

Religion and the State In Modern Arab Thought

Kanaan al-Khoury Hanna / Reviewed by Yusuf Kamal (1)

The rise of Islamic movements during the last three decades provoked a renewed interest in the relations between religion and state in the Arab and Islamic worlds.

In the most part, this interest was expressed through the review of the cultural and intellectual experience of Arabs and Muslims extending from the mid-nineteenth century to the sixties of the twentieth century, since these views and developments were in fact the cradle that nurtured present phenomena. Scholars who study these views mainly rely on two sources: Albert Hourani's *Arab Thought during the Nahda* (1962) and Hisham Turabi's *Arab Intellectuals and the West* (1970). Both these works include four main ideas:

-The Arab *Nahda* began when Napoleon conquered Egypt.

-The purpose for this *Nahda* was to establish a western-like state (along the lines of the French or British models).

-The main problem in the development of this project of state is the relationship to Islam, as the anti-modernity tradition. Therefore, the main carriers of this project were Christian Arabs.

-The failure of modernization (outside of Kamalist Turkey) is to be justified, beside despotic rules, by the firmness of tradition and the rise of (backward) fundamentalism.

Dr. Fehmy Gedaan has proved in his illustrious study: "the foundations of progress to Islamic thinkers in the modern era", (1979), that the last three ideas are greatly faulty or

unscientifically exaggerating. The pressure that the dominance of Islamic revival has reinforced Hourani's categories and made them more resistant, especially after the publication of Aziz al-Athama's book: *A Different Perspective on Secularism*, which establishes an almost complete comparison between religion and reason oriented movements.

At first sight, it appeared that Kanaan al-Khoury Hanna's new book *Religion and the State in Modern Arab Thought* was a promising work. The author is nothing short of an expert on the era commonly known as *Nahda* (renaissance), since he presented his Masters thesis. He is familiar with the references and resources of this era and frequently refers to them. The review of these resources in contemporary times makes it possible to correct mistakes and set illusory myths straight, and it can at least stop the acceptance of prejudice.

The author does not open this big work by speaking of al-Tahtaoui, like all his

predecessors have done. He justifies this by saying that he had studied al-Tahtaoui's work for his Masters thesis, so instead, he mentions Hussein al-Jisr and Abi al-Hoda al-Sayyadi, as the representatives of The Renewed Islamic Reactionarism (fundamentalism): obedience to the Ottoman Caliph Abdel Hamid the Second, considering Sharia as right at all times and in all places, banning all further jurisprudence, and putting the state and religion in one mold.

On the other hand, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani speaks of two issues: the Islamic League and the bond between the religious and the national entities, on the grounds that religion is a social necessity and that decision is not an issue pertaining to the masses. The author agrees with Jamal al-Din on the matter of the national bond, but he disagrees with those who say that Jamal al-Din was an atheist. On the contrary, the man is a religious conservative who sees this bond as a tool of firmness and strength in the face of colonialism.

Muhammad Abdo also believes in jurisprudence and reform, and has a strong dislike to Ottomans. He is a fervent enthusiast of the possibility of a revival based on religion. His debate with Farah Antoun and his opposition to the separation of State and Religion are somewhat confusing things, since he says that the: *nithamat* of the being in Islam is a civil one. Abdo's moderation and hesitation was opposed by his pupil Rashid Rida Sultawi's views. The author says that when Muhammad Abdo was alive, Sultawi was an adherent to the Shura and the Constitution. After Abdo's death, however, he revealed his extremism and Salafi (early school) beliefs. When Mustapha Kamal abolished the Caliphate system in 1924, he insisted on its necessity. Rashid Rida thus believes that state and religion should be combined in one entity, like the third Saudi state has done. Rashid Rida had approved of its ascent and encouraged it with all his might.

As for Kheir al-Din al-Tunisi (Aqam al-masalik), his views differ from Rashid Rida's and even Muhammad Abdo's in two points:

He believes that European civil institutions, per example, are a gateway to better spiritual and civil lives alike, and that the policies of Sharia and reason have a meeting point, since they both rely on interest. All of the views above share on belief: the concomitance of religious and political authorities.

