

The Problematic Relationship between Religion and State Policy in Contemporary Egypt

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Introduction:

One of the leading issues raised by the national independence era and the modernization of states in the Arab region is the issue of religion, and the nature of the relationship between the institutions of states and Islam as a referential affiliation and cultural heritage. The issue of religion stands at the heart of the institutional and political action of the newly established states that emerged from the ruins of the colonial era as part of social movements, and is linked as well to the profound social questions of the crisis of democracy and the pursuit of legitimacy by the state (Masarra 1990).

The essence of the modern [postcolonial] state lies in the fact that political power in its modern sense, replacing traditional authority, is framed by the main problematic of progress and modernity as associated with the relationship with the “other” (in this case, the West). Hence secularism becomes the entry point to the “political modernization” of the state. The main purpose of raising the issue of the relationship between religion and the state is to explore what lies beyond the state’s stance regarding secularism, whether supporting or rejecting it (Masarra 1990).

The nation-state is a recent phenomenon that came into existence and assumed its form in the age of capitalism, hence one can say that secularism cannot be understood apart from the modern state and capitalism, and this is where secularism presented itself as an alternative to the religious state, as a solution that could not later be abandoned if states were to tread on the path of progress. The advocates of secularism have considered religion from two angles, namely religion and culture, where the cultural dimension of religion can be a common factor among a group of people belonging to different religions, while the ideological dimension is concerned with the relationship between believers and God. The cultural dimension can be expressed through the slogan, “religion is for God, and the homeland is for all”. Here, religion turns into a face of the homeland and the nation-state.

Furthermore, the advocates of secularism considered the issue of minorities and took it seriously, which constituted an important reason for secularism’s special significance. Many disputes, wars, and civil strife have taken place between minorities and the religious majority [in postcolonial states], as evident in colonial and imperialist interventions on the one hand, and the absence of democracy, on the other hand. The failure of the theocratic state strengthened the advocates of secularism and caused their secular goal to approach the level of a mass political slogan (Tizini 1989).

What Egypt is experiencing in the relationship between religion and politics is an important model in the regulation of the relationship between Islam and politics, the exploitation by the political elite of religion in political rivalry, and the containment of conflicts that are politicized in terms of religion. The fundamental dilemma that constitutes the basis of regulating the relationship between religion and politics lies in the dialectic between exploitation of religion in politics and the extension of state authority (Masarra 1990). The current relationship between religion and the state in the Arab world, in general, and in Egypt, in particular, is framed by the conflict between the European model of secularism, or rather the one stemming from the French Revolution defining the separation of religion and state, and the opposing, “Islamist” religious model. The first model is shaped by the statement of Christ; “Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's” (despite the inaccuracy of the interpretation of the statement) and the slogan, “religion is for God, and the homeland is for all,” which requires separation between religion and the state and is considered a primarily political position. This position is the result of the needs of the modern, contemporary state that declares its civil identity, which many interpret as an expression of secularism. (Masarra 1990).

This paper attempts to answer [the question] of whether Egypt is a secular or religious state, what form the relationship between religion and the state takes in Egypt, and the problematic issues and outcomes of this relationship.

The beginnings of liberal, modernizing, and secular thought in Egypt:

The process of modernization of the state in Egypt began specifically in the era of Mohamed Ali Pasha, who undertook major reforms in several political, social, economic and cultural fields, initiated the process of transformation from feudalism to capitalism, and laid the foundations of the civil state, as he took advantage of the *Mamluk* heritage and Napoleon's experience in invading Egypt. Thinkers such as Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani and Muhammad Abdo later appeared, and left a clear imprint on Egyptian cultural life a significant impact on enlightened religious scholars as well as the secular current thinkers, such as Farah Anton (Anton 1988, Tizini 1989).

The debate that arose between Anton and Abdo regarding the relationship of religion to the state represents an important phase in the formation of Egyptian political thought, since the debate between them centered on “political power.” Abdo, who was affiliated with the reformist religious current, attempted to adapt liberal concepts to Islamic legislation, which is consistent with what Egyptian renaissance thinkers had proposed, since they considered liberalism a tool to achieve modernity in society and state administration, to disseminate culture using the Western model, and to proving that Islam was not at odds with liberal modernity. However, Abdo did not agree with Anton on the issue of separation of religion from state, believing that this would assist Western colonialism.

