Imagination, meaning and revolution: The sources of the revolutionary power of Islam in Iran
Alinejad, M.

Citation for published version (APA):
Alinejad, M. (1999). Imagination, meaning and revolution: The sources of the revolutionary power of Islam in Iran
Chapter Eight

The Post-Revolution Battle of Ideas

Introduction

This chapter is mainly concerned with the development of politico-religious discourse in post-revolutionary Iran, particularly since the demise of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. The concern though is not so much with the historical process of this development, based on a politico-economic analysis. The intention is rather to draw the map of the recent politico-religious discourses in Iran by demonstrating the meaningful function of the new interpretations of Iranian-Islamic philosophical and mystical traditions in building new political imaginaries, which are significant in transforming the political ideology of the State. The theoretical premise for the arguments in this chapter is that creative interpretations of the texts of tradition, cultural symbols and narratives have a constituting role in shaping the political life of modern societies by creating new imaginaries that motivate collective action for building ever new forms of political community.

Unfortunately, in the existing critical and analytical writings about Iran after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, there has been little effort to seriously study the politico-religious discourses that in the form of new political philosophies are instigating a novel political-institutional reform movement. Most of the external critics of the current Iranian political developments have turned a blind eye to this reform movement. Naturally, they have also ignored the significance of the creative interpretations of religious texts, literary narratives and rituals in motivating and driving this movement. One may even say that there has been a degree of obsession on the part of many critics of the Islamic Revolution with questioning the integrity and legitimacy of the post-revolution political processes, rather than try to understand and appropriately respond to them. The secular forces of opposition in exile, for example, have largely perceived the emergence of the revolutionary Islamic political culture as tantamount to political despotism, violence and economic stagnation. As such, they have often categorically denied any positive potentials for the Islamic political culture.

As I have mentioned earlier, the reactions of the international community to the Islamic revolutionary politics in Iran have generally consisted of the two approaches of the United States and Europe. The former has so far been a revengeful reaction sharing with the opposition-in-exile the dominance of the desire to see the destruction or containment of the Islamic political culture through sanction and threat of violence, while the latter is a more calculated approach that advocates critical dialogue. The rationality of the former approach is being increasingly questioned, and has recently resulted in a change of mood and rhetoric in the language of the American foreign policy toward Iran.

Among the scholars, including those of Iranian background, there have also been two main approaches to the current political developments in Iran. First is the

1 For an in-depth understanding of the concept of imaginary and the political function of the new interpretations of the texts of tradition in modern societies, see particularly Ricoeur, P. From Text to Action, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 1991.

2 The statement of the U.S. Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, in June 1998, and the follow-up support of President Bill Clinton for this statement, in which new changes in Iran are acknowledged and welcomed, may be a turning point in the American foreign policy toward Iran.
approach that has followed the United States foreign policy, and so far has expressed itself in sometimes active and sometimes passive animosity toward the Islamic Revolution. The second is a more moderate or in a sense rational approach, which has expressed willingness to create understanding between Iran and the West through dialogue.

Those who have sought to offer a critique of the pathological tendencies of the Islamic Revolution through dialogue rather than violence have until recently been at pains to find concrete evidence of positive developments in the Iranian politics away from political repression and toward democratic means of handling political power. I believe these critics of the Islamic militancy need to make a much more serious effort to engage themselves in the religious, academic and civil political trends in today’s Iran toward democracy and pluralism; trends that are rooted in the Iranian-Islamic philosophical and mystical traditions. The power of the emerging politico-religious discourses in Iran lay in their capacity to offer an internal critique of the ideology of the Islamic Revolution; an ideology that has dominated politics in Iran since 1979.

In this chapter, I shall offer a few examples of the ideas and discourses that have emerged in post-revolutionary Iran in the context of the Islamic political culture. Readily, I admit that these discourses hold both positive and negative promises. Some of them hold the promise of the pursuit of political and religious pluralism, freedom of expression, civil liberties, the rule of law and economic prosperity. Others are bent on preserving the literal interpretations of the texts of tradition, reflecting an ominous determination to create an absolutist religious polity. They are exemplified in the persons of the theocratic minded Statesmen who, in order to preserve the antiquated traditions in their perceived original form, seek to isolate Iran from the modern world. There are also those that are offering new forms of secular critique of the Islamic traditions. In this chapter, I shall offer examples of most of the new orientations in the post-revolution political discourse in Iran.

In this context, I shall discuss the views of some of the important contributors to the current Iranian religious reform-movement. Among these are the modernist philosophical views of the lay religious thinker Abdol-Karim Soroush and the theologian Muhammad Mujtahid-Shabestari on new interpretations of religious experience, the critical views of the Nehzat-e Aadi-e Iran on the authority of the Islamic government, the politico-religiously conservative views of Ayatollah Ahmad Azari-Qomi, a defender of the absolutist interpretations of religious government, and the innovative views of another theologian Ni’matullah Salih-Najafabadi about the concept of velayat-e faqih (governance of the jurist). I shall also briefly review the enduring legacy of hostility toward the West in the thought of the Iranian religious and secular intellectuals, which has been a feature of radical political expression in recent Iranian history. Finally, I shall offer a discussion of the new critical views offered by some Iranian secular intellectuals of the nature of a religious government in Iran.

Throughout this chapter, I shall argue that notwithstanding the genuine and fabricated fears of the political power of Islam, the emergence of an Islamic political culture in Iran has not destroyed all hopes for democratisation of politics, social reform and economic development. Instead, the rise of socially meaningful politico-philosophic movements against religious absolutism, in itself, may have created new hopes and possibilities for democracy and civil society in Iran.

Once again, the Iranian people have proved that they are willing as a community to find appropriate means for the peaceful reform of their political structures - just as they had done throughout their history under repressive political
conditions. Iranians have demonstrated that they care about political openness, individual and social freedoms, and economic progress - despite the claims that these notions were not on the political agenda in Iran. It appears, however, that Iranians by and large have opted for demanding their natural right to freedom and better economic condition within the context of creative interpretations of the religious culture to which they belong.

Even some secular intellectuals and activists have realised that, in order to find culturally meaningful means for achieving democracy and economic prosperity in Iran, they have to give up their blind prejudice against the Islamic cultural tradition. Although this realisation has come at a high price, it is nonetheless much needed if an effective critique of the current politico-religious repression in Iran is to be formulated. As such, any critique of the prejudicial and rigid interpretations of religion and politics in Iran should acknowledge that Iran inevitably belongs to the vast domain of the Islamic cultural tradition; a tradition that modern Iranians will have to both continue and bring into question.

It is in the recognition of belonging to the Islamic tradition that a new generation of modernist Muslim intellectuals is coming of age. These intellectuals are trying to find appropriate means for overcoming the prejudices and rigidities of their tradition. In fact, a growing number of Iranian Muslim intellectuals are increasing acknowledging that there is an urgent need for an effective internal critique of the Iranian-Islamic traditions. However, it should also be recognised that such a critique, while offering a possibility for questioning the repressive tendencies of the Iranian-Islamic traditions, cannot afford to deny the historical experience in which it has come to existence. The experience of the older generation of secular intellectuals in Iran has made it patently clear how detrimental the disconnection with the Islamic tradition - which constitutes a large part of the collective historical experience of Iranians - could be. This is particularly evident in the case of the pre-revolution leftist and nationalist intellectuals and activists who, in their narrow understanding of the Iranian society, ignored the fact that the Islamic culture, for better or worse, had become a key factor in shaping the identity of Iran as a modern nation.

The revolution of 1979, however, has produced a new generation of Iranian intellectuals, both religious and secular, who have come to realise that the critique of traditions does not have to be necessarily linked with the destruction or reversal of the modern Islamic politics. It is being increasingly recognised that such a critique may be more productive if it could offer creative ways of turning the Islamic political culture into an effective language of dialogue between Iran and modernity; a dialogue that is absolutely essential for reintegration of Iran into the community of nations. For these intellectuals, the Iranian-Islamic philosophical and mystical tradition, as a tradition of critique of religious repression, may offer an alternative model for interpretation of the Islamic religious tradition in favour of the demands for political freedom and social tolerance, and in rejection of repression and violence.

Many of the new politico-religious imaginaries, which have motivated new movements for political and social reform in Iran are based on invoking the Iranian-Islamic philosophical, mystical and literary traditions in order to produce modern political discourses that allow creative interpretations of religion in favour of political and religious pluralism. In this sense, the religious reform movement in Iran does not differ much from the reformation of religion in the West, whereby new

---

1 One may go as far as claiming that both religious and secular discourses in the context of modern Iranian politics are consciously or unconsciously loaded with the basic elements of the Iranian-Islamic philosophical, mystical and literary heritage.
understandings of the Christian religious tradition opened up the horizon for the creation of new forms of economy and political community.\(^1\) It was in this context that religiously based political movements in Europe instigated secularism in the West.\(^2\) Just as in the West, the religious reform movement in Iran has inevitably created a strong impact on the political and economic developments, and presented both progressive and regressive tendencies. Consequently, any responsible reaction to this movement has to take account of the intricacies and complexities of the situation.

**The Emergence of the New Out of the Old**

The emergence of new politico-religious discourses in Iran has already inspired a trend toward increased popular demands for social, legal, political and economic reforms. The May 1997 democratic presidential elections, which brought the moderate middle-ranking cleric Muhammad Khatami to presidency, was a watershed marking the proliferation of demands for political and social reforms. Since then, there have been a number of moves made by the followers of Khatami in government toward reform in domestic and foreign policy arenas. The moves to relax censorship on print publications and the media, the initiation of certain bureaucratic reforms, the holding of the Islamic Conference in Tehran in December 1997 with its peace-promoting and anti-terrorist agenda, and the conciliatory message of President Khatami to the American people in January 1998, are but few examples of political reform in post-Khomeini Iran. Yet, this process is a fledgling one and will naturally take a long and painful course before it can reach any meaningful end in the sense of creating a stable democracy and prosperous economy. It may even be that it would never reach any meaningful end if it were to be neglected or opposed by Iranian intellectuals and the international community at large.

The unexpected appearance of these developments to many of the so-called Iran experts once again indicates that these experts are still out of touch with the Iranian situation, just the same as they were at the time of the Islamic Revolution about twenty years ago. The same goes for the authors of the United States foreign policy, who have until recently proved almost completely oblivious to these developments by still insisting on isolating and containing Iran.

The current process of reform in Iran may be conceived as a state of mature reaction of the Iranian people to the events that began to change their lives during the revolutionary upheavals of the last two decades. After a long period of painful and confused interaction with the events, they now seem to have found a clearer vision of Iran of the future, which they wish to build. This vision is being emphatically expressed as one of peace, security and prosperity under the guidance of a dignified national identity animated by a powerful cultural tradition. Signs of this new imaginary of the future are clearly visible in the burgeoning public demands for freedom of expression, civil liberties, rights of women, the rule of law and economic reforms within the framework of collective national and cultural aspirations. These demands have been manifested in wider political participation, increased economic,

\(^1\) In pointing to the fundamental role of new religious understandings of the world in inspiring rationalism and secularism in the West, I am inspired by the work of Max Weber. In *Protestantism, the Spirit of Capitalism*, and other works, Weber argued that the source of the process of "démystification of the sacred", which played a vital role in the critique of religious dogma and the development of modern categories of knowledge and power, was located in religion itself.

\(^2\) However, one should also acknowledge the legacy of violence bequeathed by religious sectarianism in the Christian tradition, which was also a product of reformation, and has continued albeit in a limited scope (notably in Northern Ireland).
social and cultural activities, proliferation of new publications, and advances in science and technology. But the popular desire for a better future has constantly been repressed by political intolerance, cultural parochialism and economic setbacks.

The signs of change, as noted earlier, have been evident even at the government level. The wider participation of the public in the parliamentary and presidential elections has already created the possibility for the entry of more moderate politicians into the ranks of decision-makers. At the domestic level, a number of new politicians have begun to address the nation’s political, social and economic issues from the standpoint of representatives of the people who must be at their service. This is in sharp contrast to the role that the theocratic-minded jurists have tried so hard to play; i.e. the role of the agents of the Divine who are entitled to exercise absolute power over the people. And at the international level, the language of diplomacy has begun to challenge the clichés of Islamic radicalism and militancy that has so far been the dominant factor in shaping the posture of Iranian foreign policy. For instance, the peaceful, calm and smiling faces of the new generation of Iranian officials during the recent Islamic Conference in Tehran stood in sharp contrast with the nervous, militant and uncompromising gestures of their predecessors.

In a sense, the current resurgence of popular demand for political moderation and economic reform, which is expressed in the context of the political resurgence of Islam in Iran, is similar to the reaction of Iranians to the Arab armies that initially brought Islam to Iran around a millennia and a half ago. After an initial period of confusion, pain and hostility, Iranians found a new imaginary of the future as an Islamic political community. At that time, as they matured in dealing with their new position in the world, they questioned the dominant Arab political structure of the caliphate by projecting a political utopia to be instituted in the future. They also revised the dominant Arab religious law, i.e. the Sumi fiqh, by adopting the Shi'i fiqh. And finally, they produced new paradigms of religious experience like irfan (Iranian-Islamic mysticism) by synthesising the Islamic philosophy and pre-Islamic traditions of thought.