The author details in the second part of the book, the views of nationalists who believe that nationalism and religion share a joint path. He considers Kheir al-Din al-Tunisi as one of these people. Mustapha Kamal, the head of Egyptian Nationalist movements remains though the one who has most manifested this line of thought. He fought against British colonialism on the foundation of partnership between Nationalism (Egypt) and Islam (the Ottoman State). To him, the Caliph is the

religious and political leader. However, it is not clear to us how he achieves independence from the British only to go back to the Ottoman dominance. Lebanese Christian Suleiman al-Bustani has high hopes in Ottoman Nationalism, with its constitution, *tatrik* policy, and the mobilization of Christians (i.e. equating them with Muslims). He does not perceive any contradictions opposing Sharia to the Constitution, and has no objection to Islam being the state's official religion, in the presence of a uniting nationalism. Suleiman al-Bustani's view is in accord with that of Skeikh Abdel Hamid al-Zahraoui. The latter called for a National Ottoman League (community) in a decentralized system where all minorities have their equal shares of rights. He does not object that the higher symbol of authority is then a civil union not a religious one. This total loyalty to the state did not help his case when the Turkish Military Commander, Jamal Pasha did not like his decentralization idea, so he had him arrested and executed during the First World War.

The third part of the book details the ideas of those who called for a separation of state and religion. He mentions Abdel Rahman al-Kawakibi (*Umm al-qura tabai' al-istibdad* [nature of oppression]), Najib al-Azouri (*al-Umma al-Arabiya* [The Arab Nation]), and Ali Abdel Razzaq (*al-Islam wa usul al-Hukm* [Islam and the Origins of Rule]). All of the above believe in religion and faith but they see that it is an individual and spiritual matter that should not interfere with public matters.

To al-Kawakibi, religion was used and exploited to facilitate despotism and oppression. Najib al-Azouri replaces the Islamic league with the national one. He separates civil authority from religious authority. He advocates the separation from Turks and the establishment of an Arabic Caliphate.

As for Ali Abd al-Razzaq, Islam is a message not a rule, a religion nor a government.

The fourth and last part is entitled “The Secular National Movement, or Civil Laws

and the Separation of Religion and State.” In this chapter, the author includes the names of Boutros al-Bustani, Khalil Saade, Farah Antoun, and the Egyptians Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyed and Mahmoud Azmi. Boutros al-Boustani relates the prosperous European expansion to the separation of religion and state which allowed for prosperous nationalism and the establishment of the modern collective state. Khalil Saade shares this point of view and adds that religious extremism is the greatest curse of the Middle East that can never be resolved without separating religion from the state and hence founding a national laic party. Farah Antoun agrees to this as well and considers that religious interests differ from civil ones, since religion examines deep metaphysical issues while reason is interested in the surface of things: between these two directions, there is no conflict, but a separation. The European experience has proven that evolution can only come with this separation. Ahmad al-Lutfi Sayyed, whom the author calls the Pioneer of Laic Nationalism in Egypt, sees that the rule

must be exercised by the constitution and the nation, in a frame of an Egyptian national state governed by European civil laws. Mahmoud Azmi, who also advocates the laic and civil aspects of laws, shares these same views.

The author commits one mistake however, when he considers, despite his direct examination of the sources, that any acknowledgment of an Islamic role is an attack to freedom and an inappropriate link between religion and laicity. He does not distinguish between the conflict over the caliphate position and the view on religion's role in society. To him, those who call for the rule of the Ottomans necessarily advocate a unification of religion and state! This was obviously not the opinion Mustapha Kamal advocated. He approved of the Ottoman rule for political and not religious reasons. Religion and the state can agree without having to resort to lies and false compromises to the political authority, to which Muhammad Abdo Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyed and Ali Abd al-Razzaq, etc., concur.

They all speak of Islam's civil authority, harmoniously with the understanding of Islam that was passed on through generations. So long as this civil authority exists, it is meaningless to consider all those who call for a harmonious relationship between religion and state as backward, for in doing so, it would seem that conflict is necessary to laicity and modernization.

Finally, the ongoing religious revival is not a continuance of any religious movements of the *Nahda* era; it is a new movement brought on by new circumstances. It cannot rely therefore on reformists, traditionalists or advocates of laicity to uphold or condemn it.

[1] - *Religion and the State in Modern Arab Thought, an analytical study of modern intellectual movements in the Arab world*, Dal Al Rukn, Beirut, 2004. the reviewer is a Jordanian author.