Conversely, Anton, who was affiliated with the secular current, proposed separation between the religious and political authorities to achieve interfaith tolerance, and linked the concepts of progress and modernity with the separation of these two authorities. Yet it is evident that

Anton's advocacy for secularism was driven by the apprehension concerning the status of Christian minorities in Muslim countries. This led him to disseminate the conviction that the exploitation of religion in politics does harm to religion itself and could lead to discord among people, if religion was adopted as the basis of citizenship; he argued that the separation of religious and political powers would achieve equality among the citizens of the nation, making belonging to the homeland the foundation of citizenship. He believed that religion should be determined in the relationship between the individual and God, and must not exceed it or venture into the political or worldly sphere, due to the many differences among individuals. Hence this notion of secularism would bring tolerance, justice, equality, liberty, and progress (Kamal et al. 2003, Anton 1988, Tizini 1989).

Following this argument, Ali Abdel Raziq (1925) discussed the issue of power in Islam in his book, *Islam and Governance*. He presented an argument about whether the caliphate position in Islam had a religious basis or not, and concluded, based on his study of Islamic history, that the *Qur'an*, *Sunnah*, and the consensus [of scholars] did not confer legitimacy to the caliphate, rather, the latter used force and violence to impose itself, i.e., the caliphate has nothing to do with religion, but with politics, and the caliphs associated it with religion to gain the support of the populace. Thus Raziq addressed the issue of separation between what is religious and what is political in Islam via the issue of the caliphate, and proposed how to modernize the state to attain progress. His thought was an extension of Mohammed Abdo's reformist thought, since he discussed the question of the state from within the Islamic religion.

These are the arguments upon which modernist and secular thought in Egypt was based, and which contributed to the formation of ideas about what the relationship between religion and politics ought to be, addressing the restructuring of the relationship between political power, the judiciary, and the institution of fatwa. Since the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, major changes had occurred in Egypt in the relationship among law, religion and the ethical system, since Islamic courts were the only form of the law in Egypt during the Ottoman rule. Afterwards the gradual process of introducing manifestations of modernity, with the restructuring of legal and ethical systems and religious authorities, and the separation of political power, the judiciary and the fatwa institutions began (As'ad 2003).

The process of the modernization of the Egyptian state continued under successive regimes despite their dissimilarity. The state in the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser, for instance, pursued modernizing policies under socialism and adopted as a basis the secular thought that Karl Marx had established. According to Marxist logic, the political liberation of religious persons ensues as a result of the liberation of the state from religion. However, Marx's idea about liberation from religion does not mean the removal of religion from existence, and does not consider the presence of religion incompatible with the establishment of the complete state, but rather describes human liberation as the non-conversion of mundane issues to theological ones, that is, the idea of political liberation would come through human instead of religious liberation (Marx 1844). Subsequently, the Egyptian state turned once again to capitalism in the Sadat era also the Mubarak era, a period when the dialectical relationship between religion and politics materialized under the modern state.

The emergence and renewal of Islamic political thought in Egypt:

The Islamist political movement current, or “the Islamic Movement,” started to appear in Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century and with the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate, as represented by the establishment of the “Muslim Brotherhood” in 1928 by Imam Hassan al-Banna, who presented the idea of “the comprehensiveness of Islam” for the first time in the modern era. The movement calls for the revival of the *shura* [consultation] principle and jurisprudence in opinion, and the application of the *shari’a* [Islamic jurisprudence] through state institutions (Kamal et al. 2003).

The “*Jamaa’ah Al-Islamiyah Al-jihadiyyah*” [the Jihadi Islamic Group] appeared in 1973, and believed that all the regimes that had adopted legislative approaches and systems outside the Qur’an and *Sunnah* were “infidel” regimes, and that whoever obeyed them and was convinced of them was a ‘*kafer*’ [an infidel]. It also called for the establishment of an Islamic state as an individual obligation [fardh ‘ayn] of every Muslim man and woman (Kamal et al. 2003). With the existence of various Islamic groups, and the use by some of violence as a means to change the “infidel” society and the establishment of an Islamic society with a “caliphate following the way of prophethood,” attempts of self-criticism emerged, many of which are considered attempts to renew the political thought of the Islamic stream.