By preserving a strong element of nostalgia in their memory of the unfulfilled political aspirations of the Shi'i Imams, Shi'i Iranians kept the hope for the restoration of a truly legitimate political authority alive. They did this by taking the imaginary of the disappearance and the future re-emergence of the Mahdi (the twelfth Shi'i Imam) from the Arab Shi'is, and by further developing it initially into the level of a political philosophy, and finally into an ideology of revolution. The belief in the divine mission of the Mahdi to institute the Government of God and the utopia of absolute justice became the cornerstone of the historical experience of the Shi'i Iranians as a Muslim nation in creating a peculiar concept of State and a peculiar national identity. These concepts of State and nation were undoubtedly the products of the multi-layered interaction of Iranian culture with other Islamic cultures.

Iranians thus embraced the highly spiritual and humanistic essence of Islam: its transcendental, logical and egalitarian message. During several centuries of the reign of the Arab Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates and the subsequent Turkic sultanates, Iranians produced great philosophers, scientists, mathematicians, mystics, poets, and even politicians at the level of grand veziers, who represented the productive inter-mix of the Iranian, Arab and Turkic cultures.

1 Recent moves by religious and political conservatives in cracking down on new political and social reforms and the sharp fall in oil prices have inflicted a severe blow on the popular hopes for democracy and economic prosperity in Iran.
Some like Abu Nasr Farabi, Ibn-e Sina (Avicenna), Abu Reyhan Biruni, Khadjie Nasir-ad-Din Tusi and Khadjie Nezam-al-Mulk, although they were of Iranian descent, became leading figures of the larger Islamic cultural and political continuum. They influenced the course of events by entering the service of the official social, political and scientific institutions as Muslim believers rather than Iranians. In this sense, they were the products of a successful inter-cultural interaction between Iran and other Islamic societies. Their integration in the Islamic culture was so close that their Iranian origin became virtually immaterial. The fact that they chose to write mainly in Arabic and make their contributions to philosophy, science and politics under the rule of the Arab and Turk rulers was reason enough for their appropriation by Arabs or Turks as part of their own cultural heritage. These great men thus, not only made momentous contributions to the social, political, economic and intellectual development of Islam and Iran, but also enriched the philosophical, scientific and literary traditions of humanity.

Others, such as Abol-Qassem Ferdowsi, Omar Khayyam, Khadjie Shams-ad-Din Hafiz and Jalal-ad-Din Mowlavi chose to write mainly in Persian and keep a distance with the official institutions. Nevertheless, they were engaged in a critical dialogue with the existing order in the language of mysticism, which amounted to a kind of religious dissidence and at times political resistance. The fact that they wrote mainly in Persian did not detract from their novel contributions to the process of cultural, political and social development of other Islamic societies. In fact, Mowlavi (also known as Rumi) came to be claimed as much by Iranians as by Turks.

On the question of the religious laws, Iranians followed certain innovations, which not only sought to reform the sub-principles of the religion (foru-ad-din), but also the principles of religion (usul-ad-din). The influence of the Mu'tazelite religious philosophy on the Shi'i theology entailed the incorporation of two additional principles into the Islamic faith, which had not been recognised by the Sunni theology and jurisprudence. These two principles were adl (the principle of justice of God), and imamat (the principle of the legitimacy of the leadership of the descendants of the House of the Prophet).

The Mu'tazelite rationalist philosophy was, in turn, influenced by the Aristotelian concept of causality, which allowed for the role of human agency as the determinant of human behaviour. This philosophical understanding of religion ran against the Asha'rite atomistic philosophy, which influenced the Sunni world, advocating the concept of God's intervention in every natural interaction. For the Asha'rite, the world was annihilated and recreated at every moment; the cause of all events was the Creator and not a finite, created agent. The influence of the Mu'tazelite philosophy on the Shi'i world was particularly owed to the earlier philosophy of Ibn-e Sina (Avicenna). However, the scholastic theology (kalam), modelled after the Sunni schools continued to persist, not only in the Shi'i theology, but also in the Persian illuminationist (ishraqi) and mystical (irfani) tradition, and served as a source of new imaginary creations in various intellectual fields. Even the later philosophy of Ibn-e Sina took an illuminationist bent.

No where was this creative adaptation of the originally Sunni and Arab worldview more conspicuous than in the case of the mystical appropriation of the Asha'rite philosophy. The influence of the Asha'rite concept of nothingness of all beings before the creator on the mystical tradition in Iran was made possible particularly through the influence of Al-Ghazzali. He sought not only to refute a strictly rationalistic-philosophical understanding of religion, but also to establish a

---

1 Nasr, S. H. Science and Civilisation in Islam, Barnes & Noble Inc. USA, p.35
harmony between the exoteric and esoteric elements of Islam. His teachings also exhibited similarities with the Greek tradition, but not with Aristotle. Rather, as Seyyed Hussein Nasr has noted, his affinity was with the “Hermetic-Pythagorean” tradition.

In his *Ehya-ul-Oloum* (the Revival of Religious Sciences), Ghazzali pursued a metaphysical rather than a rationalist philosophical approach to the religious sciences; and in his *Deliverance from Error*, he exemplified the reaction of the theologians and the mystics to the approach of the rationalist philosophy to the sciences of nature. Against the “syllogistic-rationalistic” interpretations influenced by Aristotelian philosophy, he along with the Sufis took a symbolic approach to the interpretation of the natural phenomena. The survival and continued development of “illuminationism” (*ishraq*) and mysticism (*irfan*) in Iran, as against the decline of the “Peripatetic” (*Masha’i*) philosophy, owes a lot to the Sunni Ghazzali and his Shi’i followers, such as Mulla Sadra, Mulla Hadi Sabzevari and Mulla Mohsen-e Feiz.

In this context, the Iranian culture evolved to become a mixture of the various traditions that constituted Iran as an Islamic society. In this course, the interaction of Iranians with those who were initially regarded as foreign occupiers gave rise to new interpretations of the ideals of the Islamic faith in a critical but constructive engagement with the social and political institutions, which produced novel intellectual and artistic pursuits.

### A New Momentum in the Religious Reform Movement

The new religious reform movement in Iran in fact began before the Islamic Revolution in the thought of modernist Muslim intellectuals like Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Ali Shari’ati, Mehdi Bazargan, Morteza Motahhari and Ruhollah Khomeini who contributed significantly to the formation of the ideology of the Islamic Revolution during the 1960s and 1970s, and the eventual downfall of the Pahlavi monarchy in 1979. As I have previously discussed, these Muslim intellectuals inspired a political movement, which offered a powerful critique of the Pahlavi monarchy, and which eroded the legitimacy of that regime in the eye of the public. The political power of the Islamic ideology as developed by these intellectuals laid in the successful adaptation of the Shi’i political philosophy to inspire a modern religious nationalism. This ideology was shaped on the basis of new interpretations of sacred texts, rituals and other Islamic symbolic structures offering a new concept of nation based on the reinterpretation of the traditional concept of Islamic community (*ummat*). *Ummat* came thus to be perceived as a community of believers where the utopia of Islamic justice would be materialised under the legitimate political authority of the Shi’i faith.

In the Islamic ideology, the political and social practice of Prophet Muhammad and the twelve Shi’i Imams and their genuine followers became the model for a new political authority, which would rescue Islam from the distorted interpretations that had derailed it from its true path through violence and deception. It would restore the true message of the faith by fulfilling the aspirations of Imam Ali and Imam Hussein and other Shi’i Imams, which had remained unfulfilled since the illegitimate usurpation of political power by the *Umayyad* caliphate after the demise of the Prophet in the seventh century AD.

The Islamic ideology was essentially an ideology of revolution, a revolution that would be modelled after the uprising of Imam Hussein against the illegitimate...
rule of the *Umayyad* Caliph, Yazid, in the seventh century. It would amount to a religious, social and political renaissance, which would prepare the ground for the promised revolution of the *Mahdi* and the institution of the government of absolute justice.

It was in this utopian context that the Islamic ideologues of the 1960s and 1970s encouraged a return to the Islamic moral and cultural values in the face of what they perceived as “the alienating influences of the Western culture”. They also revived the Islamic concepts of *velayat* (political authority), *jihad* (holy war) and *shahadat* (martyrdom) in order to restore belief in the political and military power of Islam *vis-à-vis* the political and military superiority of the Christian West. In the same context, the Islamic rituals such as *namaz-e jama’at* (the congressional prayer) and *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca) were reinterpreted as forums for the political solidarity of the Muslims of the world. And the *Shi’i* rituals, such as the ritual of commemoration of the bloody massacre of Imam Hussein and his family and followers at the hand of Yazid, were turned into an arena for preservation of the *Shi’i* aspirations of political power.

As I have noted previously, the religious reform movement of the 1960s and 1970s was originated in an essentially academic environment of religious and philosophical higher learning. It was mostly pursued in the universities, religious seminaries and other centres of higher learning. But naturally, it spilled into the public arena through political propaganda, reports and debates in the press, and various religious and professional associations and print publications: magazines, journals and books.

Al-e Ahmad, a former Marxist intellectual who later became a fervent supporter of the political authority of religion in Iran, popularised the concept of *Ghabzadegi* (Westoxication) in his writings; a concept that inspired a serious intellectual trend advocating a new religious identity for Iranians *vis-à-vis* the modern Western secular identity. Shari’ati, a social scientist, orator and activist in his own right, was deeply influenced by Al-e Ahmad. Nonetheless, he developed the revolutionary understanding of *Shi’i* Islam much further by attracting a generation of young educated Muslims to the idea of an “Islamic renaissance” and the political and social virtues of “return to self”. Shari’ati though was pessimistic about the political role of the *Shi’i* ulama (clergy) due to the traditionalist and conservative views of the senior *Shi’i* theologians. The Muslim liberal Bazagan led the group called *Nehzat-e Azadi-e Iran* (the Liberation Movement of Iran) as a platform for the Muslim professionals who advocated a moderate role of religion in politics that would limit the political power of the king to that of a constitutional monarch. Motahhari was a clerical Islamic ideologue, a follower of Ayatollah Khomeini, who used Islamic philosophy to formulate a rationale for the political rule of the *Shi’i* jurists. And Khomeini, himself a high-ranking *Shi’i* jurist, politicised the concept of *velayat-e faqih* (governance of the jurist) and popularised the notion of *shahadat*.

With the victory of the revolution, the religious reform movement of the 1960s and 1970s did not come to a conclusion, but took a new momentum and has continued vigorously ever since. The movement that the Muslim ideologues of the 1960s and 1970s initiated has in fact continued to operate with more force after the revolution. It is marked by vastly divergent views ranging from radical to liberal to conservative politico-religious views. The writings, lectures, speeches and interviews of those involved in this movement are mostly published in journals printed domestically. It is

---

1 The journal *Kiyan* is a main forum for the publication of debates, interviews and writings of religious, philosophical, social and political nature.
important to note that this movement is not yet sufficiently self-conscious and
organised to express a coherent political agenda. Many of those contributing to this
new politico-religious movement are working as individual thinkers; and more often
than not, they are in bitter academic and political disputes with each other.
Nonetheless, there are also a few loosely organised groups active in this reform
movement. Yet, these politico-religious associations and groups are also at times
vehemently opposed to each other. This is when many of these groups share in their
exclusion from political power by the more conservative and yet hard-line clerics who
wish to institutionalise their own absolute power.

There has been, for example, a serious conflict between the Liberal views of the
*Nehzat-e Azadi-e Iran* and those of the Muslim intellectuals with radical economic
views against capitalist market economy and in favour of the lower social classes.
Bazargan initially occupied the office of Prime Minister in the provisional
revolutionary government. But later during the hostage taking drama in 1979-80, his
radical opponents deposed him in the strong belief that his liberal policies were in the
interest of the Western enemies of the Islamic Revolution. Other liberally inclined
politico-religious groups also won ministerial positions before the radicals drove them
away from the government.

However, the radical Islamic activists like the *Mojahedin-e Enghelab-e Eslami*
(the Warriors of the Islamic Republic) and the so-called Students of the Imam’s Line
(*Daneshjuyan-e Khatt-e Emam*), who expected to ascend to power in their opposition
to the liberals, themselves fell victim to the political intrigue of the theocratic-minded
clerics. Many of the members of these groupings, who even served as ministers and
members of parliament for a while, were also driven away from power by the
theocrats. The internal struggle within the ranks of the clergy was no less intense. The
ruling clergy were divided into two main politico-religious associations: the
politically and religiously conservative *Jame-e Ruhaniyyat-e Mobarez* (the Society of
Militant Clerics) and the more radical *Anjoman-e Ruhaniyyun-e Mobarez* (the
Association of Militant Clerics).

