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Maryam Jameelah's Approach to Secularism An Analytical Study

Muhammad Ali Zafar

Head of Islamiyat Dept, Chand Bagh School

Abstract

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Maryam Jameelah (formerly Margret Marcus) was an American convert to Islam. Jameelah as a critic of the West and its ideologies has refuted the Western philosophies of modernism, atheism, secularism, and humanism in her writings. Jameelah's thought is unique in many ways as she contributed a lot to the development of contemporary Muslim thought about the West. Secularism is one of the most conspicuous phenomena of the modern Occident which distinguishes it from the Orient. The discernment of a holistic view of secularism is essential to understand the modern West, and its impact and contribution in modern times. This research paper intends to present an analytical study of Maryam Jameelah's thoughts on Secularism.



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Introduction

Maryam Jameelah (formerly Margaret Marcus) was born in 1934 in a suburb of New York. This epoch is marked by the Great Depression in American history. She belonged to the fourth generation of German Jewish descent. She was brought up in Westchester; an affluent suburb of New York. She was raised in a secular American environment and acquired the usual education at the local public schools.

Maryam Jameelah studied Islamic literature in depth at the age of nineteen years and after correspondence with many Muslim scholars embraced Islam at the hands of Shaikh Dawood Faisal on 24th May 1961 at the Islamic Mission. Shaikh Dawood Faisal changed her name from Margret Marcus to Maryam Jameelah. After a long correspondence with Maulana Maududi, she decided to migrate to Pakistan at the invitation of Maulana Maududi.

She started her literary career, while she was still in America. Her early articles were published in the journals like, "The Islamic Review", published in London, "The Muslim Digest" published in Durbin, South Africa. She got published her first book entitled "Islam versus the West" in Lahore, while she was in America. She continued her writings after her migration to Pakistan as well as after her marriage. She wrote approximately thirty-eight books on the subject of Islam and the West.¹

In her discourse, Maryam Jameelah has examined the basic ingredients of Western civilization. Jameelah in her discourse on Western civilization has demonstrated materialism, modernism, humanism, evolutionism, and Secularism as the basic elements of Western civilization. In the modern age, the irreligiousness of the West is no hidden phenomenon, religion, and religious discourse have lost their currency in the West. All the intellectual capabilities and physical activities of Western man have been restricted to the material realm without any heed to eschatology.

Materialism has directed Western civilization towards "secularism" in all the realms of human life. Secularism has influenced the modern mind to the greatest extent on the subjective and objective levels. Subjectively, the modern mind refused to accept religious thought, feeling, and symbolism to comprehend temporal things. At the objective level, secularism rejected religious offices, institutions, and rituals from public life.²

Meaning and Definition:

The Webster's dictionary describes "secularism" as such: "1. worldly spirit, views, or the like; esp., a system of doctrines and practices that disregard or reject any form of religious faith and worship 2. The

belief that religion and ecclesiastical affairs should not enter into the functions of the state, esp. into public education.”³

Encyclopedia of Britannica says that secularism means “any movement in society directed away from otherworldliness to life on earth.”⁴ The Catholic Encyclopedia defines secularism in such terms: "Secularism is a code of duty pertaining to this life founded on considerations purely human, and intended mainly for those who find theology indefinite or inadequate, unreliable or unbelievable.”⁵

Currently, two notions of secularism exist together under the same word in the West, and this is a wellspring of incredible disarray: from one viewpoint, the French model of *laïcité* i.e. total separation of Church and state, and add up to the withdrawal of the state versus religions in which state pronounces itself inept in the matters of spirituality. And the second notion pertains to the Anglo-Saxon meaning of secularism, i.e., equal tolerance for all religions by the state, and acknowledgment of representations of religions inside of the state.⁶

Maryam Jameelah also defines secularism with the same ingredients: Jameelah says; by secularism is implied the theory which takes on religion to purview over just fragmentary sections of human life, and particularly rejects it from any unequivocal impact over issues of aggregate concern. Secularism, which confines religion as only a private or individual matter lies at the base of modern Western civilization.⁷

The following ingredients of secularism can be drawn from the meanings and definitions of secularism:

- i. separation of religion from the state,
- ii. withdrawal of religion from matters of public concern,
- iii. religion is a private matter of an individual,
- iv. indifference to the life of the hereafter,
- v. equal tolerance for all religions.

