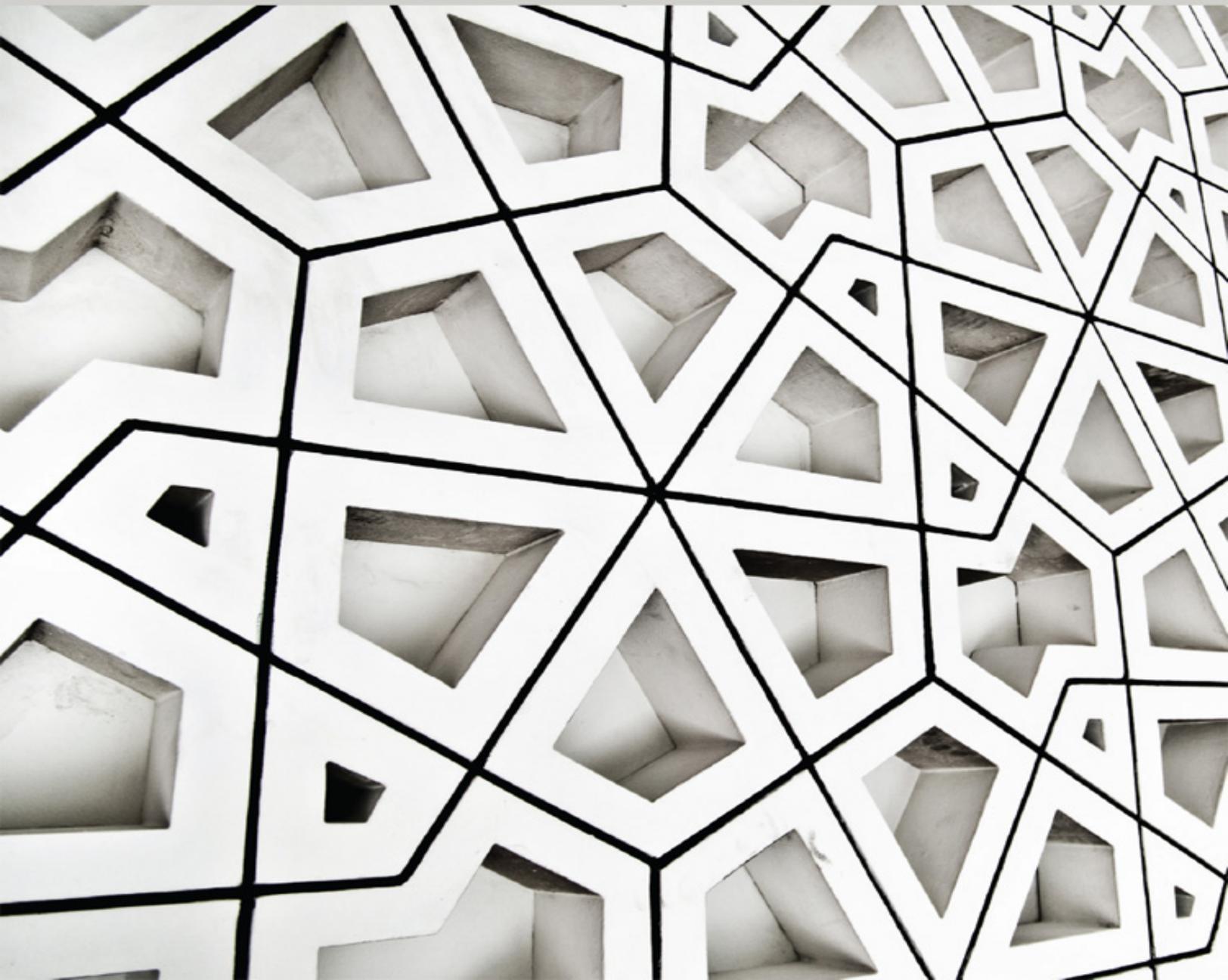


ISLAM & POLITICS

MUFTI MUHAMMAD TAQI USMANI

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CHAPTER ONE

THE RELATION BETWEEN ISLAM AND POLITICS

1. THE PLACE OF POLITICS IN ISLAM

The first thing to be said is that nowadays, views about the relation between Islam and politics on the subject are polarised between two extreme positions. One is that of secularism according to which Islam is, like religion in general, a personal matter concerning only the individual and no one else, and that politics and the government have nothing to do with it. As we saw in the first part of this work, this kind of thinking was adopted as a reaction to the evils of the Christian form of theocracy. Once secular democracy became popular in many parts of the world, this kind of thinking also found acceptance. It was further strengthened by the activities of some religious circles, who instead of concentrating on the reform of their own character and deeds, and engaging in acts of worship and the like, became the focal point of criticism when they began to engage in political activities as well. It raised many an eyebrow that a religious person should participate in politics. This viewpoint stemmed from comparing Islam with other religions, although such an analogy is absolutely wrong. The teachings of Islam are not limited to beliefs, worship and moral concerns. It has in fact provided us with invaluable injunctions regarding financial questions as well as matters of politics and government. Without these guidelines and principles, the holistic concept of Islam would be incomplete. Some aspects of the injunctions in question will be discussed below, *in shā' Allāh*.

The second extreme view is that of those who made every effort to refute secularism and, as a result, declared politics to be the

actual objective of Islam. According to them, the purpose of Islam is to establish a just political system all over the world, and all the other injunctions of Islam are meant to serve this end. Hence, a person who engages in politics so that Islam may prevail is serving the true purpose of Islam, and those who engage in other things, like purification of the soul, preaching, reformation of society, etc., and are not involved in politics, are myopic and oblivious to the actual purpose of Islam.