As for the individuals who have contributed to the reform movement, both in
the ranks of the clergy and non-clerical religious intellectuals, disparity and dispute is
also a strong feature. Clerics, such as Hussein-Ali Montazeri, Ni’matullah Salihî
Najafabadi, Muhammad-Javad Hojjati-Kermani, and Muhammad Mujtahid-
Shabestari, and lay religious thinkers, such as Abdol-Karim Soroush, have been
variously contributing to intellectual debates on religious reformation since more than
a decade ago while continuing their internal divisions that keeps them apart. Their
contributions are made mainly through giving lectures and writing articles in the press
and publishing books, with constant flirtations with politics.

What is common between those who are contributing to the new religious
reform movement is that they tend to hold alternative views of religion and politics
not recognised by the official politico-religious establishment. Interestingly though,
alternative views of Islamic politics has not remained totally external to the
government. In fact, as I noted earlier, some of those within the official politico-
religious establishment have begun contributing to this movement. Naturally though,

---

1. With the attack of the so called Students of the Imam’s Line on the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in the late 1979, the
   provisional government was accused of being too liberal and leaning toward the West, and its such was deposed.
   Bazargan himself suffered a strong measure of political humiliation until his death in 1995.
2. JAMA was one of these groups whose leader Dr. Sami ascended to a ministerial position. After dismissal from
   his position by the radicals in the early 1980s, he became the victim of a brutal murder at his home. Many believed
   this was a political assassination by the hard-liners within the government. But the mystery of his murder was
   never solved.
those outside the establishment have found it much more difficult to operate politically. Their criticisms of the absolutist theocratic versions of Islam have come under severe pressure by the hard-line jurists in power. The external critics of the government have been invariably accused of diverting from the true path of the faith. A main area of contention is the question of the supreme politico-religious leadership or the velayat-e faqih.

More recently, the religious reform movement has taken a new political momentum appearing much more vigorous than before, both at intellectual and political levels, particularly as it is being extended to the inner government circles. As such, it has been pursued by a group of clerics and lay religious thinkers, who wish to present a new image of Islam and Iran not only to the people of Iran, but also to the world at large. In light of this new image, Islam is presented as a religion of peace and moderation, a religion fond of logic, science and philosophy, and a religion with a rich tradition of dialogue with subscribers to other thoughts or beliefs. This group is also concerned with presenting an image of Iran as a civilised nation in pursuit of cultural, scientific and technological excellence, in favour of human rights, political freedoms, civil liberties and free trade, and totally opposed to violence at the domestic and international level. The most conspicuous political figure coming out of this group of Islamic modernists is Ayatollah Khatami, who rose to presidency in a landslide victory in May 1997. Other personalities who have figured high in the ranks of Khatami supporters are the Mayor of Tehran Gholam-Hussein Karbaschi, and the deposed Interior Minister Abdollah Nuri who have been vocal critics of politico-religious conservatism, and have had to pay a price for it too.¹

Naturally, the reform movement within the government is in an underdog position with respect to the official politico-religious establishment, facing strong resistance by the more politically and religiously conservative ulama. In fact, one may suggest that the reform movement within the government needs, to a large extent, to resort to the new religious-philosophical ideas outside the government circles in order to create a political platform in harmony with such political utopias as civil society and political pluralism, which it advocates.

A Hermeneutic Philosophical Movement

Here, I shall try to cover at least part of the major political trends that in active engagement with the current religious, social, political and economic developments in Iran are producing new imaginaries of the future. These political discourses are flourishing, as I have already noted, in the context of the creation of new political utopias built upon new interpretations of the traditional religious and literary texts. Nevertheless, they struggle to address themselves to modern socio-economic and socio-political issues that concern the ordinary people in the language of new social and political philosophies. One significant political trend of this kind has come about or, more accurately speaking, has taken a new momentum as a consequence of the religious-philosophical views of the lay religious thinkers like Soroush, the clerics

¹ In April 1998, Karbaschi, a lay religious intellectual, was accused of embezzling public funds by the conservative jurists. He was arrested briefly, but was released under popular pressure. In June, he was put on trial and July he was sentenced to five years imprisonment. Nuri, a middle ranking reform-minded cleric, was impeached and forced out of office in June 1998 by the Majlis (Parliament), which is dominated by the conservatives. He was accused of creating political instability by allowing the critics of the government to become too vocal. It is widely believed that these accusations are politically motivated and used as a pretext by the supporters of absolutist theocracy to weaken liberal and moderate tendencies within the government.
like Mujtahid-Shabestari and Salihi-Najafabadi, and the political organisations such as Nehzat-e Azadi-e Iran.

These views, in fact, belong to a larger philosophical movement, which, in its form and content, may be described broadly as hermeneutic. I consider this philosophical movement as a hermeneutic movement because it is mainly concerned with various interpretations of the Islamic and particularly Shi'i texts, as well as classical literary texts of Iranian-Islamic mysticism. From a political perspective, these new interpretations may be considered in opposition to the official interpretations of the sacred texts held by the conservative Shi'i jurists in power. These latter types of interpretation are also varied, but their common characteristic is that they provide for the sustenance of an ideological system that legitimises the absolute dominance of the Shi'i jurists in the polity. The views of Ayatollah Azari-Qomi are an example of these interpretations.

There are two main types of texts that are invoked for building new political philosophies: the purely sacred texts, and the literary mystical texts. Significant examples of the sacred texts, as I have noted before, are the Qur'an, Nahj-ul-Balaqa, and the collections of hadith (oral reports) and prayers. The significance of the Qur'an as the most original sacred source of reference for running the other-worldly and this-worldly affairs of the Muslim believers is well established. The Qur'an, first and foremost, is a Divine Revelation whose source is beyond the human world. The belief is that the Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad in the form of oral recitation by angel Gabriel. Although oral recitation remained important as a mode of transmission of the Qur'an, the main mode of transmission of the Word of God to the following generations of Muslim believers was writing. The Qur'an was thus handed down as a book, and is referred to as the Book (Ketab). However, it is believed to be more than just a book. It is an enigmatic text that speaks in a highly sophisticated poetic language, but at the same time it is the container of the Shari'at (the law of Islam), which is believed to be the foundation of a practical spiritual life at both individual and social levels. The philosophers and the mystics believed the Qur'an to be also the container of the Tariqat (Path to Redemption) and the Haqiqat (Truth/God).

The Qur'an is believed to contain an eternal message that is beyond the words that are scribed in it. Hence, it is believed to have an esoteric (bateni) meaning on top of its exoteric (zaheri) meaning. It is this combination of exoteric and esoteric sides that, in the belief of the Muslims, makes the Qur'an a universal and eternal message for the salvation of mankind. And it is in this context that the Qur'anic text has been subject to interpretation and re-interpretation throughout its history. The principle mode of interpretation of the Qur'an has been traditionally determined by the practice of the experts in religious sciences, or the ulama, mainly in the form of tafsir (exegesis) and ta'wil (interpretation). In interpreting the Qur'an, the Shi'i ulama have strove to remain loyal to the oral traditions, or hadith, that are meticulously authenticated by being traced back to the Prophet and the twelve Shi'i Imams, who are believed to be infallible. This adherence to the oral tradition, as some scholars have noted, indicates an implicit, age-old suspicion among the ulama about the capacity of the written text to transmit to the non-expert ordinary believers the true message of the Qur'an. Nonetheless, writing has inevitably become the main mode of the transmission of the interpretations of the Qur'an, and as such has created the possibility of further interpretations of the holy book.

An essential part of the Qur'an is the Prophetic stories, which share a lot with the Biblical tradition, and at the same time contain slight but important variations.
These religious narratives are tightly knit with the fabric of the Muslim societies, and have played a constitutive role in shaping social and individual consciousness in these societies. The poetic language of these narratives has inspired the corpus of literary writing in the Muslim world. In Iran, it has been the main source of inspiration for the mystical poetry of the grand mystics such as Hafiz and Mowlavi, and has also influenced the work of modern Iranian poets and novelists.

In the Western literary tradition too, it was the usage of the mystical understanding of the Qur’anic concepts, such as the mi’raj (journey to heaven), in Arabic and Persian poetic texts that influenced the great Western poets like Dante. Dante’s fear of cultural domination of Christian Spain by Islamic civilisation, as Michael Fischer notes in his introduction to Debating Muslims (1990), made him borrow heavily from the mi’raj tradition in order to create in his Divine Comedy a powerful work of poetry, which would rival the Qur’anic poetic tradition. As such, the Islamic civilisation has been appropriately recognised as “high culture” for medieval Europe from eleventh to fifteenth centuries.

As the Iranian philosopher Seyyed Hussein Nasr has noted in his Science and Civilisation in Islam (1968), the Islamic medieval civilisation, particularly philosophy, mystical poetry and mathematics, played a significant part in shaping the intellectual horizon of the modern West. After all, Aristotelian rationalist philosophy became popular in the West initially via philosophers such as Ibn-e Rushd (Averros) and Ibn-e Sina (Avicenna), a philosophy which laid the foundation of the critique of religious dogma in the European Renaissance.

The understanding of the Qur’an as a text that contains multiple layers of meaning and thus capable of being variously interpreted has been politically significant in modern Iran considering the usage of the poetics of the Qur’an in formulating the ideology of the Islamic Revolution. Such a practice, which had been prevalent in the early stages of the rise of Islam in Iran, has become ever more prevalent in the modern time. One reason for this prevalence, as Fischer has suggested, is that the Qur’an as a poetic text “can speak to all the mysteries of contemporary (post-modern) literary criticism”, and that the Islamic culture can be “an intellectual interlocutor in the modern world scene, as it was in the days when it gave form to the nascent modern Western civilisation.”

The second most important Shi’i sacred text is the Nahj-ul-Balaqa, a collection of the sermons, edicts and decrees of the first Shi’i Imam Ali. The significance of these sermons is that they are capable of being interpreted as the words of Ali, the legend. Imam Ali as a legend is in itself an important social signification for the Shi’i Iranians far beyond Ali as a mere mortal man. Ali is universally recognised by the Shi’i believers to be the epitome of honour, heroism, honesty, humility and justice. He was the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law; and he is believed by the Shi’is to be the first convert to Islam. He was the first of the twelve Immaculate Imams (A’emme Ma’sumin), and the fourth of the universally recognised Grand Caliphs of Islam (Kholafay-e Rashedin), who ruled over the Muslim Empire immediately after the departure of the Prophet Muhammad from this world.

Ali is so highly revered by the Shi’is that he is considered to be the Qur’an-e nateq (the speaking Qur’an). The degree of reverence and respect for Ali among Iranian Shi’is is comparable only to that conferred upon the Prophet Muhammad himself. Some Iranian Sufi orders have revered Ali even beyond the Prophet. The theologians have seen Ali as the highest authority in religious knowledge. By the

---

2 Sunnis believe that Abu-Bakr was the first convert to Islam.
Sufis, he is viewed as the source of illumination and heavenly love. By the youth, he is considered as a symbol of courage and bravery; and by the ordinary people as a figure even larger than the figure of the mythical national hero Rostam, the epic character of Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* (the book of kings).

As the fourth Caliph, Ali delivered sermons to the prayer gatherings in the mosques, and issued decrees to the local governors. The most important decrees in the *Nahj-ul-Balaqa* are those issued to Malek Ashtar, the Governor of Egypt, appointed by Ali himself. The *Shi'i* believers are aware that the *Nahj-ul-Balaqa* is not like the *Qur'an* of the status of a divine revelation; nonetheless, they revere *Nahj-ul-Balaqa* on an equal footing with the *Qur'an*. The challenge by Mo'aviyya (the founder of *Umayyad* dynasty), who is believed by the *Shi'i* to have betrayed Ali out of office, has made *Nahj-ul-Balaqa* a source alongside the *Qur'an* for the moral guidance of the *Shi'i* believers. Despite the respect of the *Sunni* Muslims for Mo'aviyya, the *Shi'is* believe that his challenge had subverted the true path of Islam. This may be why the *Shi'i* jurists have put *Nahj-ul-Balaqa* alongside the *Qur'an* a source of the *Shi'i* fiqh (jurisprudence), which has established an alternative legal system to the *Sunni* schools of law, namely Hanafi, Shafe'i and Hanbali. It is also used alongside the *Qur'an* as an original source of the religious science of exegesis.

The belief in the diversion of the true path of Islam gave rise to the belief of the authority of Imam Ali’s descendants as the true leaders of the Muslim community, who would restore this community to its rightful path to Allah. The legends of Imam Hussein and Imam Mahdi were created in the context of the belief in the rightful politico-religious authority of the *Ahl-ul-Beyt* (the House of the Prophet), including Ali and his eleven descendants. Hussein (Ali’s second son and the third *Shi'i* Imam) is believed to have embraced martyrdom in his insurrection against the *Umayyad* Caliphate and thus “cultivated Islam with his blood”. The twelfth Imam, Mahdi, is believed to have disappeared in order to return in the future to institute the true government of God, which is imagined to be the epitome of a just and legitimate political authority. An important part of the *Shi'i* religious texts are based on the retelling and reinterpretation of the narratives of Ashura and Karbala (the time and location of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein) and the narrative of the disappearance and reappearance of the twelfth Imam, Mahdi, the Saviour. These narratives are socially and culturally transmitted via story-telling, religious processions, passion plays, written texts and other forms of symbolic representation.