Critics of the “Muslim Brotherhood” believe that the real dilemma of the group’s political thought lies in its argument concerning the Muslim individual/family/community, as they are foundational arguments in the writings and lectures of al-Banna, and believed that the Brotherhood undoubtedly succeeded in forming the individual, family and group, yet did not find the path to the phases of forming community and the state. Some critics believe that the movement has not answered the question of how to transform society and establish statehood,

and others believe that the implementation of *Shari’a* is only possible through an integrated and enlightened cultural project, that combines commitment to the fundamentals and interpretive jurisprudence in modern issues. Also, criticism of *jihadi* groups led to their adopting methodological changes that manifested in a cessation of violence and reconciliation with the state (Kamal et al. 2003).

The religious institutions under the modern state:

The dialectic of the religious and secular is part of a renewed constitutional theory of the separation of powers in the modern state, since it requires a functional separation between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, it also requires the necessity of functional separation between the executive political authorities and religious bodies (Masarra 1990).

The modern Egyptian state attempts to impose a democratic mode of politics (although its concept of democracy lacks clear features and has little credibility) in both politics and social life. From this premise of the acknowledgement of differentiation in jurisdiction between

religion and politics, the modern state recognizes the legitimacy of religions and its various values, yet simultaneously maintains the notion of the modern state and the minimum requirement of democracy. It also attempts to create a neutral field in terms of religion, provided it does not breach public order, so that the overlap in religion between the public and the private would not be the subject of dispute or codification for political power, thus giving individuals the right to apply religious teachings provided public order is not disturbed. Simultaneously, it marginalizes the public sphere of religion, keeping it distant from executive political affairs and limiting juridical functions of the clergy in a fashion that does not negate the dialectic between the public and the private spheres (Masarra 1990).

Through its modernization project, the Egyptian state has worked hard to control religious institutions, as well as national and social institutions including educational and cultural institutions, which are also used by religious movements in Egypt to spread their teachings. Hence the state has regulated all of these institutions, acting as the overseeing party that determines the limits, means, and ways in which they operate (Hirschkind 2001).

The state control over religious institutions includes mechanisms such as:

- The Ministry of *al-Awqaf's* [Islamic endowment] control of all mosques, the mandatory licensing of orators by the same ministry, and coordinating of the Friday sermon (Masarra 1990).
- The continuous attempt to limit the powers of the Ministry of *al-Awqaf*, where its roles were limited to dissemination of the Islamic call at home and abroad, carrying out goods and righteous deeds, and supervision of religious institutions (Masarra 1990).
- The reorganization of *al-Azhar* and the bodies it includes, regulating it so that it would be the source of opinion on everything related to religious affairs as a state institution, and since many decisions on religious matters are adjudicated in state courts and not by *al-Azhar* (Agrama 2010; (Masarra 1990).

Also, the state constantly attempted to use its cultural and media institutions, such as television, newspapers and magazines, for the dissemination of its modernist project and its modernizing secular ideas, which assume that Islam must be a personal, spiritual practice that represents a phase separating the two basic modes of life (work and pleasure). The discourse of the state in this form made culture an arena for conflict between proponents of *da'wa* and their audience, since what the state controlled through its presentation by media directed sentiments towards moral actions that are contrary to the teachings the Muslim society is accustomed to, thus forcing Islamist movements towards attempts to mobilize a popular and social shift to Islam, by focusing on national institutions and the dissemination of the Islamic discourse by all available means, such as newspapers and tapes, causing the citizens to be at the center of the conflict between religion and politics (Hirschkind 2001).

The attempts by the state to control *al-da'wa* [the Islamic call or missionary work] encountered problems mainly because religious institutions run by the state include large factions that are sympathetic to the same religious positions opposed by state institutions, and which they

condemns and controls officially; many well-known orators were state employees and were simultaneously affiliated with Islamist opposition movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result of this, the discourse of Islamic *da'wa* continued to have a presence within state institutions, despite the state's attempts to subjugate the educational and legal Islamic institutions to various national goals, mostly related to state security. This has not led to a complete abandonment of practices and discourses related to *al-da'wa* within these institutions. This overlap contributed to disparate views of proponents of *da'wa* and those affiliated with religious movements concerning the state, which caused such views to oscillate between opposition, explicit condemnation, mistrust, duplicity, and indifference. This also caused the impact of Islamist movements to be restricted to the social context for those keen on applying religious teachings. It contributed to a tension in ethical requirements and the ways persons are classified by the national homeland, and the creation of public discord. The most important achievements of the Islamic movements in Egypt during the last thirty years include a renewed interest in acquiring traditional Islamic knowledge, such as reading the Holy *Qur'an*, the *Hadith* [narrations of statements/deeds of the prophet Mohammad], and the collection of ethics and virtues of *al-da'wa* and preachers in the book "*Abaab al-da'wa*" [the Ethics of Preaching]. These have established the protocols of the Islamic discourse of *al-da'wa*, strengthened it and directed it towards its goal, and represented a detailed personal and political hinge within the contemporary Islamic discourse. They also contributed to the idea that *al-da'wa* and the values it advocates constitute a standard basis in public life (Hirschkind 2001).