The above-mentioned ingredients of “secularism” elucidate that secularism leads to a way of life on the earth in which religion or theology is shunned and avoided in both the personal and social spheres. Moreover, it directs a *modus operandi* for the state in which the guidance of transcendental is not required, and if religion is considered at any stage, the state should give due consideration to all religions, equally.

Origin, Development, and Impact of Secularism:

Historical Perspective of Secularism

Undoubtedly, secularism evolved as an upshot of the issues produced by the contention of politics and religion. These were theoretical and practical endeavors to abolish the conflict, to differentiate the limits, and to keep religion and politics apart, which gave birth to secularism in the annals of history.⁸

Jameelah identifies "secularism" as the cornerstone of modern Western civilization. Jameelah like other eminent scholars considers the conflict between religion and the state responsible for the development of secularism in the West. Jameelah states that the word "medieval" is a standout amongst the most censorious words in present-day English, and the European intelligentsia rejects religion so intensely, because, after the Renaissance, it was a brutal response by the mainstream scholars of Europe to the outrages conferred for the sake of the Church in its worthless endeavors to stifle profanation. In the light of these horrifying carnages, it was just inescapable that more extreme disdain and insubordination to the pastorate was aroused in the hearts of the general population and eminent erudite people denounced the Church and by similarity, all religions, as superstition and obsession, likening secularism with edification. Jameelah traces that "secularity" is the most noticeable characteristic of modern civilization. The wave of irreligiosity is too much strong that even structured religions are assimilating the attributes of secularism. The indifference to religion and religious offices has reached such an extent that rather than giving any counteractant to the toxin, religious front-runners in the West overlook the change of churches and synagogues into bingo lobbies, spots to serve a wedding supper and recreation centers for the adolescent. Currently, secularism is paralleled with modernism and religious atmosphere with "medievalism." Secularism is respected by all those who have a great influence, both in the East and the West, as the most fundamental element for a cutting-edge society.⁹ The secular approach has transformed into an icon of a progressive and forward-looking mentality that guarantees unlimited temporal prosperity.

Secularism came forth at a time in history when the struggle against the hegemony of the church commenced in civil society. European Renaissance was a movement for the revitalization of ancient dogmas and civilization. Akhtar Bastawi gives the reference to Michael B. Foster's book "Masters of Political Thought" that the Renaissance was, in fact, the rebirth of an ancient civilization that was dominated and put down by Christendom.¹⁰ In fact, it was the ancient Greek and Roman civilization which got rebirth during the European Renaissance, even so, it must be held in mind that besides the revival of different dimensions of the old civilization, the thoughts related to religion and politics were also revived. Therefore, it is essential to know the relationship between religion and politics in the Graeco-Roman civilization. It must be kept in view that collective life in the Graeco-Roman civilization was based upon politics rather, than religion.¹¹ Raymond G. Gettell says that Religion was a personal or individual matter, thus, there was no priestly class in Greece to patron the dogmas or to control political thought.¹² The Sophists in Greece viewed man as the measure of everything, according to them, every

individual is qualified to judge, as per his own convictions and wants, what was right.¹³ Aristotle believed the basic precepts of right and equity are to be found in nature and exposed by human understanding, and that it was the duty of the state to adjust this natural law to the specific demands of its nationals, changing the general rules in specific instances to avert injustice.¹⁴ Such was the thought of the Graeco-Roman civilization, which was subdued theoretically and pragmatically by the despotic authority of the Roman Catholic Church during the medieval period of European history. This thought started to regain its strength in the form of secularism, while religion and the state contended for power during the last part of the medieval period.¹⁵ Muhammad Riffat likewise Jameelah held the view that the European intelligentsia initially revolted against Christianity, but later on, they rejected the "religion" itself. When this trend got matured, every such notion and behavior was refuted, which was associated with the unseen and could not be observed through the sensory organs of human beings.¹⁶ Hence, the loss of religious sense diverted human endeavors towards purely material planes along with unlimited progress and innovation in the realm of technology.