Both of these views are extreme, and they stem from an incorrect perception of the role politics plays in Islam. In reality, the teachings and injunctions of Islam relate to every aspect of life, including politics. But it is wrong to say that politics is the actual purpose of Islam and that all injunctions and teachings are meant only to serve that purpose. This can be illustrated through an example. Islam has laid down very detailed guidelines and instructions about trade, but it would be absolutely wrong to say that trade is the actual purpose of Islam. Similarly, Islam has laid down many guidelines concerning marriage, but the mere fact that there are many detailed guidelines does not mean that marriage is the actual purpose of Islam. So the fact that Islam has laid down basic guidelines and injunctions about politics does not mean that politics is the actual purpose of Islam.

Allah ﷻ has clearly stated the purpose of His having created man in the following *Āyah*:

وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ

And I have not created the Jinn and man except that they may worship (or serve) Me. (51:56)

‘Worship’, or in Arabic *‘Ibādah’*, means being completely at the service of Allah Most High. This in turn includes all forms of worship sanctioned by the *Shari‘ah*, as well as obeying Allah ﷻ in every aspect of life. The word *‘ibādah* is related to the word *‘abd*, meaning ‘slave’. A slave obeys his master in every matter; but he

does not worship him, so a slave's servitude to his master cannot be called *'ibādah*. The relationship between Allah ﷻ and His servants, however, calls for obedience as well as worship, and hence it can be called *'ibādah*.

'Ibādah itself is of two kinds. One type is done for no other purpose but worshipping Allah ﷻ, such as prayer, fasting, Zakat, Hajj, sacrifice, and so on. All these are direct forms of worship. The second kind of *'ibādah*, comprises actions that include an aspect of worldly benefit, but which, if done in accordance with the Divine injunctions, and in order to please Allah Most High, can become an indirect form of worship. Take trade, for example. If it is done in accordance with the Divine commandments and with the intention of pleasing Allah ﷻ, it becomes worship in a certain sense and one is entitled to a reward for it. But this is an indirect form of worship, because trade is not in itself an act of worship; only through obedience and good intention can it become one. The same applies to politics and government. If carried out in obedience to Allah ﷻ and in order to please Him, they become a form of worship, an indirect form of worship, because in themselves they are not an act of worship. However, just as in the case of trade, obedience to Allah ﷻ and good intention convert them into worship. Hence when Allah Most High has stated that He has created mankind to worship Him, this covers both forms of worship. These two forms of worship together form the objective, the purpose of man's creation.