Some examples of the Egyptian state's control of religious institutions and the politicization of religious laws, include using *al-hisba* legislation, which emerged originally from the principle of "commanding right and forbidding wrong" (*al-amr bil-ma'ruf wa 'n-nahy 'an al-munkar*) in Islamic law, and was transformed from Islamic law to legislation whose implementation is overseen by the state's Attorney General. This decision is an example of the merger of politics and religion, through the state's transformation of religious legislation to a state policy tied to public and coercive force - a tool used by the state under the ruse of protecting "public interest," "public order," "private rights," and "religious beliefs." This makes it seem linked to liberal concepts, while it simultaneously contradicts the concept of secularism. The use of *al-hisba* law in the ruling of apostasy against Professor Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid, and the annulment of his marriage since he was no longer considered a Muslim, because of his writings on Islamic *Shari'a* [Islamic jurisprudence], provoked many reactions in religious circles and constituted a contradiction in state policy which has been ambiguous. On the one hand, the state attempted to win over Muslim public opinion, but on the other hand, it simultaneously issued decisions relating to religion through the state and not via independent religious institutions. Despite the fact that most of its judicial system is derived from French law, the state introduced some laws that were derived from *Shari'a* [Islamic jurisprudence] while attempting to link them to liberal concepts, as it did with the civil status law (Agrama 2010; Hirschkind 2001).

Since independence, the ruling class in Egypt has been concerned with having people at the top tiers of religious organizations who are sympathetic to and in line with the political orientation of the state in general, and especially the Islamic organizations. This is the logic for the state's

dissolving the *al-Azhar* Scholars' Authority and designating the position of the Al-Azhar Sheikh by state appointment and not by election (with the objective of having Al-Azhar scholars more compliant with the policies of the ruling regime), as well as subjecting the sheikhdoms of Sufi bodies to direct oversight of the Vice President of the Republic. As for Coptic institutions, the authorities expressed the desire to keep them independent and encouraged them to limit their interest to religious matters only (Al-Sayyed 1983).

In general, the leadership of both Islamic and Coptic religious institutions complied with the general policies of the state despite its unpredictability, especially at Al-Azhar, which announced on more than one occasion that it supported the political regime. The state always needs such support, and this need increases when groups appear that try to deny the legitimacy of the regime based on religious perspectives and resort to violence to combat it (Al-Sayyed 1983)

Conclusion:

State policy in Egypt is characterized by ambiguity in its relationship to religion, so the most significant problem for secularism in Egypt is the fact that politics and religion are continuously merged together, leading to a constant struggle between them. Consequently, secularism is also unstable in Egypt, and one can conclude that secularism is the reason for this problematic relationship between politics and religion and the reason behind their merger, which causes a state of ambiguity that dominates religious and political life in Egypt (Agrama 2010).

The state, while using secularism to represent the Western idea of modernity, it simultaneously attempts to maintain its religious image for fear of losing the significant religious segment of society. Thus, the Egyptian state retained religious institutions and did not dissolve them, but it placed them under the authority and control of the state and considered them as its own institutions. Hence the state exercised sovereignty over all spheres of social, cultural, religious and political life without causing this to become a direct provocation to any of the relevant parties or the public, including both religious and liberal communities as well as influential religious institutions. The Islamists continually express the desire to keep religion away from politics, because, in their opinion, religion contains elements of faith and sentiment that do not correspond to pure rational debate, and the liberals simultaneously believe in the necessity of keeping religion out of politics and decision-making because, in their opinion, religion is not suitable for the spirit and the problematic aspects of the era. This indicates that the secularism of the state in Egypt in its actuality separates religion and politics, yet attempts simultaneously to portray them as integrated, inseparable, and reconcilable.

This unclear and ambiguous relationship between religion and the state in Egypt places the society at the center of the conflict between religious culture, which religious institutions continuously attempt to revive, and the liberal and modernizing culture, that the state attempts to imprint on Egyptian society through all the institutions it controls. This is propelled by the state attempting to remain a part of the global system and subject to the centrality of Western culture.

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