

Islamic Revolutionary Thought and its Decline

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The essence of Islamic Revolutionary Thought consists of the idea that it is not enough to practice Islam in the personal life, but that the teachings of the Qur'an and those of the Sunnah need also be implemented in their totality in the social, economic, and political fields. In other words, it implies the establishment of the sovereignty of Almighty Allah (SWT) in the "religious" as well as the "secular" domains, or the removal of the dichotomy between collective life and state authority on the one hand and Divine guidance on the other. The underlying and pervasive idea in this context, which is also an integral part of the Islamic Revolutionary Thought, is that the struggle to establish unqualified and unconditional ascendancy of the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (SAAWS) is obligatory upon all members of the Muslim Ummah. The goal of this struggle is to achieve the domination of the True way of life (Deen al-Haq), so that the Islamic System of Social Justice - which is the most balanced synthesis of human freedom, fraternity, and equality, and which embodies the Divine attributes of Benevolence, Providence, and Justice - can be established on God's earth.

Unfortunately, the conception of many of our traditional ulama appears to be seriously flawed and misguided in this respect. They are usually of the opinion that implementation of the Islamic code of punishments is all that is required to turn an un-Islamic country into an Islamic one. They seem to ignore the fact that, in the first place, the code of punishments is only a small part of the Islamic Law or Shari'ah, and, more importantly, that an un-Islamic country cannot be converted into an Islamic one without changing its basic politico-socio-economic structure in accordance with the tenets of Islam. Without such a change, the implementation of strict penalties in a corrupt and highly exploitative system cannot produce desirable consequences. This is because, as a matter of fact, the law is always meant to protect and defend the system. Execution of Islamic punishments in a feudal aristocracy such as ours, which is utterly devoid of any trace of justice or equity, will only support and strengthen the status quo. Instead, what we really need are basic and radical changes in all departments of collective life, whether social, cultural, economic, or political; it is only after such a revolution that the implementation of the Islamic Law can have beneficial and favorable results.

The Islamic Revolutionary Thought, briefly defined above, is often condemned and denigrated by the Western media as one of the most despised evils in today's world, the notorious "Islamic Fundamentalism." The reason for their extreme aversion is based on the fact that it is only Islam and its revolutionary and dynamic interpretation that poses a real challenge to secularism - the system of collective life that was born in Europe but which has come to dominate the entire globe.

What is secularism? Any number of religions can be accommodated under a secular system, provided no demand is made regarding the application of religious criteria in defining social, economic, and political policies. The selection of goals and the utilization of means in all collective affairs must not be inspired by any form of religious teaching; rather, such policy decisions should be taken only on the basis of pure rationality and majority opinion. Religion under a secular system is demoted to a personal and private affair of the individual. Thus, everyone is totally free concerning his metaphysical beliefs, rituals for worship, and social customs; the state won't interfere in any of these. At the same time, religion must not intrude or intervene in the running of the state either. Such a concept is, of course, diametrically opposed to the basic teaching of Islam.

The Holy Qur'an describes Islam as Deen al-Haq, or the true way of life. The very connotation of the word Deen - as contrasted with "religion" - is a declaration of war against secularism. This is because the word religion is commonly used in a rather narrow sense, its scope being limited to a set of dogmas, some rituals for worship, and a number of social customs to celebrate important life-events. Deen, on the other hand, is a system of life in which human beings consciously surrender themselves to the sovereignty of a higher authority, and live a life of total obedience to that higher authority. When the term Deen is used for Islam, it obviously means a system of life where Almighty Allah (SWT) is worshipped and obeyed, not just in the narrow religious sense, but in a manner that includes all aspects of human life.

