Iqbal and secularism

BY DR JAVAID IQBAL

Iqbal believes that the ultimate basis of all life, according to Islam is spiritual and this eternal principle reveals itself in variety and change. He states: "A society based on such conception of reality must reconcile in its life, the categories of permanence and change". Evidently the category of permanence is observance of religious obligations whereas the categor of change is the Quranic laws respecting worldly . .fairs. This distinction is accepted by Iqbal who is of the view that the Shariah laws pertaining to *Muaamlaat* are subject to the law of change through the process of *Ijtehad*.

Iqbal is also of the view that the claim of the present generation of Muslim liberals to reinterpret the foundational legal principles of Islam, in the light of their own experience and altered conditions of modem life, is perfectly justified.

"The spirit"," according to Iqbal, "finds its opportunities in the natural, the material, the secular. All that is secular is therefore sacred in the roots of its beings. The greatest service that modern thought has rendered to Islam and as a matter of fact to all religions, consists of its criticism of what we call material or natural – a criticism that merely material has no substance until we discover it rooted in the spiritual. There is no such thing as a profane world. All this immensity of matter constitutes its scope for the self-realisation of spirit. All this is holy ground.

Iqbal is of the view that Muslims are passing through a period similar to those pre-modern times when the Protestant revolution was changing the religious profile of Europe. The reform movement of Martin Luther. according to Iqbal, was essentially a political movement which eventually led to the formation of nation-states in Europe.

The profoundest of the philosophy of "secularism" in those times, were mostly atheistic materialists or agnostics. They resisted the expansion of the jurisdiction of ecclesiastic courts from priestly classes to the common folk, and insisted that the religious laws should apply only to the clerics. Their argument was that morality is not exclusively part of a people's religious life.

It is not stationary in nature but has a tendency to change according to the needs and requirements of times. Therefore, it is essentially part of a community's secular life. If the Church had evolved a process like *Ijtehad*, the inflexibility of ecclesiastic laws could have undergone a change to suit the new demands of times.

The result of this debate in the newly born nation-states of Europe, generally speaking, led to the displacement of laws founded on the universal Christian ethics by secular laws based on national conceptions of majority or human considerations. However, the imposition of secular laws did not in any sense make the European nation-states anti-religious. The change to secularisation took place only in the domain of religious laws pertaining to worldly affairs of the Christian communities, but they did not abandon their religious obligations. Their old hatred against Islam is still reflected in the present clash between Islam and the Christian powers.

If one examines carefully, no state which claims itself to be secular, is without religion or against religion. But it can be stated that secular state today means a state which is neutral in the matters of religion, grants religious freedom in the observation of religious obligations and adheres to the principle of equality of all its citizens.

However, the Ulema in the Muslim world defined secular state as an irreligious state or a state without any religion, implying thereby that the citizens of such state collectively became anti-religious. Consequently when Turkey adopted secularism as its ideology, it was condemned by the Ulema of South Asia as an anti-religious state the citizens of which had abandoned Islam. In fact the Turks, following the Europeans, had only replaced the Shariah laws by secular laws in the domain of *Muaamlaat*. In the sphere of observing religious obligations they remained Muslim and they are still devout Muslims.

If one examines carefully, no state which claims itself to be secular, is without religion or against religion (except perhaps the former Soviet Union, which imposed atheism on its people as a state policy). But it can be stated that secular state today means a state which is neutral in the matters of religion, grants religious freedom in the observation of religious obligations and adheres to the principle of equality of all its citizens. Is this not what Iqbal's Islamic state is expected to be when he declares that the real object of Islam is to establish a spiritual democracy?

Yet there is another dimension of the discussion on secularism so far as Pakistani Muslims are concerned. Are the Quranic civil and criminal laws pertaining to *Muaamlaat* an integral part of a Musalman's faith? The answer to this question is that to implement the moral laws of Islam in any Muslim majority state is the collective responsibility of the Muslims and on this basis the enforcement of civil and criminal laws of Shariah can be considered as part of a Muslim's faith. Therefore, when the Ulema disapproved the replacement of

the Shariah laws by secular laws in the Muslim majority state of Turkey, theologically speaking, they were correct. But if the Muslims in a Muslim majority state demand that the Shariah laws be reinterpreted so as to conform to the modern needs and requirements of the community, they cannot be declared apostates.

According to Iqbal, the Shariah laws respecting *Muaamlaat* can be reinterpreted whenever required through the process of *Ijtehad* by legislation in Parliament or through the judgments of the Superior Courts. However he is of the view that during the times of foreign rule and in order to counteract the forces of cultural decay leading to the Muslims' communal disintegration, if the conservative Ulema of Islam jealously excluded all innovations in the interpretation of the Shariah laws in order to preserve the uniformity of the social life of the Muslim community, they were perfectly justified. But now after regaining political ind ependence, it is not possible for the Muslims to accept the reasoning that the law of Islam is stationary and incapable of development. Therefore, if the Ulema continue following the old legists blindly by sticking to their interpretations of the Shariah laws (in the sphere of *Muaamlaat*) which had been presented to meet the requirements of their own specific times, the eventual result would be that till such interpretations (along with the deep differences of opinion among the Imams), would be left behind and the Muslim communities would proceed ahead.

In other words, in such circumstances, it is likely that every Muslim nation-state, disillusioned by their inflexibility as well as by the differences of opinion among the law doctors may be compelled to place more reliance on man-made laws formulated on the basis of each Muslim nation-states cultural or moral criterion and in order to confirm to the swiftly changing needs and requirements of the times. According to Iqbal the Muslim states at present are generally left in the hands of intellectual mediocrities and the unthinking masses of Islam, having no personalities of a higher caliber to guide them. He emphasizes:

"Our modern Ulema do not see that the ultimate fate of a people does not depend so much on organisation as on the worth and power of individual men. In an over-organised society, the individual is altogether crushed out of existence. He gains the whole wealth of social thought around him and loses his own soul. Thus a false reverence for past history amid its artificial resurrection constitute no remedy for a peoples' decay.

The verdict of history ... is that worn out ideas have never risen to power among a people who have worn them out. The only effective power, therefore, that counteracts the forces of decay in a people is the rearing of self-concentrated individuals. Such individuals alone reveal the depth of life. They disclose new standards in the light of which we begin to see that our environment is not wholly inviolable and requires revision."

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