

Social Media and Its Impact on Secularism in Society

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Abstract

Recent works on social media and religion have paid particular attention to the role of social media in the development of religious values, improvement of social values and gratification of faith-based content by using various methodologies. This research paper is a quantitative research, evaluating the use of social media by the youth and how does it affect their approach towards the Islamic ideology and Secularism. Social media is used extensively by a lot of people, with the majority being youth. The thought process takes a great chunk of its evolution from whatever mind accepts from the social media. Social media has a lot of unscreened information and misinformation which comes from the people of all the religious groups and backgrounds, when mixing together, they leave the young and tender minds vexed. In this article, it is asserted that social media has a great impact on society specially in the development of secular society. The article demonstrates the quantitative link between social media and religion on one hand and a link between all social media platforms and the emergence of secularism on the other.

Keywords: secularism, social media, muslim youth, religion, ideology

Research Problem

Nowadays the use of social media is having an effect on the religious views of people. Social media plays part in shaping one's beliefs about society and religion (Kgatle, 2018). [1] People tend to believe the information poised on social media and it eventually starts changing their theological perceptions. Lim and Putnam (2010:914), in their article 'Religion, social networks, and life

satisfaction', state that social networks offer strong evidence for social and participatory mechanisms shaping religion's impact on life satisfaction.[2]

Secularism

The term secularism has a broad and diverse meanings. In reality, at various occasions this word is utilized in totally opposite ways too: one term is unfriendly to religiosity, looking for its rejection or negligence; the other word is nonpartisan, neutral and simply shows how our can society and culture can be in harmony without much interference from religion. (Kmiec, 2014)[3]. According to the Britannica encyclopedia, secularism is a movement and a concept which focuses solely on the matters of the world and not on the afterlife. (Al-Hawali, 2017). Something worldly, and not religious, is secular. To be secular means not bound by devout limitations, particularly not having a place with a religious request. Secularism is the philosophy of humanity being greater than religion (The American Heritage Dictionary, 1969). In some areas people don't need a Islamic State and prefers Secular State as they don't want Shariah to be forced on them as done is Islamic states. [4]

Education, state affairs, culture and the society should be without the influence of the religion, that is the basic tenant of secularism. (Chambers English Dictionary, 1988)

As stated by Antonio Gramsci

“Note the problem of religion taken not in the confessional sense but in the secular sense of a unity of faith between a conception of the world and a corresponding norm of conduct. But why call this unity of faith “religion” and not “ideology”, or even frankly “politics?” [5]

We live in unsafe circumstances. The ambush of the partisan viciousness, challenge the simple quintessence of the human individual. Never again is this only a conflict of developments, however a battle for the protection of human life. Since religion or religious conviction is regularly seen as the starting point of the disdain and phlebotomy, it isn't astonishing that religion is dealt with as a lethal substance contrary with peace or the human great, and consequently beyond reach (Kmiec, 2014).[6]

A few decades back, it was unheard of that someone would say out aloud their irreligious thoughts. Even if people were skeptical about religion, they would always keep it to their own selves, and would respect the sentiments of religious people. Now it is not so. Whether the secularism is extreme or soft, it has a lot of potential in it.

Social Media

Like all forms of media, an individual's mind can be manipulated by repeatedly viewing of any information through social media. It is an umbrella term that characterizes the different exercises that coordinate innovation, social association, and the development of words and pictures.[7]

Everyone uses social media in one way or the other. According to a survey (Pew, 2010), 72% of millennials (population reaching adulthood in the first or second decade of 21st century) use one or the other type of social media [8]. There are many reasons for which the use of social media is inevitable. Communicating with friends and family, keeping up to date with the latest happenings and news around the world, projecting your thoughts and ideas with people, social media is a single solution for many tasks. There are all sorts of information available online. Sometimes it may not be authentic, but because it will be online and would have been shared so many times, it will have an impact on people, nonetheless. Also, Social media played a central role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring. A spike in online revolutionary conversations often preceded major events on the ground. Social media has also helped in spreading democratic ideas across international borders. Examples are Mohammed Bouazizi in Arab World [9]