Islam is based on, and rooted in, a well-integrated set of beliefs describing the nature of ultimate reality, meaning of human life, and the final destiny. In addition to this essential faith or Iman, modes of

worship (i.e., Salat, Zakat, Saum, and Hajj) and various social customs are also indispensable and integral parts of Islam. However, in addition to these "religious" features, we are also provided by Almighty Allah (SWT) all the relevant instructions regarding our social, economic, and political existence (generally considered to be the "secular" or "worldly" elements of life), and this is what really distinguishes Islam from other religions, say, Christianity or Buddhism.

The true way of life, Deen al-Haq, is not meant to survive submissively as a mere religion under the umbrella of secularism; instead the Holy Qur'an makes it abundantly clear that Islam is meant to dominate all aspects of life and all man-made systems and ideologies. This puts a tremendous responsibility on our shoulders. The Qur'anic commands vis-à-vis human society, culture, law, economics, and politics are not given to us so that we may admire and praise them, but they are meant to be implemented and acted upon. This necessitates that the gulf between Faith and Power be removed, which obviously requires a revolution in the leadership so that - instead of fulfilling any un-Islamic agenda - it contributes towards the establishment of "God's Kingdom" on earth. Without collective organizational power, a significant portion of Islam remains confined to the realm of theory, and, as a result, all sorts of corruption, injustice, inequity and immorality are let loose on earth. It's not that Islam cannot survive or support itself without political authority, but, in fact, it is the political authority that grows more and more corrupt unless it is subordinated to the commands of the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (SAAWS).

The struggle to establish the domination of Islam is one of our basic, though unfortunately forgotten, duties. The significance of this obligation is underscored by a tradition according to which Prophet Muhammad (SAAWS) is reported to have said: "If a Muslim dies and he had neither participated in any war for the cause of Almighty Allah (SWT) nor had he a desire to take part in such a war, then he dies in a state of a certain kind of nifaq (i.e., hypocrisy, and not of true faith)." A Muslim whose life is devoid of the Jihad to establish the system of Khilafah, and who lacks the longing and the deep-felt desire to participate in it and to sacrifice his life for this purpose, can certainly be a Muslim in the legal sense of the word but such a person cannot be a Momin in the sight of Almighty Allah (SWT). This is because true conviction or Iman, although itself a hidden and covert reality, necessarily manifests itself in the form of Jihad for the cause of Almighty Allah (SWT). This, according to the Holy Qur'an, is what defines a true believer.

They alone are the believers who come to believe in Allah and His messenger and afterwards never doubt, and who strive in the way of Allah with their wealth and their lives. Only they are truthful and sincere. (Al-Hujurat 49:15)

The only possible exception consists of those noble personalities who played the role of intellectual vanguards, exhausting their lives and energies in preparing the stage - like Shah Waliullah of Delhi and Allama Iqbal - but not living long enough to personally take part in the actual struggle. However, all those persons who did participate in such an organized struggle for a period of time but then abandoned the whole mission are definitely going to face a tough accountability in the Hereafter, irrespective of the reason for their defection - whether due to their own timidity or a personal weakness, or their pride and arrogance, or their disappointment with the leader's cowardice or his lack of sincerity, or their discouragement owing to what they perceived was heartless and unkind attitude of the leader, or due to any fundamental blunder on the part of the leader followed by his refusal to take corrective measures. Of course, a Muslim can have a legitimate reason for quitting a particular religious organization or party, and this is not a sin as such. However, the real crime is committed by those who, after resigning from a particular party, give up their own convictions as well - that is, who retreat from the Islamic Revolutionary Thought itself - just to conceal their lack of courage and perseverance.

