1 Prologue: Islam, Secularism and the Muslim World

Secularism has made deep inroads into the Muslim world; it has become the standard mode of governing Muslim society. To be sure, Islam is the arch-enemy of the secularist’s claim to universal accept­ance and, therefore, the main target of secularism has been the Islamic faith and culture. It is precisely in these areas that the greatest erosion was caused by the triumphant march of secularism. Despite aping Western manners, and alien institutions, the Muslim world is nowhere closer to the millennium of self-sustained growth. On the contrary, they have become strangers to their own tradition and have become alienated from their own culture, values and belief system. This chapter discusses the nature of secularism, contrasts it with Islam, analyses the forces that shaped the secular idea and assesses the manner and extent of damage caused by secular domination of Muslim thought and life. Determined in the crucible of specific socio-political environment, secularism evinces many forms and shapes varying in contents, intents and origins. It is instructive, therefore, to discuss secularism by focusing upon its Western, Marxist and Third World varieties.

WESTERN SECULARISM

The word secularism has been used in a variety of ways and within a number of different perspectives. In all major Protestant countries, it is used to refer to the policy of separating church from state. In Catholic countries, the preferred term is ‘laicism’, which emphasises the distinction of the laity from the clergy. Both terms, however, refer to two aspects of the same thing and hence are used in connection with the problems of duality, opposition or separation of church and state.

As a formal philosophical system, secularism was first proposed by Jacob Holyoake about 1846 in England. Its most commonly regarded postulates are three: this-worldly orientation, Western science and liberalism. The first postulate sanctified humanity as the ultimate reality and argues that the significance and ultimate aim of human beings should be sought with reference to the present life and social well-being without
reference to religion or to the life in the hereafter. Western science espouses a belief in natural causation and consequent emphasis on the generalisability and applicability of the methodological pattern of Newton’s physics for the discovery of truth. The emphasis is upon reason, observation and experiment to the neglect of revelation, tradition or authority. Liberalism, the third constituent, is founded upon humanism, a belief in the integrity and sanctity of the free individual and upon inherent human rights to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness.

The ultimate claim of the liberal was religious and hence, the ultimate freedom emphasised was the freedom of the individual to profess the faith as the conscience called. As John Stuart Mill remarked:

The great writers to whom the world owes what liberty it possesses, have mostly asserted freedom of conscience as an indefeasible right, and denied that a human being is accountable to others for his religious belief.\(^4\)

By emphasising the freedom of faith, the liberal creed has intended, in the words of Jefferson, ‘to erect a wall of separation between church and state’. From this standpoint, a secular state came to mean:

- a state in which government exerts no pressure in favour of one religion rather than another religion: a state in which no social or educational pressure is exerted in favour of one religion rather than another religion or no religion; a state wholly detached from religious (or irreligious) teaching or practice.\(^5\)

The model of the secular state was operationalised politically in terms of the system of elections, the press, and the executive, legislative and judicial arms of government.\(^6\) The system of election was to ensure the liberty of the individual to choose people for various public offices. The press was to be the keeper of the conscience of the people while the three organs of government were to ensure that all active and legitimate groups in the population might make themselves heard in the process of decision-making. Economically, such a society is to be based on a self-regulating system of markets and harmony of interests. Its orientation is toward maximum efficiency, its essential characteristic is a capacity for self-sustaining growth, and it is to operate without much concern for religion, ethics or aesthetics.\(^7\)

The institutions outlined above are evolved under a democratic sys-