As a language the media molds religious imagination in accordance with the genres of popular culture, and as cultural environments the media have taken over many of the social functions of the institutionalized religions, providing both moral and spiritual guidance and a sense of community. [10]

Media is a great source to cultivate ideas and thoughts in the minds of public. By repeatedly broadcasting one thing in different ways, it can be cast in the minds very easily. Social media is the same too. You can propagate anything that you want without any check and balance. It can be very effective to use

social media to change the religious paradigm of any society. Similarly, our society is undergoing a change too. We should note that the presence of religion in the media is not just a mirror of a religious reality outside the media. It is also an outcome of a complex set of processes in which importance of religion and beliefs are contested as well. [11]

Facebook and Twitter[12] are used by millions of users worldwide. They can interconnect with just few clicks. It is very easy to find people of your mindset and not so difficult to stumble across people who are not of your school of thoughts. People share everything online, from their food to the books they are reading to their political and religious views. We see that religious posts create a feeling of belonging and community, and it also serves as personal religious triggers and reminders. (Salem, 2016)[13]

According to the uses and gratifications theory, there are ten uses and gratitudes of social media: information seeking, relaxation, social interaction, pass time, entertainment, communication, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and knowledge/surveillance. [14]

An Islamic State

Islam is a complete religion, a complete code of life. In Quran, it is said “Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah is Islam” (Aal-e-Imran: 19)

In an Islamic system, state and religion are not separate from each other but one is always must for the other. This is the reason that if religion becomes weak in a place, the government automatically weakens. If religion is not considered as the supreme governing power in a state, and its importance is overlooked, then the government and state cannot nurture at their best potential [15]

Islam has this specialty that not only it works on individual growth and betterment but gives as much importance to the betterment and civilization of the community. Islam laid out regulations for rulers and subjects, for all the people in different roles so that they can perform in their full capacities for better economy, political affairs and society.

Islam has not condemned politics neither does it differentiate between state and religion as done by the Christianity. It lays out rules for an ethical course of politics, finance and economics, so that running a state in the best way with discipline is possible. Islam appreciates healthy political discourse, until and unless it remains under the limitations laid out by Quran and Sunnah. And if we want to put these rules aside and build up a secular state, which takes no influence of the religion than it is not possible in Islam. It is not possible that one's individual life is spent according to the Islamic principles but his social life or political life is free of its influence. In Islam, individual and collective lives are all under the supremacy of Allah. The authority to rule is a divine trust places by Allah, and it is placed upon the rulers by the people.

“The decision is only for Allah” (Al-Inaam : 57)

Similarly, at one other place, it is stated in Quran,

“Do you not know that to Allah belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth” (Al-Baqarah: 107)

All the things in this universe, from a smallest single-cellular organism to the planets and spatial bodies, Allah rules everything.

“Unquestionably, His is the creation and the command; blessed is Allah, Lord of the worlds.” (Al-Araaf: 54)

Secular State

Freedom is the primary thing in secularism [16]. Secularism promotes human being as being “free” instead of “slaves of God”. The basic purpose of human life in a secular state is progress, and they are ruled by human rights. Tolerance and equality are other major traits. Secularism promotes progression so much that it compels people to work for better and better luxuries, eventually making a robotic person, who is working day and night, instead of having some greater purpose of life.

Unlike in an Islamic state, the people in a secular state are only answerable to the state and the court, they are not answerable to any Supreme being. The three main objectives of secular state are:

1. Infinite capital
2. Infinite power
3. Infinite knowledge

A secular state emphasizes on the importance of four different things – income, wealth, power, autonomy. Without these necessities, a state or a person cannot function properly. [17]If we keep this in mind, we can conclude that in a secular state, a person has just a few roles – worker, voter, consumer and spectator. The secular culture has ended religiosity and traditions.

