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Secularism in the Modern World

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Guest Speaker

Umair Baig

Good Afternoon everyone and thanks for being here.

My name is Umair and I have recently migrated to Australia. I am a Permanent Resident so I am not going back. I grew up in Pakistan and after living the first 25 years of my life in Pakistan I had later moved to Dubai for professional reasons. I was born and raised in a Muslim family but I can't technically be classified as an ex-Muslim as religion has never made sense to me. There was a time I consider it to be true and that was the same time I considered fairy tales to be true. I grew out of religion and fairy tales at the same time. However, I didn't identify myself as an atheist until my late teens. Until that time I tried to make sense of personal religion in general and Islam in particular but I was unable to convince myself of the idea of a personal god.

My topic today is about life in Pakistan for a person who desires secularism.

A secular Pakistan is one of the biggest oxymoron that I can think of. Pakistan was created in the name of religion because some Muslims of the sub-continent wanted a separate state for themselves.

Just to put the struggle of Pakistani secularists in perspective I will draw a background.

1. According to the preamble of the constitution of Pakistan - sovereignty belongs to Allah.
2. Under Article 2: Islam is to be the state religion.
3. Under Article 41: Only a Muslim can be the Head of State.
4. Under Article 19: It talks about Freedom of speech and explicitly restricts it. It says: 'Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and there shall be freedom of press subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam.' No wonder public property is destroyed in Pakistan when Muhammad's cartoons are drawn in another part of the world.
5. One of the founding fathers of Pakistan the poet and thinker Muhammad Iqbal is regarded as the most influential thinker by the Pakistanis and he has a verse that translates to: '*If religion is separated from state, all we are left with is barbarism*' That's what is taught in the Pakistani school curriculum as the highest form of wisdom.

6. The military control is another problem. Military is the entity that always rules Pakistan even when a democratic government is holding office. The Military is the most powerful entity in Pakistan, both in terms of fire power obviously as well as in economic terms. The Military have their own corporations, banks and industries. They use religion for strategic purposes by supporting and arming the militants as recently accepted by the ex military chief of Pakistan General Pervez Musharaff.
7. Even Pakistani passport mentions the religion of the citizen. It says Islam for me. I tried to put 'other' in the religion section when I applied for my passport but the guy at the office shouted that both of your parents are Muslims so how can you be anything else but a Muslim. Other people around me also turned towards me. I was trapped and I had no other option than to allow Islam as my religion on my passport in order to avoid a premature death.

I think this would give you an idea of a feedback loop that's in process. A country made in the name of religion formed institutions based on religion that allowed the military to gain power and use religion for its own purposes and eventually the people produced through this system are non-secular enough to continue the system as it is.

At this point I must say that the Soviet Afghan war and then post 9/11 adventures of the US has just made Pakistanis more religious and has fostered the idea that somehow the whole world is united against Muslims.

In such a country there is no surprise that there are strict blasphemy laws in place. There have been numerous victims of this law, the most famous case is of the Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer who tried to amend these blasphemy laws and was killed by his own body guard in 2011. He was shot 27 times. It has been four years now but the legal system of Pakistan has failed to punish the murderer Mumtaz Qadri.

Secularists have to live in a constant fear. If the governor of a state is not safe from his own bodyguards then what chance does an ordinary Pakistani have? I have been threatened on at least three occasions by the so called moderates. I didn't have any online presence and I stayed away from the religious gatherings but in my college and at the office everyone knew about me and those educated Pakistanis threatened me. The first guy who threatened my life was moderate enough to drink alcohol and have premarital sex but when it came to criticism of Muhammad he was not able to tolerate it.

It's an uphill task for secularists in Pakistan. The only tool that I can see is the internet. The anonymity that the internet provides can be used to propagate such ideas in a country like Pakistan. And western countries that have the gift of freedom should not be hesitant to criticise Islam and have a dialogue about it because that's the only way to reform this religion. We can't do it in our own countries. Christianity had had its enlightenment. Islam should be next.

The problem is that most Muslims (moderate or extremists) consider Muhammad to be the perfect role model to follow and the Koran to be the immutable word of god. Muhammad had a peaceful start to his career but as he gained power he became a war lord and performed actions that are similar to what ISIS does today. Therefore, until Islam compromises on these two points Islam will not be reformed.

My only hope is the internet. I do think encouraging use of the internet in places like Pakistan will go a long way in making Pakistan secular but I can't see this happening within my lifetime.

Thank you.

Many thanks to all our sponsors, supporters, members and friends, and all of our guest speakers who volunteered their time to make this conference a success.



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