Other *Shi'i* canonical texts include the texts containing the *hadith* (oral traditions of the Prophet and the Imams). There is evidence that the *hadith* were originated in the lifetime of the Prophet from the recognition of the need for recording the discourse and practice of the Prophet as a source of law. This tradition continued after the Prophet, and was intensely followed by the *Shi'i* religious scholars, who have

---

1. Ferdowsi, a *Shi'i* believer, wrote his *Shahnameh* over a thirty year period in the ninth century AD during the reign of the *Sunni* and Turk Sultan Mahmoud Ghaznavi. A large part of this work of epic is a lyrical narrative of the conflicts of the mythical Persian kings with the mythical enemies of Iran, Tazian and Turanian (the allegorical representations of the *Sunni* Arab caliphate and Turkic sultanates that ruled Iran for several centuries). In this context, Ferdowsi created the legendary hero, Rostam, the epitome of bravery, physical agility and collective pride. Throughout *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi criticised the unjust kings and rulers both Iranian and non-Iranian; but he particularly championed the collective identity of Iranians against the Arab and Turk occupiers. In this, he remained unequivocally devoted to the Household of the Prophet Muhammad, and particularly Imam Ali, presenting Iranian collective identity in harmony with the *Shi'i* Islam.

2. Ashura is the tenth day of the month of Muharram. This day marks in the *Shi'i* calendar the day around 1400 years ago when the heroic battle of Imam Hussein and his handful of followers against the army of the Caliph Yazid occurred in Karbala (a city in Iraq). In this battle, it is believed, Hussein and his followers embraced death in order to perpetuate the struggle against those who distorted the spirit of the Islamic faith and turned the faith into an instrument of legitimation of their own illegitimate authority.
recorded the traditions of the twelve *ma'sum* (purely innocent or infallible) Imams. One of the main tasks of the Shi'i theologians has been to collect the authentic *hadith* and to identify the *hadith* that are believed to be susceptible to misquotation and misinterpretation. The *hadith* considered as authentic are invoked not only as a model for legal emulation, but also as a social and political model.

The classical literature of mysticism is yet another genre of religious texts, which are not considered to be strictly sacred or canonical, but are, nonetheless, object of spiritual and intellectual reference. These texts include but are not limited to the *Ruba'iyyat* (the collection of poetry) of Omar Khayyam, the *Manteq-ut-Tayr* (Conference of the Birds) of Sheikh Farid-ad-Din Attar Nishabouri, the *Ressaleyeh Aql-e Sorkh* (Treatise on the Red Intellect) of Sheikh Shahab-ad-Din Sohrevardi, the *Golestan* and *Bous*tan of Sheikh Mosleh-ad-Din Sa'adi, the *Divan* (collection of poetry) of Khadje Shams-ad-Din Hafiz, and the *Ghazaliyyat* (collection of lyrics) and the *Masnavi* (collection of poetic stories) of Jalal-ad-Din Mowlavi. These texts are deeply rooted in the Islamic religious tradition. However, they are distinct from purely religious texts in their association with earthly matters alongside transcendental subjects. The authors of these texts have not been loath to engage in the language of human desire while pointing to the human capacity to transcend enslavement by desires. These texts speak of sensual love and intoxication of wine in a language that offers possibilities of transition from the sensual pleasure of belonging to this world to the spiritual ecstasy of a transcendental world. Their poetic language also offers the possibility for the critique of the rigid piety preached and enforced by the despotic political and religious officialdom.

The literary-mystical tradition is also distinct in its link with the Iranian religious, philosophical and linguistic traditions, which are not reflected in the Arab-originated religious texts. The poetic nature of these texts and their transcendental character give them the capacity to be variously interpreted. In fact, in the present philosophical-hermeneutic movement in Iran, there is at least as much, if not more, reliance on these literary texts as there is on purely religious texts. Interestingly enough, these texts are themselves often concerned with providing esoteric interpretations of the purely religious texts.

The importance of the Persian literary and mystical texts comes not from a mere fascination of Iranians with figures such as Hafiz, Sa'adi and Mowlavi (although there is a certain degree of this kind of fascination), but from their capacity to be reinterpreted by modern readers in ways relevant to the present. In fact, the part that the personality of the author plays in the sensitivity of Iranians to the traditional mystical texts comes mainly from the ability of these texts to reflect the traditions that are coveted in the historical consciousness of Iranians. These texts act for Iranians as mirrors in which they can see an earthly and yet ideal image of themselves. They reflect the desirable traditions embedded in the Iranian psyche: spiritual traditions of asceticism, contemplation, illumination and transcendence, as well as earthly traditions of freedom, honesty, love, and pleasure. The imaginaries that these texts provoke do not belong to the past, although they are from the past. These imaginaries, as though they are timeless, act as attractive and yet illusive models for the future.

Iranians covet the traditions that these texts reflect because they see them as part of the glory that they could have, but of which were deprived. There is a deep sense of resentment in the Iranian popular culture towards the political regimes of the past for their failure to uphold and practice these traditions at political and social levels. In fact, people find support for such beliefs in the mystical poetics of the likes of Hafiz and Mowlavi due to the capacity of their texts to be seen as social.
commentaries, commentaries that not only criticise the passivity of the official religious establishment toward political power, but also expose the hypocrisy of both religious and political authorities in preaching one way and practising another.

It is a sense of self-realisation on the model of this ideal culture that makes these texts so popular among modern Iranians. Their significance is not only in their invocation by the public for leisure (although they are invoked for this purpose), but more importantly, in their role in providing utopian models for alternative social and power relations. It is in this latter sense that they have been incessantly invoked as models for spiritual transcendence, moral and educational guidance and aesthetic excellence; and it is as such that they are now being used to produce new social utopias and cultural fantasies via creative political, social and artistic discourses.

The Theory of Contraction and Expansion of Religious Laws

Attempts at understanding the current trends of political philosophy in Iran should be made in light of two premises: first that these trends are deeply religious and expressed from the viewpoint of the believers. And second that they are part of a larger attempt to define how religion is understood and how this understanding is evolved. To provide a more detailed picture of the post-revolution and particularly the post-Khomeini politico-philosophic discourses in Iran, I first turn to the works of Abdol-Karim Soroush as a representative of reform-minded lay religious thinkers. An in-depth understanding of Soroush’s religious views seems necessary due to the political attention that they have received both inside and outside Iran. His views have already influenced the Islamic intellectual movement, which is openly challenging the absolutist interpretations of the Islamic political philosophy by the ruling Shi’i jurists.

Soroush’s critique of the absolutist interpretations of the Islamic political philosophy has been taken seriously not only by his small circle of followers but, more importantly by both the ideologues and the mobs that try to enforce theocratic interpretations of Islamic politics. It is well recognised that at the present stage of the development of the Islamic Revolution, the likes of Soroush are politically more dangerous for the supporters of theocracy than the militant groups or individuals opposing the regime from exile. The danger of Soroush is in that he is offering a powerful internal critique of the ideology of Islamic theocracy, which is far more challenging than the external and ineffective interjections of opposition in exile, which has become politically marginalised by excluding itself from the Islamic political discourse. To discuss Soroush’s views, I shall draw on his major work, Qabz va Bast-e Teorik-e Shari’at (The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of the Religious Law) as well as a number of his articles and speeches.

The inspiration of the thesis of the “contraction and expansion of religious laws” seems to have come from the theme raised by the Pakistani Islamic modernist Muhammad Iqbal-e Lahouri. Iqbal had held in the early part of the twentieth century that in order for an honourable existence in the modern world, Muslim societies must learn how to combine the issues of “eternity” (abadiyyat) and “change” (tagyeer).

In the Contraction and Expansion, Soroush is concerned from the outset with posing an alternative view of the Shari’at, which challenges the traditional rationalistic and literal interpretations of the religious law. Against the views that reiterate an established tradition of religious interpretation, or exegesis, as the true and final purpose of the Islamic law, he argues that the essence of the Shari’at transcends
the traditional interpretations found in the “religious sermons” (khotbeh), “religious edicts” (jatva) and “scholastic theology” (kalam).

Soroush speaks of the revival of religion; and - in the heated market of the accusations of heresy and apostasy - he is at pains to declare that his interpretations of religion are not heretical. Referring to the long historical background of religious reformism in Iran, he emphasises the difference between the traditional and the modern Muslim reformers. According to Soroush, the traditional reformers, be it the theologians such as Imam Muhammad Ghazzali and Mulla Mohsen Faiz, or mystics such as Jalal-ad-Din Mowlavi and Mahmoud Shabestari, believed that there was a timeless essence to the Shari ʻat that must be kept immune against the attempts of the “eclectics” and “sophists”. Whereas, he argues, the present day reformers have the more difficult task of reconciling “eternity” and “change”. This reconciliation has been needed to provide a balanced relationship between tradition and modernity, which would not fall in the trap of traditionalist and modernist extremism.

According to Soroush, the absolute submission to change, which narrow interpretations of modernity demand, would leave no stability, and hence no religion; and insistence on stability and resistance to change makes impossible religious life at the present time. Sorosh criticises the attempt of some theologians, whom he calls naive and simple-minded (kham-andish), at putting a modern face on religion by trying to source the modern scientific inventions and technological developments directly in the sacred texts. He ridicules those who - in order to make religion acceptable to modern knowledge – try, for example, to prove that religion had anticipated microbes, aeroplanes, electricity and vitamins.

Soroush also criticises those theologians who have tried to resolve the problem of the encounter of Islam with modernity by referring to the capacity of Shi ʻism to provide answers to modern questions through ijtihad (the authority to issue new religious rulings by revising the existing interpretation of the Qur ʻan and hadith). The “openness of the door of ijtihad” in Shi ʻism has been conventionally understood as an advantage of the Shi ʻi over Sunnis jurists, because it is believed to have enabled the Shi ʻi jurists to extract fresh religious rulings from the sacred texts befitting the developments of the modern world.

In criticising the mujtahids (those qualified for ijtihad), who over-emphasise the role of the ijtihad in adapting religion with the modern world, Soroush questions the alleged advantages of Shi ʻism over Sunnism. He points to the inability of the ijtihad to tackle the modern day social and economic problems of the Muslim communities any more effectively than the non-ijtihadi schools. He thus argues that this inability is a logical consequence of the failure of many mujtahids to realise that ijtihad is only relevant to legal matters associated with jurisprudence (fiqh); whereas, problems associated with economy, development, technology, etc. do not fall within the scope of the religious law.

Soroush, however, does not fail to acknowledge the possibility of a progressive jurisprudence (fiqh-e pouya), such as that of Khomeini and Motahhari, which has “revolutionised” the traditional approach of the fiqh to politics. He also acknowledges Seyyed Jamal-ad-Din Asadabadi, the Islamic reformer of the late nineteenth century, and his followers like Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida in the Muslim world, who have “awakened” the Muslim nations to the realities of

---

3 Ibid. p.49.
modernity. He recognises the value of religious innovations, such as the practice of issuing religious ruling (fatwa) on the masa’el-e mostaheddesa (the emergent problems) by the mujtahids. He also notes the attempts of some mujtahids to extract certain human sciences from the heritage of religious knowledge, such as the attempts to create religious sciences, such as Islamic sociology, Islamic psychology, etc. But Soroush underscores the insufficiency of these attempts to tackle effectively the complexity of the socio-economic and socio-political problems facing Islam and Iran at present.

More than anybody else, Soroush finds himself close to Iqbal and Shari’ati, whom he praises for their recognition of the problems of the Islamic jurisprudence in the modern world, and the assertion that the key to the problems of the Islamic societies is not to be found only in fiqh. Soroush, however, asserts that what has so far been missing from the previous attempts to reconcile “eternity” and “change”, and has thus led to a relative lack of success in adapting Islam to the “age” (asr), is a theory of knowledge, or some kind of epistemology, which would enable Muslim intellectuals to differentiate between religion and the knowledge of it. His concern is mainly with the traditional failure to differentiate between religion as the knowledge of the essence of the Divine, and religion as a set of rules for social behaviour that has been produced by human interpretations of the Divine. This is an essentially secular worldview, but Soroush presents this view such that it makes secularism compatible with religion. In doing so, he fundamentally rejects the view that secularism is essentially anti-religion. It is Western secularism, arising from the culture of the Western Christianity, he purports, that has led to the separation and opposition of the state and religion, not secularism per se.

**Soroush’s Religious Secularism**

Not surprisingly, Soroush’s philosophical secularism is deeply religious. He is concerned with the fundamental essence of secularism, and takes a view that gives secularism a fundamental religious character, which is rooted in the fetrat, or the pre-conscious soul of man. It is because the quest for religious essences is incessant and fundamental for man, that he seeks to find ways to adapt this quest to the requirements of the modern “age”. According to Soroush, the modern age is characterised by an abundance of non-religious aspects of social and political life, whereby people are not driven only by religious motives, like they might have been in the time of the Prophets. In this age, the people are rather driven by many other non-religious, but legitimate concerns, such as “the economy”, “social services”, “political rights”, “individual freedom”, “human rights”, etc. None of these legitimate human needs, Soroush considers to be in conflict or contradiction with religion.