That Prophet Muhammad (SAAWS) did achieve his Divinely ordained goal of establishing the Islamic System of Social Justice after a remarkable and strenuous revolutionary struggle that lasted twenty years, is a universally accepted fact. Moreover, it is also universally accepted that this system existed in its ideal form for at least thirty years after the death of the Prophet. However, two confusions have been created in this regard that need to be redressed here. The first consists of the objection that if Islam is indeed the God-given system of life, and if it is really in harmony with human nature, why is it that it lasted only for a period of thirty years? A tit-for-tat kind of rejoinder to this objection consists of the countercharge that even the critic would agree that the System presented by Prophet Muhammad (SAAWS) did materialize in its ideal form at least once, and that it sustained itself for at least thirty years, whereas not even a single one of the various man-made systems and ideologies - that have been presented as universal remedies for mankind - ever succeeded in establishing itself in its ideal and original form. Granted that Plato's Republic was never meant to be anything more than a fantastic utopia, even the paradise of

democracy that was conceived and presented by Voltaire and Rousseau hasn't emerged so far in the world of reality. Thus, even the most ardent supporters and devotees of democracy would admit that they are still progressing towards an ideal democratic system. As for the "classless and stateless" Communism of Marx and Engels, their dream has already been shattered completely without presenting even a single glimpse in the world of reality.

The second confusion consists of the misconception that the Islamic System collapsed totally and vanished all of a sudden from the face of the earth after the period of Al-Khilafah Al-Rashidah. Nothing can be more removed from the truth. All that happened after this golden era of thirty years was that, in the affairs of political governance, the highest democratic standards of mutual consultation (Shura) began to be gradually replaced by the influence of tribal loyalty and the allegiance to the clan (Asabiyyah). As far as genuine monarchy or kingship is concerned, it took at least 90 years to become fully established. The Umayyad period, therefore, should be considered a transitional phase from true Khilafah to overt and unmistakable monarchy; it was actually the Abbassid period that displays all the corruption and exploitation characteristic of kingship, what is described by Allama Iqbal as "Arabian Imperialism."

The Islamic System of Social Justice, as established by Prophet Muhammad (SAAWS), did not end in toto with the termination of Al-Khilafah Al-Rashidah, although it must be admitted that the process of its decline did start from that point onwards. This downward trend has been a very slow and gradual phenomenon, taking at least a full millennium to reach its lowest ebb as a result of the invasion by Western Colonialism.

Moreover, we must not forget that our noble ancestors have put in their best efforts to stop this process of decline and degeneration at every step of the way, sometimes to the extent of sacrificing their lives. This not only constitutes a brilliant and highly meritorious chapter in our history, but also testifies to the supremacy of the ideals which were inculcated in the Muslim psyche by the training of Prophet Muhammad (SAAWS). Thus, in the initial phase of decline, Sayyidina Husain Ibn Ali (RAA) and Sayyidina Abdullah Ibn Zubair (RAA) tried their very best to check the growing influence of Jahiliyya, and, in the latter period, it was Hadrat Zaid Ibn Ali (RA) and Hadrat Muhammad Ibn Abdullah (RA) - also known as Nafs al-Zakkiyya - along with his brother Ibrahim Ibn Abdullah (RA) who did the same. The fact that all these efforts failed - in the sense that no substantial and tangible change could be achieved by any of them in the socio-political setup - cannot tarnish their images or discredit their superb characters in any way.

Regrettably, there are some shallow, weak-willed, and mean persons in our own times who criticize these noble ancestors of ours in a venomous and insolent manner, and thereby disparage their grand undertakings by trying to measure their efforts by a self-styled legal and formal criterion. Of course, such critics succeed in nothing but exposing their own perverted mentality. What they ignore in their short-sightedness is that the earliest founders of the Islamic fiqh, Imam Abu Hanifa (RA) and Imam Malik Ibn Anas (RA), are on record as having cooperated with the revolutionary struggle of Hadrat Muhammad Ibn Abdullah (RA), and it is not all that difficult to imagine as to what role these two would have played had they seen the times of Sayyidina Hussain Ibn Ali (RAA) and Sayyidina Abdullah Ibn Zubair (RAA).

As a matter of fact, just as the highly esoteric realities of Iman cannot be described in terms of Aristotelian logic, in the same way the immense amount of heroism and fortitude displayed by these noble ancestors cannot be evaluated in terms of a legalism which itself is a legacy of the decadent age of kingship.

