished the manifestation of religious persecution in history for the first time. Today's every man has a right to profess, practice and propagate his own religion. This right accompanies only one provision that such right must be availed in a peaceful manner and with deflection of violence. In modern's day media such news are reported the in one of countries Islamist parties were tortured and persecuted like the leader of Muslim Brotherhood namely Syed Qutub was hanged in 1965. The founder of Jamā'at-e-Islamī was jailed in 1948 but such incidents were politically-charged and were not on religious grounds. Such punishment could be called as political not religious.³⁰

Politicization of Islam:

Discussing the same issue Khān writes ahead that fact is that in modern time some Islamist offered their self-styled ideology that Islam is complete code of life and for its installation it requires the existence of government. They contend that it is our religious obligation that we should fight the rulers to seize the governments from them and forward the opportunities of ruling the country to the Islamists. Such ideology sparked the clashes between the rulers and the Islamic parties. Resultantly the rulers took violent actions against the Islamic parties. These violent steps orchestrated by the rulers were engineered for the protection of their own governments but not for erasure of Islam. On these so-called Islamist leaders the words of companion of Prophet Abdullah Bin Omer comes true that God has revolutionized the history to secure Muslims from the interference of rulers to enable them in to freely practice the real teachings of Islam but Muslims invented their self-styled political interpretation of Islam which induced them to eliminate their rulers from government. Resultantly in history religious persecution and violence was resurged.³¹

Prophet and the secular shield:

Khān further writes that in Qur'ān we have been shown that the nation of one Prophet told him: *"They replied, Shu'ayb, we do not understand much of what you say. In fact we see that you are powerless amongst us. Were it not for your clan, we would have stoned you, for you are not strong against us"* (Sūrah Hūd:91). Likewise in one of the traditions of Prophet the same fact has been shown as: *"that every prophet was sent by God with the protection of his own nation."* In ancient times when there was not any kind of modern governmental structure people of that age lived under the protection of their own tribes. In accordance with the tribal tradition every tribe was bound to shield their own

people against the other tribesman. The same tribal tradition also guarded the prophets of their own ages. The Prophet Muḥammad himself got his protection under the shield of Abu Talib who was the elder of *Bani Hashim*. It is also a fact that Abu Talib did not accept Islam but due to the same tribal norms he guarded the Prophet against his opponents.³²

He pens further that in present age the tribal mechanism has been vaporized but under the spell of modern concept of state secularism is doing the same service by giving protection to men of faith and men of preaching. Modern time secular state offers guarantee to all its citizens that every person has a right to profess, practice and propagate his desired religion with only one provision that they must not do violence against others. The protection which was offered to prophets in ancient times was tribal shield and not an Islamic shield but despite that fact they accepted it. In modern times too the protection which was offered to the Muslims is also secular not Islamic. Now in accordance with the prophetic tradition (*Sunnah*) Muslim should have accepted that shield and work for the peaceful *Dawah* mission. Conversely Muslim leaders of all over the world declared secularism as against religion and started verbal and practical fight against it. In other words they shed the great opportunity forwarded by this secular shield.³³

Religious state in secular world:

Contending ahead Khān opines that the intellectual orientation of the last several hundred years has produced a worldwide mind-set which is totally against a state based on religion. It is in favor of secularism. Contrary to the philosophy of religion which is based on faith secularism is based on reason. Majority of educated people in modern times has accepted the fact that the affairs of the state should be separated from the sacred scriptures and should be dealt with on the basis of reason. The fact is that world's opinion is in favor of secular rather than a religious state. In India too the same phenomenon is at work where as a result of two hundred years of modern education Indian generations share the same motor of secularism with the rest of the world being a part of the global village. In accordance with this factual point if a state based on religion had to be structured than ideologically a sea change in global thinking should be realized. Without such a global change the foundation of religious state is impossible to get to fruition. In that case we have no other option but to confess the reality.³⁴

Conclusion:

Here, after briefly discussing the background, definition and experiences of secularism and diversity in the views of Muslim scholars this article might assume that Khān considers secularism as the harbinger of religious freedom which was introduced by Islam and later through historical process it culminated to its present position. At the same time he does not believe in theoretical or philosophical division between Islam and secularism. He rather takes it a temporary mechanism to mentally prepare people for acceptance of Islamic state based on Islamic laws. Once getting social acceptability secularism can be

replaced by Islamic state. He contends that secularism can help in propagation of Islam and its objectives with policy of its non-interference in religious domain therefore it should be ranked as helper and supporter of Islam. At the same time through the motor of that article different intellectual circles might be able to discern the practicability and relevance of Khān's thought postures on the above issue for today's Muslims.

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 33. *Ibid.* , 61-2.
 34. *Islam and Peace*. tran. Farida Khanam (New Delhi: Goodwords Books, 2012), 155. One inquirer asks question from Maulana Wahiduddin Khan which is quite important to shed further light on Khan’s stream of thought about secular politics and Islam. In response Khan posts his opinion that when politics is operated with secular mind then it becomes worldly affairs. Due to such state the base of decision is rationality in secular politics. In such a case the people at the helms of affair perpetuate, change, revoke or invoke their decisions and steps in accordance with

the desired results without any impediments. In contrast when people with religious mental frame steps in politics then in accordance with their intellection politics becomes a matter of religious creed which sanctifies their politics like other religious deeds. They do not become ready to review their course of action whatever the cost is. Even they are ready to destroy themselves in the way. Such people make suicide in the name of martyrdom. Opining on the other question Khan writes that politics always generate rival as politics is the name of change in system. From the very first day it becomes inevitable that tussle and friction is practiced with the managers of state. In order to avoid such situation with the rulers it is necessary that politics should not become the arena of creed but it should be the subject of social acceptability. Khan further writes that in religion the inclusion of practical politics would not be on the basis of creed but it would be on the basis of social situation. In other words social situation would determine the fate of practical politics. One Tradition of *Sahih Bukhari* can make the situation further understandable, “*Aishah said, the first thing that was revealed thereof was a Sūrah from Al-Mufassal and in it was mentioned Paradise, and the Hell (Fire). When the people embraced Islam, the Verses regarding legal and illegal things were revealed. If the first thing to be revealed was “Do not drink alcohol drinks, people would have said, we would never leave alcohol drink and if there had been revealed,” Do not commit illegal sexual intercourse”, they would have said we would never give up illegal sexual intercourse. While I was a girl of playing age, the following verse was revealed in Makkah to Muhammad: Nay, but the hour is their appointed time (for their full recompense) and the hour will be more grievous and more bitter (54:46). Sūrah Al-Baqarah (The Cow), Sūrah Al-Nisa (The Women) were revealed while I was with him. Then Aishah took out the copy of Qur’ān for the man and dictated to him the verse of the Sūrah (in their proper order), Al-Risala, May, 2016, 42-3.*”