

Islam Or Secular Humanism?

Khalid Sohail

This talk was given in the context of a debate organized by the Muslim Students Association of the University of Western Ontario, on March 9th 2011, titled: *Islam or Secular Humanism?* The debate featured Hamza Tzortzis, a Muslim scholar from England and Dr Khalid Sohail, a humanist psychiatrist from Whitby, Ontario. We thank Dr. Sohail for permission to publish his talk in our pages.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
First of all I would like to thank the Muslim Students Association for inviting me to the University of Western Ontario to participate in a dialogue and share some of the highlights of my journey from Islam to Secular Humanism. Over the decades I have come to the gradual realization that there are as many truths as human beings and as many realities as pairs of eyes in this world. So today I will share my reality and my truth and I hope it will inspire you to get in touch with your own truth and share it publicly. My story will have personal, philosophical and political dimensions.

Some of you might know that I grew up in Pakistan, a predominantly Muslim country that was created after the partition of multi-cultural, multi-faith India in 1947. Growing up in that environment I never met Hindus or Sikhs, Buddhists or Parsis. So my story is similar to the stories of millions of children who grew up in Muslim countries. Looking back now, I realize that I was exposed to the social, religious and cultural conditioning of a religious family, community and culture and I became a Muslim, and like other Muslims, started believing in a heavenly God, scriptures, prophets and life after death.

As a teenager I used to believe in miracles, but after studying science and laws of nature, I started questioning my blind faith and religious traditions.

In 1965 when Pakistan had a 17 day war with India, I saw bombs dropping all around me and witnessed people digging trenches. Many *maulanas*, the Muslim clerics, declared that we

were fighting a holy war, a *jihad* against the Hindus, our enemies. I became so brainwashed by the religious fervor that I started dreaming of becoming a holy warrior, a *mujahid*, myself.

Looking back on my life as a teenager I realize there was a time:

I believed in holy wars

I believed all non-Muslims were my enemies

I was willing to give my life for a holy cause and I was willing to kill in the name of God.

Now, when I look back on that stage of my life, I feel ashamed and embarrassed.

As a teenager, my radical and fundamentalist views were challenged by Saadat Hasan Minto, a well respected humanist writer, who wrote a number of stories about the partition of India. In one of his stories about those slaughters, he wrote, "When 200 people have been killed, why do you say 100 Muslims will go to heaven and 100 Hindus will burn in hell? Why do you not say that we lost 200 precious human lives?" Minto made me aware that people are human beings before they are Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Jews, Parsis or Zarathustrians.

I was very distressed when the Ahmedis in Pakistan were declared non-Muslims and they were penalized and persecuted for their beliefs. I was not from an Ahmedi family but some of my friends were, and it hurt me to see people throwing garbage on their door steps. Some fundamentalist students even set fire to the houses of our Ahmedi teachers. I also witnessed hostility between different religious sects, between Shiites and Sunnis, Devbandis and Brelvis.

Seeing the anger, resentment, bitterness and violence, I was quite disillusioned with Islam and was contemplating saying goodbye to it.

When I shared my disillusionment publicly, some Muslim scholars suggested that before I left Islam I should study Quran and the history of Islam, as they believed that the problem I was witnessing was with Muslims, rather than with Islam itself.

So for the next five years, I seriously studied Quran from the first verse to the last. Since I did not understand Arabic, I read many translations and interpretations of Quran. The more I studied Quran and Islam, the more I realized that there are as many Islams as Muslims, and as many interpretations of Quran as Muslim scholars. Let me share a few examples.

Muslim scholar Abul Aala Maududi opposes the Theory of Evolution while another Muslim scholar, Abul Kalam Azad, is in favour. While many Muslim scholars translate the Quranic expression *nafs-un-wahida* as Adam, Azad translates it as unicellular organism, amoeba, and tries to prove that there is no contradiction between the Theory of Evolution and Quran. Similarly the Quranic expression *malaika* is translated by many Muslim scholars as angels while Ghulam Ahmed Pervaiz translates it as laws of nature. Allama Mohammad Iqbal in his collection of lectures titled *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* states that hell and heaven are “states, not places” and the story of Adam and Eve is the story of man and woman. After studying different and contradictory Quranic translations and interpretations I realized that there was no way for me to find the right meaning of Quran, as some scholars make literal while others make metaphorical interpretations of Quran and we all know that the Arabic language, like other living languages,

has greatly evolved and changed over the centuries. Gradually I realized that Quran was part of folklore and wisdom literature.