Despite all these heroic efforts, however, the un-Islamic system of despotic and authoritarian monarchy continued to encroach over the truly Islamic System of Khilafah, and, as mentioned above, it finally established itself fully in the era of the Abbasids. Simultaneously, the inseparable twin of kingship - feudalism - also became firmly and securely entrenched in the Muslim lands. Everybody knew that all this was in sharp conflict with the highly egalitarian and democratic ideals of Islam, but the powerless masses had no option but to accept the exploitative and unjust system as a de facto, though certainly not de jure, reality. As a logical and necessary outcome of this degenerative change in the politico-socio-economic setup, the very concept of Islam as a complete code of life also began to disappear from the collective consciousness of the Muslims. Gradually and steadily, Islam was demoted from the position of Deen al-Haq to a mere "religion", the exclusive interest of which lies in the minor details of worship and ritual and not in the affairs of the government or of politics. Soon it was accepted by all concerned, almost as if it were an axiomatic certainty, that the state can function only on the basis of tribal loyalty and allegiance to the clan - what is described by Allama Ibn Khaldun as Asabiyyah - and that the only feasible and practicable principle in this domain is that of "might is right."

As for the ulama or scholars of Islam, the order of the day was that they should better not interfere in the affairs of the government. The ulama were, of course, "free" to function in the Civil Service of the monarchy as sermonizers in the mosques, as jurists, and as judges. The more talented of them could try their intellectual prowess in the various burgeoning Islamic sciences, like Qur'anic exegesis, Hadith, jurisprudence, scholasticism, and theology. Or, if they were not gifted enough, they could fulfill the religious obligations of sermonizing and exhorting the masses in order to inculcate in them the love of Almighty Allah (SWT), the motivation to follow Prophet Muhammad (SAAWS), and the concern for the Hereafter. Or, if they were really capable and daring, they could adopt the mystic path of purification of the soul and establish monasteries to help others purify their souls as well. But as far as the affairs of government and politics was concerned, the idea was implanted among the people that these "profane" things belonged to the "worldly" folks, and that to try and change the whole system by means of any armed struggle is almost as prohibited as outright apostasy.

It may be pointed out here that the possibility of an armed rebellion against an un-Islamic but ostensibly Muslim regime has been rendered quite ineffective by the purely legalist mind. The dominant view among the Muslims, made popular mainly by some of the Ahl al-Hadith scholars, is that such a rebellion is strictly forbidden by Islam no matter how wicked, cruel, and corrupt the ruler may be. According to these scholars, armed rebellion is allowed only when the ruler commands a flagrant violation of the Shari'ah, or orders to commit something identifiable with kufr. The most balanced opinion in this regard, however, is that of Imam Abu Hanifa (RA). According to him, an armed rebellion against an un-Islamic system is permissible provided there is sufficient strength available, so much so that there is a high probability of achieving a permanent and stable change, which, of course, is the goal of such a rebellion. However, even this was not feasible under the monarchy, on account of the fact that, since "state" and "government" were still considered to be one and the same thing, any movement against the government was to be viewed as anti-state, and, therefore, was sure to be smashed before it could gain any real strength or momentum. Incidentally, the efforts of our noble forefathers, as mentioned above, were crushed by the governments of their time on this very plea.

Thus continued the process of our decline. The ever-growing chasm between Faith and Power resulted in the trends of tyranny, totalitarianism, and oppression in the running of the government, as well as the indulgence of those in authority with all sorts of luxuries and extravagance, maintained, of course, at the public's expense. On the other hand, religion was turned into a "profession." This, along with the consequent professional jealousy and disputes among the ulama and the subsequent dichotomy between the "School" and the "Monastery", contributed much to the downward trend in the moral standards of the Muslims as a whole.