Soroush is very conscious of the fact that all Muslim reformers throughout Iranian history, including figures like Hafiz and Mowlavi, have been faced with serious accusations of heresy. They have been accused of believing that there are flaws in the Islamic faith, and trying to correct Islam, which is believed to be a

---

1 These are questions associated with the modern forms of social organisation and regulation of life, such as the administration of health and insurance. They include questions, such as the use of alcohol for medical purposes, and problems created by global mobility in upholding religious practices, such as praying and fasting near the polar-regions of the earth, or even on the moon.
2 Soroush, A. 1374/1995, p.51
3 Ibid. p.52.
4 Ibid. pp. 52-53
5 Soroush’s view on the intertwining of religion and society presents strong Durkheimian overtones.
complete religion. They have been thus accused of believing that the Prophet Muhammad had not delivered the complete Message of God. And they have been accused of putting themselves in the place of the Prophets by trying to deliver their own message as his.

Soroush, himself, has been subject to such accusations. And it is in response to these accusations that he writes: "Religion is not flawed, but our understanding of it is. Religion is divine and heavenly, but religious knowledge is earthly and human. What remains unchanged (static) is religion, and what is changing (dynamic) is religious knowledge. Religion is not in need of reconstruction to become complete, but religious knowledge is in need of deconstruction. Religion is devoid of cultures and the intervention of human subjectivity, but religious knowledge is immersed in subjectivity. Intellect (aql) does not come to the rescue of religion in order to complete it; rather it tries to complete its own understanding of religion. Those, who search for static (sabet) and dynamic (moteqayyer) in religion should better know that the very differentiation of static and dynamic in religion belongs to religious knowledge, and as such determined by a certain understanding of religion. The understanding of static and dynamic (in religion) is not prior to the understanding of religion; it is born as a result of it. We are always dealing with religious knowledge, which observes religion and is about it, but it is not religion itself."

Thus, Soroush’s view of religious reform, or as he prefers to call it: "revival", welcomes the search for flaws and impurities in the religious knowledge as a legitimate and even sacred effort. A consequence of humanisation of religious knowledge is that it then must be understood historically. This historical character of religious knowledge, or as Soroush puts it, its being subject to the “age” (asr), is the key to understanding why, for example, Islamic thought had been dominated for a long time by Greek thought; or, why today Islamic psychology is born, and “why the Islam of the philosopher smells of philosophy and the Islam of the mystic smells of mysticism?” He, therefore, suggests that the evolution of religious knowledge as a human knowledge is naturally dependent on the evolution of all other fields of knowledge, and on the evolution of the means of human survival, particularly the economy. Accordingly, progressive change in religious knowledge is inevitable, because the human search for “Truth” in the future is inevitable.

The Politico-religious Implications of Soroush’s Thesis

Soroush’s thesis of “contraction and expansion of religious laws” has serious theological as well as socio-political implications. It denies the official class of Shi’i jurists a privileged position in interpreting the religious knowledge. Soroush rejects the traditional claim of the jurists that their interpretations are the essence of religious knowledge and hence the essence of religion. He, therefore, opens the way for challenging the theological interpretations that may be wrong or outmoded, especially in the areas that do not fall in the domain of religious law.

Soroush, however, does not believe that religious knowledge is a personal knowledge open to interpretation by every unqualified individual. For him, it is rather a branch of knowledge that has a collective character, and as such is based on exchange and competition between the experts; and it is thus full of proofs and errors, as well as certainties and uncertainties. In this sense, errors are as essential to Soroush’s version of religious knowledge as proofs. He insists that when one expert disproves a view, that view does not go right out of the domain of religious

---

1 Soroush, A. K. 1374/1995, p.53
2 Ibid, pp.54-55
3 Ibid, p.56
knowledge; rather it becomes part of the history of religious knowledge. And it is in this sense that, according to Soroush, religious knowledge gets contracted and expanded. He writes: "The main aim of The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of the Religious Law is neither to resolve the conflict between the traditional and progressive jurisprudence, nor modernisation of the religion, nor completing the Shari'at, nor relativising the Truth. It is rather to establish how religion is understood, and how this understanding is evolved."

Given this premise, Soroush argues that the thesis of "Contraction and Expansion" belongs to hermeneutics. And it is in light of this hermeneutical view that he sets out to clarify why the concepts of "authenticity" and "inauthenticity" of an interpretation have inevitably entered into the religious texts and traditions, as well as into the jurisprudential and historical exegesis. And more importantly, he uses this hermeneutical view to explain why "definitive" or "grounded" (muhkam), and "non-definitive" or "contingent" (mutishabeh) interpretations are subject to evolution, and why no interpretation of religion will always be "authentic" or "inauthentic". Soroush thus rejects the views of his predecessors who, in his belief, had either denounced alternative interpretations in order to claim religious purity and ended up in backwardness, or had permitted a wholesale openness of the religion to all interpretations and ended up in eclecticism.

The political implications of Soroush's understanding of religious knowledge are significant, particularly when it questions the attempt by the incumbent politician-theologians at giving their own rulings the same weight and value as a divine revelation. He writes: "We humans are at present turned away from the Paradise and disconnected from the Divine Revelation. We are a bunch of impure, sleep-stricken souls. We have a devil-stricken existence and an erroneous knowledge. We are not fit to speak and act like the Prophets. We can only approach the Truth within the limits of our humble intellect. We are interpreters, not Lawgivers. We are enchanted souls, not infallible spirits. And those who accord to their own words any value over a mere understanding of the Shari'at must be warned not to slip into the Prophetic cloak. From becoming the governor of religion, it does not follow that one can take the position of the Divine Lawgiver, and speak his words in the name of the Divine Word. Rather, he must try to understand His (God's) Word through constant reference to the Book (Qur'an) and the Tradition (Sunnat). The claimants of religious knowledge have no other position, and are of no other service, than this. They are the collectors of religious knowledge, which is neither complete, nor final. Their sacred effort to understand the Book and the Tradition does not produce a Sacred Knowledge."

The Probe for a New Theology

Soroush's discussion of the theory of "contraction and expansion of the religious law" found wide audience as a series of essays published in the monthly, Cultural Keyhan (Keyhan-e Farhangi), between 1988 and 1990. He later on added to these essays a series of five lectures on a new theology (kalam) and published the whole thing in the form of a book. In his lectures on kalam, he was mainly concerned with establishing the exchange between religious knowledge and other fields of knowledge. Soroush divides the areas of concern to the motekallem (one who is qualified in kalam), into three branches: 1) the religious fundaments that require

1 Ibid, pp. 56-57
2 Ibid, p.57
3 Ibid, pp. 57-58
4 Ibid, p. 60
5 Soroush delivered his lectures on the new kalam in the Society of Imam-e Sadiq (a new institution for higher education in Tehran).
logical proof such as the existence of God, the principle of Prophecy, etc. 2) the questions within religion that would require explanation such as the attitude of religion to Satan, Paradise and Hell; and 3) the task of defending the religion against its opponents, particularly against shubahat (non-definitive interpretations), which are bent on destroying the clarity of the religion.1

The religious science of kalam is different from the sociology of religion of the type developed by Weber and Durkheim. Whereas the sociology of religion studies religion from a viewpoint exterior to it, and therefore without necessarily being committed to it, the science of kalam views the religion from within, and requires an absolute conviction on the part of the motekallem. What Sorosh means by the new kalam is a religious science that not only addresses itself to the three traditional areas covered by the classical science of kalam, but also takes on the task of looking at religion from outside, and hence develop something like a philosophy of religion.2

This religious philosophy, however, is understood not as a philosophy modelled on Aristotle, but one based on Ghazzali, the medieval Islamic theologian whose views had been influenced by the ancient hermetic tradition and the Islamic illuminationism (ishraq). According to Sorosh, the conflict between the traditional and progressive understandings of religious law reflects the conflict between two approaches to the modern thought. He sees the late Ayatollah Motahhari as a progressive theologian, who meant to provide an understanding of religion more congruent with modern sciences.

Soroush refers to the history of exegesis in the Shi‘i Islam, particularly to the history of various understandings of the Shari‘at, and disputes the views that advocate a kind of prohibition on fresh interpretations of the Shari‘at. He refers to the Shari‘at as “silent” (samet), which does not express any explicit meaning, and adds that its meaning emerges out of the interaction of various understandings put forward by different interpreters.3 It is therefore with this language that the Shari‘at speaks, and it is in this language that the meaning can be approximated.

For Sorosh, no emerging meaning or understanding is final and conclusive; rather any emerging meaning is a “new-born” and subject to “evolution” and “maturity”. He refers to the meaning of a text or event not as an essence that is extracted from the body of the text or event, but metaphorically as a “garment”, which the interpreter tailors to fit the body. Thus, the congruity of this “garment” with other details should determine to what degree one understanding prevails over others at any given time.

Soroush compares the silence of the Shari‘at with the silence of history and nature. Just as the silent events of history and the silent changes in nature come into expression via the perspectives and theories of the historian and the physicist, he suggests, the silent meanings of the Shari‘at is expressed via the interpreter.4

Soroush then suggests that the fiqh, as the knowledge of religious laws, is not immune to the human limitations that inhibit a full understanding of things. Hence, the understanding of the Shari‘at that the fiqh proposes is dependent on other areas of human knowledge. The fiqh is thus a small part of a larger field of religious knowledge, in which Sorosh includes Kalam (Theology), Akhlaq (Ethics), Tafsir

1 Sorush, A. 1995, p.66
2 Ibid, p.79
3 Ibid, p.181
4 Ibid, p.182
For Soroukh, human knowledge logically and historically precedes religious knowledge. Humans should have formed an image of the world and of themselves before they developed an understanding of religion, he argues. They should have had an image of justice and injustice, good and evil, before they could call religion just and good. “No religious understanding is formed without any association with the primary worldviews of the believer. And no religious understanding remains unchanged when confronted with these primary worldviews.”

The Question of Validity of the New Interpretations of Old Texts

According to Soroukh, the influence of “the primary worldviews” are, in fact, such that they might cause the decline of a religion, if that religion were not prepared to establish a rapport with existing worldviews. As an example, he refers to the weakness of religion among the intelligentsia at the time of the Constitutional Revolution. It was not due to sheer animosity toward religion, he points out, that the intellectuals did not hold religion in high political regard during the Constitutional Revolution; rather, it was because the religious knowledge was unattractive at that time. “Compared to the dynamism of modern scientific, philosophical, legal and political ideas imported from the West, the religious knowledge was languishing in a serious illness, unable to provide systematic and sophisticated views on economics, politics, philosophy, etc.” Thus, it has been owing to new developments in the views of modern religious thinkers that religion has once again become relevant to the modern world. Clearly, the rise in the interest in social and political issues among religious thinkers, particularly since the mid-twentieth century may be seen as a significant factor in making religion so popular in recent socio-political movements in Iran.

Soroush provides examples of various new interpretations of religious texts by Muslim theologians in order to establish the influence of their “primary worldviews” on their interpretations. His examples are selected from the exegesis of the Qur’an by two of the more widely accredited contemporary religious thinkers Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleqani and Allameh Muhammad-Hussein Tabataba’i. The point of departure is the interpretation of the term “Satan’s copper” (mess-e Shaytan) in the Qur’anic verse: (Baqara, 276). The verse may be rendered as follows: “Those who take usury will not rise, except as those who have been touched by the Satan’s copper.” Here, Soroush tries to demonstrate how deeply different two Shi‘i scholars have interpreted this same phrase, and how the variation in interpretations is connected to the difference in the background views of the two scholars.

Ayatollah Taleqani has considered various possibilities for the interpretation of the “devil’s copper”: he interprets it in terms of epilepsy or some other form of psychological disorder, which follows from the traditional belief in possession by the devil. In fact, among the people in Arabia, who were the apparent targets of the prophetic message, the belief was widespread that madness was caused by the possession by the djin (an ethereal devilish creature with human upper body and with a goat’s lower body). He also considers the “devil’s copper” as a symbol for a kind of biological agent causing the mental disease, which follows from recent scientific

---

1 Ibid. p.188
2 Ibid. pp. 190-191
3 Ibid. pp.193-194
4 Ibid. p. 220
information that certain mental disorders could be caused by infectious or viral damage to the nervous system.

Soroush argues that in using a symbolic method, Taleqani, as a modernist theologian, was following a certain strategy in interpreting the Qur'an whereby he could justify the usage of such unscientific terms as the "devil's copper". According to this strategy, should a contradiction between a Qur'anic expression and the modern findings of science arise, the interpreter may resort to a symbolic exegesis of the text in order to salvage the integrity of the word of God. Soroush does not suggest that Taleqani had any intentions to distort the word of God; rather that he was simply trying to tackle the exegetic difficulties faced by his predecessors in the occasions where contradictions were found between the Qur'anic text and the emerging realities.