Jameelah sheds light on the contribution of scientific advancements in the development of secularism in Western civilization. She took the viewpoint that since, the European Renaissance onwards to the current era, the advancement of "Science" in Europe and America was not merely the immediate outcome of Western materialists in their rebellion against the power of the Church, yet its most essential, crucial and effective weapon too. The speculations of Copernicus (1473-1543) and Darwin (1809-1882), to take just two of numerous striking illustrations, were all utilized by the materialists against a religious perspective of the making of the universe and life on earth. As right on time as the thirteenth century, researchers like Roger Bacon (1210-1293) rebelled against the religious worldview and celebrated automated life. Bacon was of the view that human beings can attain perfect life and all of its virtues essential for an ideal mundane life through the application of human reason without any Divine aide or superhuman power.¹⁷

European Renaissance & Secularism

The basic beliefs of Christianity like the trinity, sacrament, atonement, and monasticism are hard to comprehend by the means of rationality. The European intelligentsia could not discern Christian dogmas logically, so, as a reaction, they revolted against the Christians. European intelligentsia refuted the concept of priesthood, and they refused to have the office of the priest class to whom they would think mortal beings like themselves. Christian dogmas created two divisions in Christianity, one was the stratum of common people and the other was the priesthood which acquired the exclusive right to interpret the divine

message, and even Caesar would seek their support. Thus, European intelligentsia revolted against such beliefs and the priesthood, they were not ready to take on such beliefs, which were against human reason, and would call the people to be the slave of people like themselves. This revolt resulted in conflict. There were two parties in this conflict, one was the "priest class" and the other was the "intelligentsia". Both classes contested each other in both realms of "academics" and "politics". The conflict ensued in the defeat of "priests", and generally, the people in Europe accepted the norm that human conduct should be established upon "reason" rather than "religion".¹⁸

Seyyed Abul Hassan Ali Nadwi, a renowned Muslim scholar of the recent past has also discussed the origin and the impact of "secularism" in Western civilization; he too held responsible for the conflict between the Church and the state for the overspreading of secularism in Europe. It was the "Inquisition" that sowed immense hatred in the hearts of the Westerners, first, against Christianity, and then for religion in general. The European intelligentsia established subjectively that Religion and Science were unable to get along with each other, and it was essential for Europe to prevent religion.¹⁹ During the early period of the European Renaissance, the questions relating to the spiritual truth used to emerge in the minds of Europeans, yet the intrinsic character of its civilization bit by bit unraveled itself and indulged in the pursuit of its material accomplishments, they (questions about the spiritual truth) were neglected. The quandary of the modern Westerner is that he has lost the sense of religion, therefore, the questions and inquiries relating to religion have lost their meaning for him.²⁰

Protestantism

Renaissance in Europe gave birth to the Protestant Reformation, Jameelah says that Protestantism stroked the Church such a disabling blow, to the degree that Christianity has never recuperated from it right up till today. Martin Luther²¹ was not satisfied to correct the misuse of church power, he snapped off the ties with it, and chose to introduce a new religion.²² Nevertheless, Jameelah is unique in identifying the cause of Luther's breaking ties with the church. It was the growing interest of the German business class in the economy which caused them to become inimical to the "saintly monastic ideal and the spiritual domination by Rome", says Jameelah.²³

In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther began the Reformation movement in Germany and he founded "Protestantism" as a new sect of Christianity. Protestantism was a novel interpretation of Christianity, which took the shape of a movement. Essentially, it was a religious movement, but it passed on a fresh focal point to the political scenario of Europe and assisted to reveal secularism in a further fine

