CHAPTER NINE

THE PROPHET PRESENT

Prelude

Once reason had stepped into the realm of religion it was to stir up many storms. Believers were brave indeed to invite such a corpulent guest as reason into their homes. The entry of reason into the realm of religions was a colossal, historic and ancient event, and the aftershocks produced more or less similar effects and consequences throughout the realm. Among Muslims, too, the debate over reason and its relationship to religion created an enormous rift within Islamic theology; viz. the well-known and oft-encountered rift between the Ashʿarites and the Muʿtazilites, the likes of which is to be found in most other religions.

The advent of reason opened the way to “secularism” and “secularisation”. The occurrence of these two phenomena, that is to say, the coming into existence of “secularism” in the mind and subsequently “secularisation” in the external world, had a much broader ambit than the traditional references to the separation of religion and politics or the separation of church and state would have us believe. The independence of a host of human concepts and social institutions from religion lies at the root and heart of secularism/secularisation. If we wanted to summarise secularism in three phrases, they would be as follows:

a. acting on the basis of non-religious motives;
b. explaining the world, life and human beings on the basis of non-religious concepts and constructs;
c. discovering the independence of such constructs as science and politics and so on from religion.

When secularism in this sense came into being, that is to say, when these motives, approaches and explanations surfaced, religion per force lost its hegemony over many aspects of human life and became, at most, a rival among rivals. And it was inevitable that politics and the state would also be affected by this development and declared to be independent from religion.
In fact, it may be more appropriate to speak of “the independence of politics from religion” rather than “the separation of politics from religion”. Nonetheless, it must be recognised that it was not just politics that was found to be essentially independent from religion, but that philosophy, the arts and sciences, and many other social institutions and aspects of human life became likewise independent. Hence, separation should be understood in the sense of independence and people’s secularity seen as arising from their awareness of this sense. In other words, people gradually realised that these constructs had always been essentially independent from religion but that, over the course of history, they had accidentally and incidentally become associated with religion.

At the heart of secularism lies the view that politics, science, art, etc. have an essence and substance that is independent from religion and that religiousness is not a part of their definition. Of course, they are free to don a religious garb and accidentally mingle with religion; for example, when they are recommended by a prophet or a religious leader or included by them in a religious system as part of a greater aggregate, but this does not mean that they have become religious in essence. Concomitance does not always mean necessary connection, nor does the association of two things necessarily entail similitude or identity of essence; it can at most suggest fellowship between them. Many different plants coexist in a garden without dissolving into a unified essence or losing their independence and without it leading to any logical or essential interdependence. This idea can be expressed more simply by saying that religious knowledge is a subjectless knowledge or that the only axis that can bring together and unify the different elements of a religion is the religion’s founder or the religion’s end. There is in fact no common subject. This is why the language of religion is more like a conventional language than a technical-specialist language. The philosophical views in religion pertain to the discipline of philosophy (with its own particular subject, end, principles, problems and definitions). And its legal views pertain to the discipline of law (with its own particular subject, definitions, etc.). And it goes without saying that an aggregate comprised of the discipline of law, the discipline of philosophy and other disciplines cannot have a common subject; it can only be lent a contingent unity through a common motive and end.

The thinkers who have tried to prove some segments of religious teachings rationally and philosophically have in effect injected an independent life into the relevant teachings. When you want to prove