Allameh Tabataba'i, on the other hand, has rejected this kind of symbolic interpretation of the Qur'an; instead, he advocated a philosophical method of interpretation. Instead of searching for symbolism to represent the supernatural expressions of the Qur'an, he raised the possibility that the natural and supernatural could co-exist. He, therefore, did not exclude non-scientific interpretations, such as admitting Satanic influences in causing altered mental states, in order to save a scientific face for the Qur'an. However, he insisted that admitting causes such as the "devil's copper" did not preclude natural causes. Here, Tabataba'i, as a philosopher, was using philosophical concepts such as causality to support his claim that from a logical perspective scientific knowledge could not replace transcendental knowledge, but could sit beside it. From an Ash'arite position, which denies causality and believes in the direct intervention of the Divine in all natural interactions, the exegesis of the "devil’s copper" would thus be interpreted totally by supernatural references.

Soroush's main objective here seems to be to establish how diverse, and at the same time valid, the interpretations of religious texts could be. Of course, he has had a difficult time establishing that there are more than one valid interpretation of the Qur'an. So far, due to the dominance of a literal and juridical understanding of religion, only those who have been officially recognised as qualified could have embarked on interpreting the religious tradition. The qualifications of such officials have been recognised by the religious scientific communities, based at the centres of religious studies in Qom, Isfahan, Mashhad and elsewhere. They have had to be well versed in fiqh (Islamic religious laws), and to a lesser degree in kalam (Islamic theology), falsafa (Islamic philosophy) and irfan (Islamic mysticism).

The dominance of fiqh in religious studies has been so strong that to the outsiders religious studies have been understood almost exclusively in terms of the knowledge of jurisprudence. And the faqih or jurist has been popularly accepted as the most qualified interpreter of the Shari'at. It is this kind of atmosphere that makes the task of the likes of Soroush so difficult. First and foremost, they have to establish that there are other valid interpretations of the sacred texts than that of the faqih. Following that, they also have to establish that they possess the quality and authority required for providing alternative interpretations. This is perhaps why Soroush has been cautious not to claim that he is yet qualified to issue original interpretations.

In evaluating the standing of his Contraction and Expansion among the religious texts, Soroush insists that his text has “only an epistemological standing”,

---

1 Ibid, p.221
2 Ibid, p.222
3 Ibid, p.223
4 Ibid, p. 223
which simply identifies and describes the various existing interpretation of the religion, interpretations that are in constant interaction with each other, and are incessantly influenced by cultural, political and economic developments in the society. He places this epistemological standing at the level of what he calls: “secondary sciences” of religion distinct from the “primary sciences” that are the exclusive domain of the faqih and mujtahid.¹

Yet, Soroush occasionally gets involved in the debates at the “primary” level, which is supposed to take place between the turbaned theologians only. For example, in his review of Tabataba'i's interpretation of the Qur'anic verse: (Nesa, 1), he clearly disputes the soundness of Tabataba'i’s understanding of the verse. This verse may be rendered as follows: “Oh people, fear God, who created man and woman from the same soul.” In interpreting this verse, Tabataba'i was primarily concerned with validating the theory of creation as a justified philosophical and scientific theory, and as such, he tackled the Darwinian theory of evolution. He did not reject the theory of evolution per se. Rather, he actually validated Darwin's work as a scientific endeavour that explained the physical evolution of animals, which was extrinsic (‘etebari). But according to Tabataba'i, Darwin's theory did not have anything to do with the evolution of essences, which were intrinsic (zati), nor for that matter with the human evolution, which was basically a spiritual rather than physical evolution. Tabataba'i thus concluded that the Qur'anic message that viewed man as a species with a spirit distinct from the animals did not contradict any scientific view; rather it stood alongside science. He particularly stressed that no scientific discovery had yet shown a case of evolution of animals from physical to spiritual level.

In the Contraction and Expansion, Soroush disputes the validity of Tabataba'i’s interpretation of the Qur'anic verse on the basis of the untenable nature of Tabataba'i’s requirement for the proof of the theory of evolution. He thus argues that one could not expect that in order to accept the theory of evolution in the case of human, one must observe for example turning of a monkey into a man.²

Opposition to the Exclusivity of Religious Knowledge

As I have hinted earlier, Soroush’s theory of “contraction and expansion” has explicit political implications with respect to tackling the issue of the claim of the official clergy to exclusivity of politico-religious knowledge. Soroush asserts, for example: “in the context of the theory of contraction and expansion, it is fundamentally impossible to conceive of a class or group that bears and preserves an official understanding of religion.”³ He rejects such an official understanding because it is offered as “an exclusive religious ideology” by those who get their “power and subsistence” from it, with which their “material and worldly interests are mixed”, and from which their “political power base and its material survival are derived.” He thus insists: “Contraction and expansion is the theory of the evolution and development of religious knowledge. A religion that is tied to the material and political interest (legitimate or illegitimate) of a special class (and for this reason, becomes precisely an ideology) leaves little room for its own evolution and development. From that point on, that group’s defence of that religion, and its struggle against invention and innovation, will become a defence of its own interests and position. ... With such a religion it is neither possible to attain happiness in

¹ Ibid, pp. 223-224
² Ibid, pp. 231-235
³ Ibid, p. 35
this world and contentment among the people, nor to satisfy the Creator and achieve happiness in the hereafter.”

In a situation where the Islamic regime in Iran is run mainly by the class of clergies from the official religious establishment, the position of Soroush clearly poses a fundamental challenge to the absolute legitimacy of such a political rule. The political significance of the theory of “contraction and expansion of religious law” is also clear in the coercive reaction of the hard-liners in the regime, and the critical dialogue offered by some of the scholars in the centres of religious learning. The reaction of this latter group is important because they so far have operated by and large as a class of official ideologues in support of the concentration of political and religious power at the hand of the Shi‘i jurists. I shall have a discussion of such views later in this chapter. Presently, I shall concentrate on other areas of Soroush’s socio-religious and politico-religious concerns, which he has addressed in his numerous lectures and articles. In these areas, Soroush, besides challenging the attempts at appropriating the religious knowledge by an official class of theologians, has tackled, among other subjects, issues such as freedom, pluralism, democracy, human rights and civil society.

**Freedom and Clergy**

In a speech, later published under the title “Freedom and Clergy”, Soroush presented freedom and religion as mutually inclusive. “Only free people can guard religion”, he said; “and it is in the shadow of such freedom that individuals can defend the religious life.” Here, he argues that the religious belief of an individual, who is deprived of his/her freedom, is of no value. This priority of freedom over belief, according to Soroush, is what makes religious belief a meaningful experience rather than a mechanical discharge of duty.

In “Freedom and Clergy”, Soroush in fact shifts his discussion about freedom to the relation of freedom with the clerical establishment and its attempt to institutionalise a theocratic regime in Iran. Here again, he approaches the issue from the same point of departure as in the Contraction and Expansion, that is by resisting the push for exclusivity of the clergy as the sole bearers of the religious knowledge. It is in this context that he writes: “The matter of religion is too great an issue to be exclusively entrusted to the clergy. A clergy that supports itself through religion will gradually be converted to a body whose work will be aimed at preserving itself. When a person’s livelihood depends on confirming and supporting the organisation of clergy, how can he think freely?”

Here, Soroush curiously points to the significance of the clergy’s independence and detachment from relations of domination, and narrow political and economic interests. He emphasises that this independence has been fundamental in providing the Shi‘i religious scholars with the historical ability to stand against political, economic and social injustices perpetrated by the rulers and the political elite, and to refuse to become part of the relations of domination. As a warning against the trappings of power, he refers to the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia who, as he asserts following Ayatollah Khomeini, have turned the “most elegantly celestial Islamic fate to an ideology that defends their sectarian, political and economic interests.”

---

1. Ibid p. 35
3. Ibid pp.25-26
4. Ibid, pp. 26-27
The political implication of Soroush’s view is, therefore, a type of secularism that is advocated in defence of religion against the State. To keep freedom and religion “from being trampled by livelihood and interests”, he writes, “there is no way other than to separate the two, ... which means preventing religion from becoming an ideology to serve the interests of a special group or class.”

Soroush’s opposition to the turning of religion into an ideology distinguishes him from Shari’ati, who in his quest for the riddance of religious thinking and experience from the dominance of the official clergy, believed that it was necessary to make an ideology out of religion. According to Shari’ati, an ideological structure would give religion the capacity to be embraced by the ordinary people and become an impetus for political freedom.

Drawing on the late Ayatollah Motahhari, the great ideologue of the Islamic Revolution, Soroush criticises the deep involvement of the clergy in the political system. He believes that such involvement will mean the loss of the freedom of the clergy to the State bureaucracy and the trappings of power, and hence will make the clergy unable to perform their primary religious duty. This primary role, according to Soroush, is “to enjoin good and prohibit evil” (amr-e be ma’rouf va nahi-e az monkar) devoid of group interests.

However, Soroush qualifies his position by saying that his objection to the direct rule by the clergy does not mean that he is an advocate of secularism in a Western style. Rather, he insists that he is neither for the removal of the clergy from the political scene, nor for the removal of politics from the religious domain. He explains: “The religious community like a fruitful tree creates politics and government that are appropriate for it, ... and this is the most natural way to bring politics and religion together, i.e. in a separate realisation and existence.”

Concerning the form of political rule, Soroush advocates a political pluralism in which clergy as much as any other group has the right and obligation to participate in politics. In this sense, the clergy is not entitled to any special privilege as far as participation in politics is concerned; rather its desire for power must be determined by the respect and acceptability that it finds among the population.

The Meaning and Foundation of Secularism

In his article “the Meaning and Foundation of Secularism”, Soroush proposes a secularism that sees the enhancement of human knowledge as a factor in enhancing the ability of humans to better understand the essence of the Divine Revelation. The conventional belief that the modern world is conducive to an increase of irreligious thought, he writes, is only superficially true. “It is true that in the modern world demagogic religiosity is in decline; but instead a kind of deep and sophisticated search for religion at a higher level is on the rise.”

Here, Soroush points directly to the fundamental political imaginary around which the Islamic Republic has been built, i.e. the concept of velayat-e faqih, or the governance of the jurist. The thesis of velayat-e faqih has been considered as an

---

1 Ibid. pp. 27-29
2 Ibid. p. 30
3 Ibid. p.31
imaginative and creative interpretation of the religious texts with significant political import in post-revolution Iran.1

Soroush’s approach to the concept of velayat-e faqih is based on his assumption that in the modern world a fundamental change has taken place in the popular attitudes toward rights and obligations. He writes: “In the modern world speaking of human rights is desired because we live in an age when people are more concerned with discovering and understanding their rights than they are concerned with understanding their obligations. That the issue of human rights in our age is highly regarded, despite the abuses that are perpetrated in its name, is of extreme importance, and justifies every effort for its understanding.”

According to Soroush, what makes the acceptance of the current concept of velayat-e faqih and the Islamic government difficult - for both the opponents and proponents of the Islamic Revolution - is that this government is based on “obligation”. Whereas, he argues, in the mind of the modern humanity and a majority of the modern political philosophies, the State ought to be subjected to the “rights” of the people. This means that government is no longer an instrument for the exertion of authority of the rulers over the ruled, but an instrument for rendering service and management for the people. The population demands the politicians to facilitate the achievement of their “rights”, and not to make it difficult, Soroush argues; and “that is why there are elections in Iran for the people to elect their representatives.”

Soroush, therefore, criticises the prevalent concept of the velayat-e faqih for its emphasis on “obligation”, which has come to mean the obedience of the people to the ruler as a religious duty. He purports that the conventional understanding of the velayat-e faqih even looks at voting as an “obligation” rather than a “right”. So, the main problem that Soroush finds in a theocratic government in modern time is the difficulty for such a government to determine whether or not to accept the natural rights of human beings. “If we consider the ruler as a valy (custodian),” he writes, “then we are speaking of obligation, but if we consider him as a vakil (representative), then we are speaking of the rights of the people.” In this sense, Soroush is criticising the proponents of absolute theocracy by appealing to the positive aspects of modernity, that is its emancipatory potentials. As such, in his argument against theocracy, he is not overly concerned with the issue of the crisis of modernity.

In Soroush’s critique of the Islamic Republic, the problem of this regime is that it has so far heavily relied on the popular support for charismatic religious leaders, such as the late Ayatollah Khomeini, in order to give itself legitimacy. While at the same time it has sought to suppress the right of the people to check the powers of the government by imposing its rulings in the name of a religious obligation to obey the velayat-e faqih. While the occupant of the position of velayat-e faqih was a popular personality like Ayatollah Khomeini, this problem did not surface. But, in the current situation where this position is occupied by a person, who has neither been popularly elected, nor enjoyed the religious scholarship and universal popularity of Ayatollah Khomeini as the supreme politico-religious leader of the community, the contradictions of the velayat-e faqih have increasingly come to the surface.