shape.²⁴ Protestant thinkers were of the view that Papal authority should be destroyed completely, they held an absolute Church would choke the liberty of life and thinking patterns.²⁵ Luther made it clear to the people that salvation of the man is depended upon faith and only faith. The ecclesiastical mediation between man and God is not required. Lutheran theology wobbled Europe in a similar manner as Columbus and Copernicus quivered it in another manner.²⁶ Machiavelli's contribution to the state was that he acquitted it from the concerns of the moral law, while Luther got the credit to liberate the state from the clutches of the Church. Luther recourse to the New Testament, keeping in mind the end goal to demonstrate the "priesthood" of all devotees.²⁷ He steered the nation to become freed from the clutches of the Church and showed the route to the Emperor and princes toward severing their ties with the Roman Catholic Church. He worked to eliminate the distinction between the clergy and the layman. He set the principle that the law of the kingdom is applicable to everyone, clerics, and temporality, equally. Thus, Luther paved the way for modern nations to come into being.²⁸ Luther tried to transform religion into an individual matter between man and God, thus, it wiped out the difference between the Church and layman, which cleared the way for secularism to command Europe.²⁹ Jameelah presents the same viewpoint regarding the elucidation of the Bible by the common man that it would provide every individual the license to interpret according to his will, caprice, and expediency. Moreover, the translation of the Bible into local languages by Protestant scholars was exposing it to further subversion.³⁰

Secularism as a movement

Secularism as a movement carries two-fold meanings; i. ethical, ii. religious. As it attempts to offer a theory regarding life and action, it may be called ethical in a positive sense, while it seeks to offer such a hypothesis regarding human life without the aid of any transcendental source, so it may be ascribed negatively religious. However, the origin of secularism sprang from certain political circumstances and philosophical notions. As a matter of fact, secularism was a "protest-movement" against the societal and political milieu of the contemporary time.³¹ Philosophically, secularism was adhered to by the "British utilitarian" philosophers. The founder of "Secularism" was George Jacob Holyoake. The movement of secularism was initiated in 1849 as a substitute for atheism. Holyoake after meeting with Bradlaugh in 1850 invented the term "secularism". The vital principle of secularism is to strive for human well-being with the help of temporal means. It developed at a time when the relations between science and religion were becoming tense. It was perceived that as the natural sciences were secular in their formation, likewise it would not be impossible to develop a theory of human conduct and welfare on the same secular lines.³² Similarly,

Jameelah also propounds the same ideas with respect to notions of morality during the “age of Reformation” that morality was considered like natural sciences, which is not dependent upon religion like any other department of knowledge. The only criterion to judge morality is “utility and happiness”.³³ It clarifies the position of secularism, which frees morality from religious beliefs and brings it into the human realm. The standards of good and bad would be obliterated when “utility” would become the criterion to assess morality.

Although Holyoake refused to identify secularism with atheism, yet it is unrealistic to overlook the religion instead of negating it. Because, it would be an incomprehensible hypothesis to keep up that there might be a Divine being, though He doesn't concern material actuality. It is thus that secularism which does exclude a very antagonistic attitude to religious hypothesis will undoubtedly come up short.³⁴

Secularism and Atheism

The author of the article “secularism” in the Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics demonstrates the fact that in the historical perspective, secularism and atheism have intermixed, but Holyoake considers them distinct from each other.³⁵ Since, the commencement of the secularism movement, it has been recognized as atheism. McCann in his three-night debate on secularism with Bradlaugh adopted this standpoint that secularism is in fact atheism.³⁶ While Bradlaugh's viewpoint was that it is not indispensable that all secularists are atheists, however, he maintained that the effect of secularism is atheism.³⁷ Likewise, it has been propounded that secularism is not a doctrinaire, but a skeptical sort of atheism, since, it does not deny the existence of God; all the same it does not believe in Him.³⁸ If secularists or atheists do not believe in anything? Phil Zuckerman maintains that people without having a religion, or even without believing in God can have values and beliefs. Several types of research have shown that secular and atheist people keep up robust “values, beliefs, and opinions”. Zuckerman gives reference to various studies that atheists and seculars, in comparison to religious-minded people are found “less nationalistic, less prejudiced, less anti-Semitic, less racist, less dogmatic, less ethnocentric, less close-minded, and less authoritarian”.³⁹ Fazlur Rahman deems secularism put an end to the sacredness and universality of all moral values. Similarly, he also thinks that secularism is equated with atheism.⁴⁰ Hence, a strong bond between secularism and atheism can be seen during the development of both theories, even modern research bind both theories in a closer relation.