Now, obviously the direct forms of worship are of higher standing than the indirect ones. There are many forms of indirect worship, and one cannot say that man has been created for only one of them. Rather, all direct and indirect forms of worship put together are the purpose for which man has been created. However, it should be kept in mind that the indirect forms of worship also vary in significance. The more far-reaching the effects that any of them has, the more important it is. As far as politics is concerned, once a proper Islamic government is established according to the principles of the Holy *Shari'ah*, not only does it become easier to perform indirect forms of worship, but also their circle of practical

application expands. In that sense, it is not wrong to point out the importance of political activity; but it would be wrong to declare it the sole purpose of religion, for that would upset the whole list of priorities. To accept that the purpose of Islam is to govern would lead to a whole series of ills.

The first of these ills is that if one declared politics to be the actual purpose, everything else would assume a secondary role. Actions which are direct forms of worship would no longer remain the actual purpose: they would be reduced to being a means to achieve the actual purpose, and so their importance would be diminished. In fact, however, the Holy Qur'an tells us that political powers are a means, while direct forms of worship are the actual purpose:

الَّذِينَ إِن مَّكَّنَّاهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ أَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَوُا الزَّكَاةَ وَأَمَرُوا بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَنَهَوْا
عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ

Those who, if We give them power in the land, establish the prayer, pay Zakat, enjoin goodness, and forbid evil. (22:41)

This verse informs us that the purpose of authority and power is to establish the prayer, to pay zakat, and so forth. This makes it clear that worship is the actual purpose, which authority is to be used to attain. Some have argued that power is the actual purpose, citing this *Āyah*:

وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ لَيَسْتَخْلِفَنَّهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ كَمَا
اسْتَخْلَفَ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ وَلَيُمَكِّنَنَّ لَهُمْ دِينَهُمُ الَّذِي ارْتَضَى لَهُمْ وَلَيُبَدِّلَنَّهُمْ مِنْ
بَعْدِ خَوْفِهِمْ أَمْنًا يَعْبُدُونَنِي لَا يُشْرِكُونَ بِي شَيْئًا

Allah has promised those who believe and do good that He will surely make them succeed (the present rulers) in the earth, as He has caused those who were before them to

succeed (others); and that He will surely establish for them their religion which He has approved for them, and will exchange their fear for peace. They worship Me and do not associate anything with Me. (24:55)

Ḥakīm al-Ummah Mawlānā Ashraf ‘Alī Thānawī ﷺ provided an unanswerable rejoinder to this argument, which we will quote here. He says:

‘Allah Most High says:

الَّذِينَ إِن مَّكَّنَّاهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ أَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَوُا الزَّكَاةَ وَأَمَرُوا بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَنَهَوْا
عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ

Those who, if We give them power in the land, establish the prayer, pay zakat, enjoin goodness, and forbid evil; and with Allah rests the outcome of [all] affairs. (22:41)

This shows us that acts of worship are an end in themselves. Politics and Jihad are not ends in themselves, but are a means to achieve the end of establishing religiosity. That is why all the Prophets ﷺ were given all sorts of injunctions about worship, but not all received injunctions about politics and Jihad. If there was need for the latter such injunctions were given, but not otherwise. That is a hallmark of a means: it is provided as and when it is required.