This problem has become more acute since the recent presidential election, whereby a person not endorsed by the incumbent supreme leader, Ayatollah

---

1 As we have seen, the theory of velayat-e faqih was put forward by the late Ayatollah Khomeini in the early 1970’s in a series of lectures in Najaf and later appeared as a book. This book was originally in Arabic, and was later translated to Persian under the title Hokumat-e Eslami (the Islamic Government).
2 Soroush, A. “The Meaning and Foundation of Secularism”, p. 9
3 These sentiments have found support in the position of President Khatami since his election in May 97.
4 Soroush, A. “The Meaning and Foundation of Secularism”, p.10
Khamene’i, was elected President in a landslide. The contradictions are also evident within the present structure of the government institutions. For example, according to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, the Majlis (Parliament), a popularly elected legislative assembly, may be overruled by a simple objection of the velayat-e faqih.

**Irfan and Development: Misgivings with Mysticism**

Soroush does not only target the official clergy for their static views of religious knowledge; his other target is the tradition of mysticism, deeply entrenched in the collective soul or psyche of Iranians. In an interview with the journal *Farhang-e Tose’eh* (Culture of Development), he presented his critical views on populist *irfan* (mysticism), or what he called a “Sufi understanding of religion”, and its role in social and economic developments in Iran.¹ Soroush begins his critique of mysticism with considering the role of the language of *irfan* that has found excellent expression in various traditions of mystical poetry by such figures as Attar, Sana’ie, Jami, Hafiz, Rumi, etc. As such, in his critique, he does not leave unscathed even these literary sacrosanct figures.

According to Soroush, the language of mysticism is far from fit to tackle the problems of the modern age, which he sees almost entirely as a scientific age. More specifically, he criticises the inability of mystical language to grasp the depth of the scientific knowledge. The language of mysticism is the language of “mystery, concealment, illusion and confusion”, he insists. Accordingly, this language involves sophistication and intricacy, on the one hand, and intrigue and conspiracy, on the other. It thus belongs to a repressive political climate where a medieval understanding of religion reigned supreme.

According to Soroush, the age-old suppression of social and political expression in Iran has forced the Persian language to develop in *irfan* a multilayered meaning structure that has become riddled with allusions and illusions. This language has thus created a social mentality that is dominated by a culture of concealment and secrecy. “The author learns how to say what he/she wants to say in a way that only a special target audience would understand; and in a way that in case of the revelation of his secret message, the author could deny any intention to that effect.”² As far as Soroush is concerned, this clearly indicates that such a language must lose clarity and take on an illusionist character. Hence, it will not be fit for functioning in the scientific world of today, where a language with clarity of expression is required.

Soroush reminds his audience that this language has been shaped and spread among Muslim Iranians by the Sufi thinkers such as Rumi, Jami and Ghazzali. The importance of these thinkers, however, should not be seen only in the conformity of their texts with the popular understanding of religion. Rather, their texts have in fact contributed to the constitution of the popular understanding of religion. According to Soroush: “the Sufi understanding of religion, if it takes a populist form and spreads too fast among the public, will have opiating, castrating and paralysing effects.”³

The main problem with the populist *Sufism* is, according to Soroush, its tendency to consider this world as illusive and unreal, and as such not worthy of dedication of life energies for its development. It emphasises the development of mind via abstract, contemplative and meditative thought. It has little, if any, connection with the real human world, but a deep connection with a world beyond this. The

---

¹ Soroush, A. “*Irfan va Tose’eh*” (Mysticism and Development), *Farhang-e Tose’eh*, 13&14, p.2
² Ibid, p.3
³ Ibid, p.5
culture that develops out of such an understanding, Soroush suggests, despises worldly development due to the fascination of this development with wealth creation, and praises poverty as the symbol of purity.

Soroush, however, does not neglect to praise mysticism when pursued as an individual quest for reaching the depths of religion. The individualist character of irfan is, in this sense, the very secret of its capacity to grow at depth, rather than on the surface. He thus advocates an elitist mysticism of the people of knowledge and insight, which does not seek mass conversion, lest it risks losing its depth and corrupting the society that it purports to purify. As such, in almost complete agreement with the Western secular thought, he turns to science as the guarantor of social development.

Soroush’s fascination with scientific knowledge at times creates the impression that he considers modernity as an age solely characterised by the rise and rise of scientific knowledge and the total decline of mystical knowledge. He therefore, unlike Shari’ati, does not see much in the heritage of the Persian mysticism that can contribute to the socio-economic development of Iran. Criticisms that have been levelled at Sorouy in this regard point to his failure to give credit and look forward to mystical understanding of religion in its capacity to provide support for religious and consequently political pluralism in Iran.

**Functions of Religion: An Alternative Concept of Ideology**

Despite his criticisms of the official interpretation of religion, Soroush’s commitment to religious thinking cannot be disputed. One of the themes of his writings and speeches is the concept of ideology and its relationship with religion. I have already noted that he rejects the notion of turning religion into an ideology. However, this does not mean that he denies any ideological function for the religion. In an speech entitled: “Functions of Religion”, he develops an alternative concept of ideology in order to distinguish ideological functions of religion from the normal working of ideology as a factor to legitimise authority. His concept of ideology is not, however, totally novel and presents similarities to the ideas of Marx, Gramsci, Geertz and Riceour.

Soroush defines ideology as a universal phenomenon that, at a fundamental level, creates conformity between human beings and their condition of life. He goes on to discuss the role of ideology in preserving the status quo as well as its role in social change. In revolutions, he argues, an ideology operates that rejects conformity with the status quo, but creates a new conformity. “In a revolution, a new actual and mental system replaces an old actual and mental system, and another conformity is established between reality and the mind on a different level.”

The ideological function of religion, therefore, is not the function of a social or class ideology, nor is it the function of a “system of superficial, belligerent, and anti-intellectual dogmas;” rather its is the function of a “universal ideology.” Religion as a “universal ideology” is a set of “sacred symbols”, which through a system of values makes life possible and pleasant in the totality of existence. According to Sorouy: “religion gives us rapport with the universe and existence; and this rapport is based on truth

---

1. Ibid. pp. 5-6
3. Ibid. p. 2
and not deception.” He argues that if a religion is not true, it cannot make human beings adaptable to the conditions of existence in any lasting manner.

Having defined religion as a “universal ideology” that creates harmony and conformity between man and his world, Soroush then turns to the mystical philosophies of Hafiz and Mowlavi, which are full of apparent non-conformities with the official religious establishment. Some theologians have even gone as far as calling Hafiz and Mowlavi as heathen and blasphemous for their unconventional views of religion. Soroush’s argument here appears to be an argument in the defence of his own philosophy, which has already been accused of blasphemy by certain theologians.

In defending the validity of individual religious experience, he refers to the famous story of “Moses and the Shepherd” in Mowlavi’s *Masnavi*. His approach here is a classical example of invoking literary narratives for the purpose of offering creative interpretations in the present. In this story, Moses encounters a humble and simple-minded shepherd, who is praising God in an apparently blasphemous language, imagining Him in human terms. He says:

“Where are you, so I can become your servant;  
Sew your shoes and comb your hair,  
Wash your clothes and kill your lice,  
...  
Kiss your staff and rub your feet.  
When you are sleepy, I shall set your bed for you.  
Oh, may all my goats be sacrificed for you...”

Here, Soroush poses Moses in the role of a theologian who fears the shepherd’s statements and considers them heathen. Moses thus says to the shepherd:

“Hey, not having become a believer yet,  
You have become a heretic and a heathen...”

Faced with the attack by Moses, the shepherd becomes disappointed and depressed, tearing his clothes, leaving the herd and setting out for the desert. He says to Moses:

“Oh, Moses you sewed my lips;  
With the regret that you incited in me,  
You burnt my soul...”

Here, the important point for Soroush is that God does not reward Moses for his treatment of the shepherd. Rather, God reproaches him for his arrogance and lack of understanding of the shepherd’s purity of the soul. God says to Moses:

“Why did you separate our subject from us?  
Have you come to connect, or have you come to sever?  
...  
We have given everyone a peculiar nature,  
We have given everyone a unique way of expression.

1 Ibid, pp 3-4  
2 Mowlavi, *Masnavi*, Book 2, verses 1721-1724  
3 Ibid, verses 1727-1729  
4 Ibid, verses 1748-1749
The Hindus praise in Hindi,  
The Sindis praise in Sindi.  
We do not look at the tongue and what is said,  
We look at the inside and the feeling.  

This (shepherd’s) error is above a hundred good deeds…”

Here, Soroush’s reading of Mowlavi emphasises that in the apparently blasphemous language of the shepherd, there was hidden a deep, secure and sincere faith. He uses this example to promote a more humanistic understanding of religious experience as against the scholastic interpretations of many theologians. He refers to Moses as representing the theological world and the shepherd as the symbol of mystical world. In the encounter of these two worlds, Soroush searches for an outcome that can embrace both sides and enhance their earlier positions in the world.

The enhancement of Moses in his experience is achieved through his new awareness that the shepherd was not a heathen, although he spoke like one. Moses becomes aware that faith is not only what is expressed in elaborate theological definitions, but that it is an essence that gives meaning to such definitions. The shepherd too is enhanced by becoming aware that there are other aspects to religion besides and beyond what is apparent: theological and philosophical intricacies of which he was ignorant. And that his experience was a raw experience of God.

Elsewhere, Soroush refers to a famous ghazal of Hafiz that seems equally if not more blasphemous:

“Humanity cannot be found in this terrestrial world;  
Another world must be built and another human…”

Here, Soroush is aware that the idea of questioning the order of this world for the theologian is tantamount to questioning the basis of divine thinking, according to which this world has been built correctly, completely and justly. Yet, he insists that one should not assume the position of a "religious magistrate” in questioning Hafiz’ belief. He rather advocates the idea of searching for the validity of a faith in the variety of possible religious experiences of the individual believers.

He writes: “Religious experience must be brought forth to the threshold of the house of the heart and show the soul its joy and beauty, for man to fall in love with it... Prophets have spoken to human beings of God, of His love and wrath, of His treatment of previous nations, of His inspiration and speech, which are all mysterious and amazing. Religion also has spoken to people about Muhammad’s ascent to the heavens, the crucifixion of Jesus, the golden calf, the tablets of Moses, the sacrifice of Ishmael, the turning of fire into a flower garden for Abraham, the passage of Moses through the Nile, and the life after death, which are worthy of wonderment. These amazing and awakening acts are those, which have constantly made the poets and mystics intoxicated and mad, and which have been the objects of spiritual discoveries. Religions have taught that this world is much more complex and mysterious than one first imagines; and at the top of the mysteries is God, who is indeed the secret of secrets, the source of religious texts, and the ultimate goal of the faithful.”

Soroush here tries to promote once again his main concept of religious pluralism, which is based on plurality of religious experiences and their

---

1 Ibid, verses 1750-1769  
2 Soroush, A. “Functions of Religion”, Opct Nov. 95, pp. 7-8  
3 Hafiz. Divan, Ghazal 470  
4 Soroush, A. “Functions of Religion”, Opct, Nov. 95, pp. 4-5
interpretations. He emphasises that this plurality “does not mean that interpretations necessarily negate each other.” Rather, he argues that “the expression of experience is precisely its interpretation”, and that “the mind fills the raw spiritual experience with the spirit of meaning.”

Referring to the symbolic nature of religious language that provides for allegorical interpretations of religion, Soroush criticises the religious jurisprudential attempt at imposing a single interpretation of religion upon the society, and the effort to find religious answers to all social and even economic problems. “Most of the issues of societies”, he writes, “are non-jurisprudential and non-legal, and therefore we must resort to non-jurisprudential and non-legal ways to solve them.”

He also criticises those clerics who push for the institutionalisation of an absolutist theocracy on the ground that in their intransigence, they have developed unrealistic expectations from the people. According to Soroush, the level of change in people’s attitude towards religion and the level of public piety that have been already achieved since the revolution is more than desirable. And he asserts that the clergy in power should not abuse the authority that they have gained with the support of the people; and that they should not put too much pressure on the already strained people of Iran.

Shabestari’s Concept of Religious Pluralism

If Soroush’s contribution to religious reformation is made in terms of creating a new philosophy of religion outside the clerical establishment, Hojjat-al-Eslam Muhammad Mujtahid-Shabestari’s attempt at religious reformation pursues an almost similar goal within the Shi’i establishment. In a debate organised and published by the journal Kiyan under the title of “Religious Pluralism” and elsewhere in his speeches and writings, Hojja-al-Eslam Muhammad Mujtahid Shabestari has made his contribution to the debate on religious reformation.

Shabestari’s views on religious pluralism are basically philosophical. His point of departure is the adaptability or non-adaptability of certain philosophical understandings of religion with religious pluralism. According to Shabestari, those philosophical systems that view “philosophical interpretations” as the expression of “hidden truths”, and proclaim that “supernatural sciences exist prior to human sciences”, are incompatible with religious pluralism. Such philosophical systems, he suggests, refuse to accept that the knowledge that is at the disposal of mankind is in fact “a knowledge of knowledge.” He then goes on to pose an alternative philosophical system, which is compatible to religious pluralism. Such a philosophical system, according to Shabestari, considers “knowledge to have begun with man”, and regards it essentially as the interpretation of symbols, and not as the awareness of essences. In this understanding of philosophy, the language of religion is also considered to be symbolic. This view presents similarities with philosophical hermeneutics and phenomenology.