The moral decline began quite early in our history and metastasized rapidly; this fact can be easily appreciated by the following couplet by Hadrat Abdullah Ibn Mubarak (RA), who belonged to the third generation after the Companions:

Three groups are responsible for causing corruption in Deen
The kings, the scholars, and the monks.

It is very significant to note that this degeneration had already become visible during the days of the third generation after the Companions; if such was the state of our affairs in an era which belonged to the "best of times", then one can easily estimate the level of corruption that was to pervade the Muslim society at the end of the first millennium. Thus, it was a serious religious and moral decline coupled with a political degradation of the highest magnitude that characterized the state of affairs of the the Muslim Ummah about three centuries ago. This specific point in time, however, represents an age of awakening as far as the Western world was concerned.

The spirit of scientific inquiry, the trend towards the use of inductive method of investigation as opposed to the deductive one, and the concepts of human freedom, equality, and dignity - all of these were introduced into Central Europe from Muslim Spain. The movements of Renaissance and Reformation appeared in Europe predominantly under the influence of German, French, and Italian scholars returning from Universities of Cordova, Toledo, and Granada, and carrying with them novel and revolutionary ideas. As a result, science and technology started to blossom in Europe on the one hand, and the concept of human rights, especially freedom, began to mature on the other hand.

The "power potential" resulting from the development of science and technology in Europe manifested itself in the form of Western Imperialism, which started its mission of "civilizing" the "ignorant

world" by attacking and conquering various countries of Asia and Africa. Thus, two-and-a-half centuries ago, almost the whole of Muslim World - with the exception of the Ottoman Empire - came under the control of Western Imperialism. An interesting but strange incongruity is that the same European nations, while establishing the worst form of colonial rule in the conquered territories, were simultaneously preoccupied inside their own homelands with a zealous struggle for human rights and elimination of authoritarianism and exploitation.

This struggle initially resulted in the French Revolution of 1789, which represents the beginning of the end of monarchy and feudalism and the commencement of various forms of democracy. However, the desired objectives were not to be achieved through democracy because, in the meantime, scientific progress had resulted in the Industrial Revolution, which caused the political authority to be shifted from the kings to the capitalists, by-passing the common people. In this context, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was in fact a reaction against the evils produced by this uncontrolled and unchecked Capitalism.

It was at this crucial juncture in world history that Allama Mohammad Iqbal (1877-1938) appeared on the scene, along with his radical ideas of Islamic revival, "reconstruction of religious thought", and a forceful call for Islamic revolution. Behind him was the vitalizing spirit of three centuries of revivalist struggle - the efforts of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi in reviving authentic Islamic mysticism, of Shah Waliyullah in reviving the essence of Islamic scholarship, and of Sayyid Ahmad Shaheed in reviving the dynamism of Jihad.

The most significant achievement of Allama Iqbal in the domain of thought is that he demolished the idea of an inherent distinction or dichotomy between the "religious" and the "secular" fields of human existence, and proved that they are, in fact, inseparable components of an organic whole. He achieved this by reclaiming the scientific method of inquiry as a manifestation of the Qur'anic spirit, and by showing that all the higher values of Social Justice that are believed to have been "born" in the West were actually borrowed from the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (SAAWS). As such, Iqbal declared that the republican form of government is perfectly harmonious with the spirit of Islam, and that Marxism can be Islamized only by adding to it the concept of God. It is indeed undeniable that the system of Khilafa is a democracy under Divine Sovereignty and that it guarantees to all the provision of basic necessities of life.

Moreover, it was none other than Iqbal who started the process of "the reconstruction of religious thought in Islam" by laying down the intellectual foundations of Iman - not on the outdated Aristotelian logic or on Plato's world of ideas - but on such sciences as higher mathematics, modern physics, cosmology, biology, and psychology. At the same time, Iqbal also described and elucidated in clear terms the Islamic Revolutionary Thought, as well as the methodology for bringing about that revolution. We shall deal with Iqbal's role in reviving the revolutionary teachings of Islam in the next chapter.