Some readers may wonder about an apparent contradiction between the above *Āyah* and another which seems to state that acts of worship are a means and politics and government an end. Allah ﷻ says:

الَّذِينَ إِن مَّكَّنَّاهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ أَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَوُا الزَّكَاةَ وَأَمَرُوا بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَنَهَوْا
عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ

Those who, if We give them power in the land, establish the prayer, pay zakat, enjoin goodness and forbid evil. (22:41)

In this *Āyah*, faith and good deeds are stated to be prerequisites for power in the land, which implies that power and politics are an end. The answer to this argument is that here, power and esteem are mentioned as rewards for faith and good deeds, and this power and esteem stem from religiousness, as a special feature. Power and might are promised to the pious, but that does not mean that the thing promised is the end in itself. Otherwise there would be no meaning in this *Āyah*:

وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ أَقَامُوا التَّوْرَةَ وَالْإِنْجِيلَ وَمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْهِمْ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ لَأَكَلُوا مِنْ فَوْقِهِمْ وَمِنْ
تَحْتِ أَرْجُلِهِمْ

And had they upheld the Torah and the Gospels and that which has been sent down to them from their Lord (i.e. the Qur'ān), they would have been fed from above and from below. (5:66)

Now, this *Āyah* promises ample provisions as reward for upholding the Torah and the Gospels: that is, for acting according to the Holy Qur'an. In return for piety, it has been promised that a religious person shall not starve or remain unclothed; but that which has been promised is not necessarily an end in itself. Here, power and authority are promised in turn for faith and good deeds, the former stemming from the latter, but not as an end in themselves.

In conclusion, it should be kept in mind that politics is a means, and piety is an end. This does not mean that politics is not desirable to a certain degree; the point was to clarify that it is not an end in itself, whereas piety is an end in itself.¹

To sum up, the consequence of declaring politics to be the actual end of religion, some acts of worship to be means to achieve this end, is that people come to think that all acts of worship are means

of achieving that end. The purpose of prayer in congregation would then be to foster a communal spirit in order to realise political goals, to inculcate discipline and order, to improve mutual relations among the Muslims, that they may begin to find ways to help one another and work together for that higher purpose. The actual purpose of Zakat would be to foster a spirit of sacrifice to achieve a higher end; the purpose of fasting would mean to enable one to endure hardship to achieve the higher purpose; and Hajj would be a kind of conference for Muslims from all over the world, creating unity and harmony among them. In short, all acts of worship would be meant only to gain some worldly benefit. There is no doubt that these acts of worship do also have the above-mentioned benefits, but those are not their spirit, their essence. Their spirit and essence are to strengthen one's ties with Allah Most High, to turn to Him, and to prefer obeying Him over everything else in this world. To declare politics to be the main purpose of Islam would weaken that spirit.

The third evil is that if all acts of worship are viewed as a means to attain the higher purpose, the natural consequence is that one does not consider it to be much of a problem if one has to sacrifice some of them for that higher purpose. If political activities and gatherings keep one from attending the prayer in congregation, or from coming to the mosque, it would seem there is nothing wrong with that. Even missing a prayer would not seem evil. Even to lapse into one or more of the *makrūhāt*—things strongly disapproved of in Islam—would not seem to matter much, if one did so in order to achieve the supposed higher purpose.

The fourth evil is that people who engage in direct forms of worship and who exhort people to do likewise by reminding them of their merits and blessings, are accused of being oblivious of the actual purpose of religion. Sometimes they are even belittled and made fun of. Books about ethics and the virtues are considered of secondary importance, and are even treated by some as though they were unnecessary, or a distraction from the real purposes of religion. Even *Taşawwuf* (Sufism) and self-reform, as practised in

conformity with the Holy *Shari'ah* and the Sunnah, are called 'opium'. Those engaged in acquiring and propagating the Islamic branches of knowledge are considered to lack a proper outlook on religion.

The fifth evil which results from the above thinking is that people are likely to develop unbecoming notions about many of the Prophets, because the majority of the Messengers whom Allah ﷻ sent failed to achieve what the people we are discussing regard as the real purpose of religion. Of the one hundred twenty-four thousand Prophets, only a mere handful are known to have established or run a government. Apart from the Noble Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ, our Masters Yūsuf, Mūsā, Yūshā', Samū'il, Dāwūd, and Sulaymān ﷺ did so; but it is not proven that any other Prophet did. Does this mean that apart from these august souls, no other Prophet attained the 'real' purpose of religion? Those who consider political success the true purpose of religion would presumably not hesitate to say that the other Prophets failed.