The question of the right interpretation of Quran became more complex and complicated when many Muslims, who dreamt of an Islamic state, sought to create laws based on Quran. There has been enormous confusion in the Muslim world as there is no one person, organization or sect that all Muslims agree upon. Unfortunately the situation is as clear as mud and various Muslim sects believe in different and rather contradictory Islamic laws regarding marriage and divorce, homosexual-

ity, slaves, minorities and many other civil and criminal matters.

When I studied Islamic history I realized that there have been many traditions of Islam. There was a time when Muslims were enlightened people and had Sufis like Rabia Basri and Mansoor Hallaj and philosophers like Avicenna, Razi and Kundi who studied and translated Greek philosophers. But gradually the enlightened Islam became a fundamentalist and militant Islam and Muslims started following the *wahabi* and *salafi* traditions. Pervez Hoodbhoy captures that change in his book *Islam and Science* in these words:

About 700 years ago, Islamic civilization almost completely lost the will and ability to do science. Since that time, apart from attempts during the Ottoman period and in Mohammad Ali’s Egypt, there have been no significant efforts at recovery. Many Muslims acknowledge and express profound regret at this fact. Indeed this is the major pre-occupation of the modernist faction in Islam. But most traditionalists feel no regret – in fact many welcome this loss because, in their view, keeping a distance from science helps preserve Islam from

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corrupting secular influences.

While I was studying the history of Islam, I also developed a keen interest in the history of secular and humanistic traditions, traditions that tried to understand life and the universe without the concepts of God and religion. In those secular traditions, I was impressed by the teachings of Confucius in China, Socrates in Greece and Buddha in India. The essence of those teachings can be captured by Buddha's statement,

Believe nothing just because a so-called wise man said it
Believe nothing just because a belief is generally held
Believe nothing just because it is said in ancient books
Believe nothing just because it is said to be of divine origin
Believe nothing just because someone else believes it
Believe only what you yourself test and judge to be true.

Buddha believed that one's own experience is the best teacher.

As I studied secular science, medicine, psychology and philosophy, I realized that the discoveries of biologists, psychologists, sociologists and existentialists like Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx and Jean Paul Sartre have made it possible for us to understand life without the help of God, prophets and scriptures.

When we study the political dynamics of the contemporary world, we realize that humanity is at a cross-roads in the 21st century, and since the 9/11 tragedy, everyone has been closely watching the Muslim world. In my opinion one billion Muslims have to choose one of the following 3 roads.

1. They can choose to create theocratic Islamic states and follow the traditions of Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar of Afghanistan, Ayatullah Khomeini of Iran and Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan, who handed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, a democratically elected prime minister. The Islamization of many Muslim countries has occurred partly because of the teachings of Muslim scholars like Abul Aala Maududi and Syed Qutb, an ideological leader of Al-Qaeda who wrote, "It is the nature of Islam to dominate, not to be dominated, to impose its laws on all nations, and to extend its power to the entire planet."

2. They can choose peaceful Islam by following the teachings of Muslim scholars like Ghulam Ahmed Pervaiz who support studying modern science, psychology and philosophy and adopting the practices of reformers like Abdul Sattar Edhi who dreams of creating Muslim socialist welfare states.

3. They can choose to create secular states like Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Canada where there is a separation of church and state, mosque and the parliament. In those countries religion is considered a private matter and the state is run on a foundation of secular and humanistic laws that respect all citizens, especially women and minorities. In those states all citizens have equal rights and privileges.

I find it fascinating that because of the advancement of science, psychology and philosophy, more and more people world wide are adopting a secular and humanistic philosophy. The number of people not following organized religions has increased from 1% in 1900 to 15% in 2000. In Canada nearly 20% of the population identify themselves as atheists, agnostics, free thinkers and humanists, while among Scandinavian populations more than 50% are secular humanists.

The fundamental question in the 21st century is whether Muslims all over the world want to send their children to religious schools to learn scriptures and divine revelations or to secular schools to study modern science, psychology and philosophy. Crucial to the future of humanity is the choice Muslims in the Middle East will make: to create fundamentalist, militant and theocratic Islamic states or democratic, secular and humanistic states. Being a secular humanist I would like to see Muslims adopting a secular and humanistic philosophy, lifestyle and politics.

Thank you very much for offering me an opportunity to share my secular ideas and humanistic ideals.

Dr Khalid Sohail is a poet, a humanist and a psycho-therapist. His books include From Islam to Secular Humanism: A Philosophical Journey and The Next Stage of Human Evolution: Essays on Science, Psychology and Humanism.