Media and the thought process

Media raises a civilization which is devoid of customs and traditions, and which believes in freedom and equality. Anything sensational will find its way to the media and it will be propagated so many times that it will be saved in the minds of the masses, despite it being true or false. Media does not vouch for what is good or bad,[18] it just on-air whatever will earn them ratings, likes, views. For media, the product is the people. Knowledge is also a product. When education, public and knowledge all are commodities, [19] and are used for the gain of capital, then the culture, traditions and morals are lacking in society. The Internet has in a general sense changed the manner by which we reach out to each other. Long range interpersonal communication has broken past boundaries that once confined supposed unthinkable themes like religion and legislative issues to formal discussions. Or on the other hand rather, it has extended outskirts to incorporate more points of view, quicker rejoinders and a more noteworthy comprehension of how different our reality is. Internet communication, regardless of whether unknown or not, uncover that we experience similar feelings, while appreciating solace and strength offered by the sense of community. For millennia using social media, religions have raised dividers among themselves as well as other people, regularly diverting from our central and shared humankind. (Barrington, 2011).[20]

Survey Findings and Analysis

We made a Google form and circulated to random people through Facebook and Twitter. The questions carried different themes and were not direct. We indirectly asked them about various things to gauge their interests in religion and other aspects.

Our respondents were majority of youth, the most concentration of age was between 18 to 25 but we also had people from age 16 to 50. 41% of them were males and 59% were females. Although 91.6% people stated Islam as their religion but there were 6 people who stated they had no religion, and we had one from Hinduism, Shintoism and Mormonism each.

Facebook was used by the most people, 78, with Whatsapp trailing behind with 69 users and Instagram with 49 users. Other apps Twitter, Snapchat, Google + also have more than 30% users.

For a secular person, religion is a personal matter. They don't wear their religions on their sleeves like religious people do. So according to our research, 16.9% people have not declared their religion on their social media accounts while 81.9% (68 people) have their religions declared on their accounts. According to the Pew Research Center, 20 percent of Americans share their faith online. (Salem, 2016)[21]

The level of religiosity among people is varying, but majority stated that they are not at all religious or somewhat religious. Only 2 people choose "extremely religious". This is also a phenomenon of present age that we seem to carry a religious label with us, given by our families upon our births but we seldom practice our religious norms and duties. 38 respondents stated that they are moderately religious.

The other side of our research is politics. Secularism is related to the political ideology of people. Although, politics is a part of Islam, and all the progressing nations appreciate healthy participation in politics because of democratic systems but still only 37.3% are actually interested in politics and have political associations. 47% respondents were not politically inclined. This is note-worthy. Islam does not separate religion from the politics, Islam just refines the political thoughts, but Muslims are associated to politics less.

Since last few years, slogans such as “no religion is greater than humanity” or “humanity is the greatest religion” are gaining popularity. These are purely secular slogans. 38 respondents answered that Islam is the greatest religion as it compasses humanity and love in itself. But the majority stated that either humanity is greater or love is. It is a point to ponder because neither humanity nor love is a religion, they are universal concepts, but people prefer them over their religion. 74.4% people think that religion is one of the most important aspects of a person’s life. But a few people stated that religion is just a part of life, just a commodity. 14.5% responded that religion is not at all a part of a person’s life.

When asked about whether social media plays a role in affecting their religious thoughts, 51.8% people said that it does not while 27.7% said yes. The rest of the people stated maybe it does, they are not sure about it. We also asked whether the social media activists have an influence on their followers or not, with their posts and opinions. 69.9% people said that it does not matter, while 14.9% people said that their opinions change the views of their followers.

Conclusion

This research focused on the influence of the social media on the trend of secularism among youth. Our results showed that although not firmly so, but social media is playing a part in shaping people’s opinions. The millennials rely more upon social media than conventional sources of information. This has turned the world into a global village where every post shared is playing its part in thought process. Our research showed that the rigidity of religion is being softened gradually, and more and more people are becoming of the view that humanity is above Islam or any other religion but on the same time, most of the people declare their religion online. It is evident that as the time passes, social media will become one of the main influences on the minds of youth and it will also change dimensions of religion and religiosity among people.

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