To sum up, politics has an important place in religion, but to declare it to be its principal purpose would upset the whole system of priorities and preferences. On the other hand, to suppose that religion is limited to prayer and fasting while completely neglecting the other branches of religion as irrelevant would also be a great mistake. The reality is that religion has many branches, and politics is one of them. In order to live according to Islam, it is necessary to act upon all its injunctions, whichever branch they belong. In practice, however, it is not possible for a person to dedicate himself or herself to all its branches. Tasks and responsibilities need to be distributed, with some people choosing to working for one and applying their efforts to it, while others do the same for another. There is nothing wrong with that. But it would be wrong to think that the branch one has chosen is the sole purpose of religion, when it is just one of many. The work one does is just one of many things that need to be done. For example, a person may choose to engage in politics, because he thinks that is where they can accomplish the most. Such a person do so—provided their motives are sincere (a

consideration that we Muslims, like others, are liable to overlook). To say that politics alone is the real purpose of religion is wrong. But if a person chooses for himself politics, for the sake of serving Islam and the Muslims, that is indeed religion.

2. THE KIND OF INJUNCTIONS ISLAM HAS LAID DOWN REGARDING POLITICS

The second point is that Islam has beyond doubt laid down many injunctions about politics, but has not drawn up a detailed plan of what an Islamic government should look like. It has provided rules and guiding principles, but how are these principles to be implemented and acted upon? Islam has left the answer to these questions to the scholars and people of insight of each age and era. The principles that Allah ﷻ has given us in the form of the Holy *Shari'ah* are unalterable, everlasting guidelines. At the same time, they are flexible enough to allow people of knowledge to work out a detailed plan for their implementation—on condition, of course that their plan is within the limits of the *Shari'ah*.

For example, the Holy Qur'an tells us:

وَأَعِدُّوا لَهُمْ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ

And prepare whatever you can against [your enemy]. (8:60)

This is an Islamic principle, and Allah has given some examples to illustrate it. But there is no statement as to what kind of armaments should be prepared. That is left to the people of knowledge in each time to decide in the light of their knowledge and experience what is needed for defence purposes.

Similarly, Islam provides basic guidelines in the field of politics, but has not laid down all the details. It is for Muslims to decide how many government departments there are to be, how administrative powers are to be divided, whether there should be ministers or not,

and if so, how many; the same applies to whether there should be a unitary form of government or a federal one, whether the legislature should be unicameral or bicameral, how advisory sessions should take place, and so on. All these things fall in the circle of permissible matters, within which the people of knowledge must take decisions appropriate to the needs of their times. Hence when we talk about Islamic principles of politics, we should not expect the statements made by the jurists of this *Ummah*² to stipulate whether there should be a unicameral a bicameral system, or how many members there are to be in the cabinet. Such particulars cannot be found in the Holy *Shari'ah*, but the lack of them is in no way a defect.

The *Shari'ah* provides guidance where it is clear that if a matter were left to people's own understanding, they might well go astray. As far as permissible matters are concerned, the majority of them have been left to mankind to resolve. The Islamic principles of politics are unalterable on one side, but they are also quite flexible on the other, in that the way of putting them into practice can be adjusted to the needs and demands of the changing times. As long as one abides by the basic principles, one may introduce changes in secondary matters. Hence, when we talk about Islamic politics we do not mean a rigid mode of government in which all details are laid down for all time to come. We mean the basic concepts and fundamental principles that the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah have laid down. In the coming chapters, we shall *in shā' Allāh* try to elucidate the principles contained in the *Shari'ah*.

¹ Ashraf 'Ali Thānawī, *Ashraf al-sawānih* (Multan, n.d.), vol. 4, *Khātimat al-Sawānih*, pp. 28–29.

² The collectivity of Muslims.

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