Contemporary Trends in Secularism

While depicting the contemporary trends in secularism, Jameelah says that moral and aesthetic values in the context of secularism are of a temporary nature, they get changed with the process of advancement. This

standpoint assumes religion is a social institution, which is formulated by humans for the sake of societal demands. Hence, when religious laws are like social laws, which are necessary for evolutionary progress at a specific stage, they don't possess any transcendental or unchangeable element. This notion further demonstrates the newest or up-to-date, as the best, advanced and desirable, while religious transcendental ideals are medieval, stagnant, and reactionary.⁴¹

Largely, contemporary trends in secularism are based upon the relationship of "secularism" with the modern nation-state, Charles Tylor in "Secularism and Freedom of Conscience" demonstrates the complex nature of the relation between modern democratic states and secularism. Modern democratic states, which maintain even an emblematic nexus with the church, are called secular regimes. Nevertheless, modern states should maintain a relationship of nonpartisanship toward the various values, convictions, and living arrangements of the masses in modern societies. Yet, the indifference towards various religious values and beliefs must not be at the cost of basic human rights and principles of "popular sovereignty". These fundamental principles of democracy allow the masses to embrace the faith and lifestyle of their choice while giving due consideration to others to do the same.⁴² Talal Asad in "Formation of Secular" also talks about the strange linkage of religion and state in the modern states, it varies from state to state, in France the state and the people are secular, in the United Kingdom; the state has a connection with church but masses are generally indifferent to religion, while in America the people are mostly religious but the state is secular.⁴³ Though such secularism shows neutrality towards religion, it calls for morality, which is predicated upon human reason and a specific form of human nature, such a moral philosophy replaces religion with a "civil religion", and France is an instance of the republican political system based on "civil religion".⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Taylor demonstrates a different position regarding the definition of "secularism". He believes that the idea of secularism cannot be comprehended through mere constructions of "separation of church and state", "impartiality of the state toward religion", and the "privatization of religion". Though all these constructions hold a segment of the truth, yet secularism depends upon a multiplicity of principles. First is equality of esteem, and second is the choice of conscience. Likewise, there are two operative means the "separation of church and the state" and "the impartiality of the state toward religion", and it is hard to separate these principles and means from the overall picture of secularism.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Taylor demonstrates the idea of secularism with a slight addition of "equality of esteem" which construes the equality of all religions rather than a single religion with a "choice of conscience" again presenting the idea of freedom of embracing

a faith of choice. Hence, the result is the same as other definitions impart that religion would not find a say in the aggregational affairs of human society.

Critical Analysis

Secularism assumes different meanings and forms. The epistemology of secularism construes different dimensions of secularism. It is employed in the sense of separation, of religion from public affairs, or the affairs of aggregate interests as Jameelah demonstrates. Secularism also stands for religion as a private matter of the individual. Secularism, as Jameelah demonstrates, makes ethics and values a matter of human reason. As far as the origin and development of secularism are concerned, Jameelah held the views akin to other scholars that it was a production of a peculiar social and political milieu of the European Renaissance. Withal, the Encyclopedia of Ethics and Religion says that the word "secularism" was coined first time by Holyoake in 1850. Jameelah demonstrates a unique understanding of Luther's breaking the ties with the Roman Church that it was due to the German business class' growing interest in the economic gains, and that was not in the favor of the monastic influence. Whereas Jameelah's discourse on secularism provides different dimensions to understand its origin, development, and impact, Taylor's definition as mentioned above presents a more comprehensive picture of secularism in contemporary times, as secularism is an ideology that continues to grow in modern nation-states and welfare democracies.

Conclusion:

Thus, Jameelah depicts Secularism as a basic element of modern Western civilization. In the contemporary world, secularism has assumed the position of an independent religion, especially in modern liberal nation-states. The most profound impact it has imparted is in the form of severing the ties of man with His Creator. Modern man under the umbrella of secularism has espoused the path of humanism. Furthermore, secularism has caused a new worldview in which instead of God, the man stands at the center of the universe. Since human reason has become the criterion of all values and ethics, religion has receded from the aggregational matters of human beings. Therefore, the values which define human conduct and attitude at a particular point in human history have lost constancy, and they tend to change with the needs and demands of the situation on the basis of utility. Values and ethics free of the transcendental source and guidance would merely engender extreme forms of materialism, humanism, and atheism.

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