

THE COMPATIBILITY OF ISLAM, DEMOCRACY AND SECULARISM

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The Turkish modernisation was built on two main pillars; secularism and republicanism. It began during the Ottoman Empire and can be traced back to the XVIIIth Century. The Ottomans have always been in close relations with the cultural entity which we call "Western Civilisation". In fact, the Ottoman Empire was founded first and foremost as a state located mainly in Europe.

The modern Republic of Turkey came into being after an independence struggle, fought against the "West". Nevertheless, immediately after the war, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the founding fathers of the Republic did not hesitate to turn their face to this very West. For, with a clear vision they concluded that "progress" meant being a part of the universal civilisation represented then by the West.

Indeed, the Turkish revolution and its product, the Republic of Turkey, are the crowning result of the embracement of the ideals and thoughts that have gained world-wide acceptance following the Age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution, by a group of visionaries and idealists led by Atatürk.

The Republic of Turkey is the product of a grand historic choice of a great nation. It was founded in the aftermath of the dissolution of a multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-religious Empire. Along with Atatürk's ultimate goal of reaching the highest level of universal civilisation, this historical choice can best be defined in the context of secularisation.

The Turkish revolution and its secular republican model introduced radical institutional, cultural and legal reforms ranging from the executive and legislative realms to the public and private spheres.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a result of a long and ongoing process of the universalization of rights. It has made possible the convergence of the fundamental values and principles of modern societies in the areas of public and private law. Consequently, today, modernisation can best be defined in the realm of law. For, the long historical process which has given life to constitutional democracy is also a process of the universalization of fundamental freedoms and rights. With ingenious foresight and wisdom, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk conceived that the historical and philosophical debate over the question whether law was universal or local would be settled through the expansion of constitutional republicanism around the world. Bearing this vision, he embarked upon a unique legal revolution that shaped a new set of rules and institutions creating the basis of a democratic-secular way of life.

The concepts of national sovereignty and secularism represent the very basis of this legal revolution. The critical determinant in this historical transformation has been the understanding that religion should be confined to the private sphere. Therefore, the fundamental framework of a modern state structure and way of life in which everyone had equal rights and responsibilities regardless of race, creed, religion or language could be forged. In other words, equality before the law became the cornerstone of the legal architecture of the Republic. In this context, the adoption of the Swiss Civil Code in 1926 was a decisive turning point. It represented the culmination of the constitutional structure based on the principles of national sovereignty and secularism.

The crowning achievement of Atatürk's revolution is the role that it attached to women. Indeed, the strength of secularism in Turkey is best illustrated by the new social status of women and their new role in the public sphere. Secularism emancipated women from ancient and outdated practices, and eliminated the segregation of genders. Participation of women in social and public life as full fledged citizens determines the distinct features of the modern secular way of life. Turkish women consider their status and roles as indispensable and irrevocable rights. It is the pride of our Republic

that today, 23 percent of university professors; 40 percent of doctors and nurses; 50 percent of teachers; and 40 percent of judges, lawyers and prosecutors are women.

The Turkish revolution led by Atatürk has successfully demonstrated the compatibility of Islam, democracy and secularism. Thus, Turkey has taken its distinct place among the commonwealth of secular democracies that are in the forefront of universal civilisation.

Today values such as freedom, equality, human rights and democracy essentially harbour principles that no widely embraced belief system or religion denies. Islam is a case in point. The Republic of Turkey has set the example throughout its history that Islam is fully in accord with secular pluralist democracy. Turkey is a unique model among the 54 member countries of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in this respect.

The uniqueness of the Turkish experience can also be described within the context of education. Turkey's educational system is built on civic and secular foundations. On the other hand, Islamic education in Turkey, unlike the rest of the Islamic world, is organised along European lines of instruction and not along traditional Islamic ones. This is a point which has fascinated many western Islamic scholars. Turkey is the only country in the Islamic world where one can find close scholarly links between its theological faculties and the Directorate of Religious Affairs and the Pontifical University in the Vatican, in the form of exchanges of doctoral students and even teachers. For example, in the Faculty of Divinity at Ankara University, a Christian priest from the Vatican teaches history and ideology of Christianity to Turkish Islamic students.

In Turkey, where there is a very long secular past, the return of religion is mainly experienced as increased individual piety. Freedom of belief and conscience for every citizen is the cornerstone of Turkish secularism and democracy. Why is the Turkish experience important? To respond to this question properly, we need to analyse the politicisation and radicalisation of Islam.

Militant fundamentalism has found the opportunity to introduce its anti-democratic discourse in societies long suffering under single party regimes. In societies where opposition is constantly crushed, movements which emerge on the basis of religion as a common denominator of the oppressed masses simply tend to become militant.

The essential problem is the difficult process of transition from single party regimes to pluralist democracy in many countries. In the Muslim world, the failure of regimes, especially ideological ones, to satisfy the masses may lead to a religious revival. The question is also one of identity. Revolutionary or radical regimes which deny and despise people and their culture may create an identity crisis which some groups then try to solve by reverting to religious fundamentalism. This is to some extent inevitable in the reforming and modernising efforts of all countries.

In contrast, Muslim Turkey has shown that this transition can be achieved without disturbing social order and compromising its stability. There is a lot to be learned from the Turkish experience, and a democratic and secular Turkey has a potential to contribute to the attempts towards integration with the world by the newly independent states in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

It is important to notice that the shock waves of the developments of the last few years brought to the surface a host of militant reactionisms, from xenophobia and ethno-nationalism to religious radicalism. Their common denominator is the trauma of the unprecedented events we experienced. They feed on various political and social problems, and they will persist.

As I see it, the question is that everybody seems to notice other's problems while neglecting one's own, although I agree that the gravity of the problem varies from one place to another.

We come across the phenomenon of religious revival everywhere, including the Western Europe. There are certain groups in this continent who consider religion as a traditional cement of Europe. They believe that it can play a uniting role at a time when the deepening integration and the gradual process of transferring power to supranational authorities in the European Union gain momentum. "Christian Europe", which was not mentioned at the time of the signing of the Treaty

of Rome, now seems to be a commonplace in some circles. These divisive tendencies are in total contradiction with the ideals of the “Enlightenment” that shaped the present form of our universal civilisation. Therefore, we should more than ever bear in mind that Europe is a community of nations that share values, aspirations and ways of life. And, it can only be united again around those values and ideals.

I, for one, do not see any discrepancy between the aims and ideals enshrined in the Paris Charter and my religion. According to Islam, which shares its origin in Abraham with Judaism and Christianity, man is created as the most dignified being. Principles oriented towards creating the conditions for men to live a life worthy of living, cannot be spoiled by subjecting religion to political designs.

Social developments are not a matter of choice. We have to accept them as they are. Let us not forget that democracy is the only way to maturity, and that secularism is an inseparable part of democracy. We have to put our trust in democracy and in people and patiently wait for the positive outcome, while not forgetting to pray.