Similarities to the philosophical tradition of Emmanuel Kant on epistemological pluralism are particularly evident in Shabestari’s philosophy of religion. Kant considered the gap between “the truth of what is” and the “truth of what appears to be” as the basis for arguments for epistemological pluralism. He
emphasised the importance of experience against dogma, and argued for recognition of the fact that the task of philosophy is to deal with the appearances of truth, not with its essences.

Shabestari too obviously advocates a view that places human religious experience over and above the theological search for absolute religious truth. In this sense, his philosophy is mainly concerned with the confrontation of human experience with the manifestations of the hidden Truth or God.\(^1\) However, in addition to this epistemological bent, Shabestari’s philosophy advocates a hermeneutic understanding of religion; and thus belongs to the tradition of Persian mystical philosophy (\textit{irfari}). His mysticism though has a modernist bent that brings it close to philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Shabestari suggests that a complete understanding of the absolute truth is not possible for the human beings due to their fundamental limitations. He writes: “Because experiences are manifest, no experience is without interpretation; and when experience is interpreted, it is affected by culture and the four limitations of man, that is: his historical limitation, linguistic limitation, social limitation, and physical limitation.”\(^2\) For Shabestari, the problem of the disagreement of interpretations of religious truth does not arise, because he sees this as a “natural phenomenon”.

In this sense, Shabestari’s view approaches a kind of post-modernist understanding of truth, such as that of Derrida. Of course, Shabestari does not go as far as the post-modernist philosophers to deny the existence of the “absolute Truth”; rather, his argument is based on the premise that various interpretations provide for various approaches to the same Truth, but none can grasp the totality of the Truth. This understanding has been criticised like that of the post-modernists for its susceptibility to philosophical relativism.

Shabestari is aware of this weakness and therefore tackles the issue carefully. He thus moves from the position of commitment to the “absolute Truth”, which is natural to his religious learning and conviction. On the ground that his arguments are in favour of the existence of the “absolute Truth”, he denies that from his arguments for the plurality of religious experiences, there follows an implicit acceptance of religious relativity. He says that the multiple manifestations of the “ultimate Truth” in various religious experiences do not imply a negation of the “absolute Truth” itself. Rather, it is this very “absolute Truth” that is appearing within the boundaries of the four limitations of human beings.\(^3\)

Shabestari appropriates the concept of the “concealment of absolute Truth” from the Persian mystical tradition, and argues that God, the “absolute Truth”, has destined man “to approach Him with mystery, ambiguity, and doubt.”\(^4\) He thus tries to find a theological legitimacy for his argument in support of the plurality of religious interpretations. In the atmosphere of religious intolerance, these statements carry strong political overtones.

The Politico-Philosophical Implications of Shabestari’s Views

The political overtones of Shabestari’s views are recognisable in their criticism of the attempt of the theocratic-minded ulama to apply an absolutist interpretation of religion in politics. As I have noted before, the official view of the

\(^{1}\) Ibid, p.3
\(^{2}\) Ibid, p. 3-4
\(^{3}\) Ibid, p.14
\(^{4}\) Ibid, p.16
theological apparatus of the government is one that validates theocracy on the basis of the traditional jurisprudential understandings of religion. Proposing that there are two types of existing religious laws in Shi'ism, Shabestari rejects one that he calls “archaic” and “stagnant” - one that, he believes, has turned religion into “meaningless rituals” superimposed by an ideological system. As an alternative, he advocates a religious law in which, “the historical, social and linguistic manifestations of the religious experience are alive and active.” For him, such a religious law is “alive and fluid.”

Shabestari differentiates between faith and religious law, associating the Islamic faith and the essence of religiosity with religious experience rather than with the religious law (fiqh). In this, he relies on the tradition of mysticism whereby “the human problem is the problem of correct interpretation of religious experience and not the experience itself.” This argument has important social and political implications. By refusing to recognise the faith with the religious law, Shabestari is in effect rejecting the State propaganda that violation of the government laws (backed by the dogmatic jurists) is tantamount to sin against religion; and that the decisions of the Islamic government create religious obligation. His views also amount to a critique of the government efforts to give “religious colouring” to the aspects of life that are not religious, such as politics, economy, technology, arts, etc.

As I have already mentioned, the unity of the “ultimate Truth” is not denied in Shabestari’s understanding of religious experience. From a Kantian philosophical perspective, Ahmad Naraqi, an Iranian scholar, has attributed this kind of interpretative understanding of religion to the epistemological need to distinguish between “the actual reality and the reality that makes itself appear before the mind.” As such, a single “intrinsic reality” may acquire plural identities when expressed as a “phenomenal reality”, or reality as it appears to the observer.

Contemporary Western philosophers like Isaiah Berlin, Charles Taylor and Richard Rorty have variously expressed the need to accept the plurality of truth as the basis of social and political tolerance. Accordingly, the important practical issue in social tolerance is to overcome the perception that authenticity is inherent in certain values and not in others prior to human intervention. Or as Nietzsche proposed, it is important to go beyond the prevalent structures of good and evil in order to validate alternative views as creative possibilities. The desirable social practice should be considered as one of making choices when more than one view of truth come into clash with each other, rather than considering one as superior to the others. Having to make choices between a variety of social goods, therefore, must not force us in the position of valorising some and demonising others.

In the Persian mystical literature, this way of approaching the truth has a long tradition. One example is the allegory of “elephant and the blind”, popularised by Rumi in the form of fiction in his Masnavi. This narrative, which has Biblical and Qur'anic origin, is one of the important sources of reference by Iranians for validating arguments on ethics and social morality. In this story, a bunch of blind people, who have had no visual experience of an elephant, give their impressions of the identity of the creature through the sense of touch. Those who touch the legs imagine the elephant as a pillar; those who touch the trunk think of elephant as a pipe, etc; but no one can grasp the visual representation of the elephant as a whole. “In the city of the

---

1 Ibid, pp.6-10
2 Ibid. p. 12
3 Ibid. pp 18-19
4 Ibid. p.21; these sentiments have also been echoed by Ayatollah Montazeri.
blind”, Shabestari notes, “no one can be the final judge, and no one supposition or viewpoint is superior to another, because there is no superior viewpoint from which to know the Truth.”

Shabestari’s Philosophical Hermeneutics

In his book, *Hermeneutic, Ketab va Sunnat* (Hermeneutics, the Book and the Tradition), Hojjat-al-Eslam Shabestari pursues his philosophical system further. In this book, he asserts that the task of the interpretation of religious texts, such as the *Qur’an*, should not be conferred exclusively upon the traditional science of *tafsir* (exegesis), and that therefore new interpretations ought to be welcomed. Shabestari notes that Muslim theologians and jurists have always understood religious texts on the basis of their own conceptual interpretations; and that this in itself should justify the openness required for proposing new understandings based on new interpretations.

In an interview with a Tehran magazine, Shabestari drew on Western philosophers such as Gadamer to validate his argument in *Hermeneutic, Ketab va Sunnat*. He argued that the conscious intentions of the author of a text could not determine the meaning of the text, and that a hermeneutical search for the meaning of a text should be focused on the traditions to which the text belongs. Meaning is thus understood as existing in the traditions independent of the author and his/her intended audience, but it emerges through the act of interpretation, which renders the text intelligible for its new readers in emerging environments. 2 Meaning thus enters the text via the traditions that form the environment of the existence of the author, and is recovered by the interpreter in a potentially different environment, hence the infinite possibilities for new interpretations and new meanings that may or may not include the author’s psychological intentions. Shabestari’s philosophical arguments also present similarities to Soroush’s position on plurality of religious knowledge raised in the *Contraction and Expansion*.

The Position of the Liberation Movement

The publication by *Nehzat-e Azadi-e Iran* (the Liberation Movement of Iran) of a text entitled *Tafsil va Tahlil-e Velayat-e Motlaq-e Faqih* (The Explanation and Analysis of the Absolute Governance of Jurist) may be considered as a movement toward directly challenging the political motifs of the ruling *Shi’i* jurists. Interestingly, this challenge also involves offering new interpretations of religious texts. It is important to note that this political group, despite the attempts by the government to undermine the integrity of its religious convictions, have remained true to its fundamental commitment to *Shi’i* Islam. The ideological wing of the government has taken the criticisms by the *Nehzat-e Azadi* very seriously. The jurists-turned-ideologues, such as Ayatollah Ahmad Azari-Qomi, have attempted to respond to this political-ideological challenge to the central concept of the Islamic Republic.

The thesis of *velayat-e faqih*, as I have explained earlier, was an innovative interpretation of the religious texts such the *Qur’an* and *hadith* by the late Ayatollah Khomeini. Disputes and criticisms of this thesis had already begun in the lifetime of the late Ayatollah. The earliest objections are attributed to grand Ayatollah Abol-Qasem Kho’i and his followers. They had rejected the idea of providing a political reading of the *Qur’anic* verse: “Obey God, and obey the Prophet, and those who have

---

1 Ibid, pp.34-35
2 This interview was conducted by the newspaper *Hamshahri* on Thursday, 7 November 1996.
authority among you”, which is the most important Qur’anic basis offered so far in support of the thesis of velayat-e faqih. This apolitical interpretation was in conformity with the practised religion. The traditional view understood the phrase “those who have authority among you” as not referring to the authority of the faqih, but to that of the twelve purely innocent Imams. The traditional interpretation was that in the absence of the innocent Imams, the role of the faqih was limited to making rulings on legal issues, and that there was no political velayat-e faqih.

The objection to a political understanding of velayat-e faqih, despite its root in the recent traditions of religious practice, proved to be flimsy and weak in the face of the momentous political events in Iran since the 1970’s. It did not reflect the changes that the Iranian society had undergone in its encounter with modernity. It had no connection with the social and political movements that had already begun outside and inside the religious domain. It did not even reflect the original political aspirations of the Shi’i political philosophy, which had sought political power for the Shi’i Imams. Although such aspirations had been suspended temporarily, they had never been given up completely. Nonetheless, the apolitical practice of the Shi’i establishment had alarmed some of the ulama to the dangers of social and political impotence of the religious authority. Ayatollah Khomeini’s thesis of velayat-e faqih was an innovative attempt to change this situation by shifting the interpretation of the Qur’an and the hadith from an apolitical understanding to an extremely political one. Khomeini had sought to connect religion at a very deep level with the social and political struggles of the people, and had thus attempted to save the religious establishment from perpetual decline.

The objection of Nehzat-e Azadi to the thesis of velayat-e faqih is totally different from the earlier objections, in that it seeks to approach the question by providing a modernist interpretation of the religious texts. Nehzat-e Azadi is determined that its innovative interpretations of the sacred texts could not be rejected on the basis of their being out of touch with social and political realities. It is also difficult for the government to attack Nehzat-e Azadi on the basis of its lack of religious conviction as it did in the case of leftists. In fact, Nehzat-e Azadi considers itself as one of the few centres of alternative religious and political thinking in Iran, which have survived the attempt of the absolutist theocrats to eradicate such circles. It provides a religious thinking that is loyal to the principal canons of the Shi’i Islam, but tries to, in Iqbal’s words: “reconcile eternity with change”.

In The Explanation and Analysis of the Absolute Governance of Jurist, the Nehzat-e Azadi invokes various Qur’anic verses such as Forqan 18, Kahf 102, Osara 111, En’am 14, Saba 41, Yousef 101, Showra 9, Towba 116, Ma’eda 99 and Baqara 257. According to the authors of The Explanation and Analysis, the absolute velayat-e faqih does not have a sound basis in the Qur’an. Although the Qur’an does demand people to obey those of authority among them, the authors of The Explanation and Analysis insist that these holders of authority are not meant to be the jurists. They advocate a philosophical and political liberalism according to which, in the absence of the infallible Imams, people should be considered fit to govern themselves on the basis of the laws that they derive from their beliefs and traditions within the embrace of the Islamic culture.

Nehzat-e Azadi understands the government as belonging to the people, and as such at their service. In this sense, its political philosophy, similar to that of Soroush, proposes a kind of religious secularism, i.e. a secularism that separates the Church and the State in order to secure the essence of religion but not necessarily its representations. At present though, the State is constituted on the basis of the absolute
government of the jurist (velayet-e motlaq-e faqih), according to which the highest jurist, or the supreme leader, has unlimited powers. As such, the supreme leader, who does not need to be even popularly elected, has among other authorities, the power to declare war, to command the armed forces, and to veto the legislation of the parliament and the decisions of the president. It is this kind of political interpretation of the Qur'ani to which Nehzat-e Azadi objects.

However, the objections of Nehzat-e Azadi are expressed primarily in theological rather than political terms. According to the Explanation and Analysis: “From the Qur'anic perspective, the absolute governance of the jurist is baseless and tantamount to polytheism (shirk). The originators and believers of velayet-e faqih, neither Mullah Ahmad Naraqi, nor Ayatollah Khomeini, had not made any references to the Qur'an for the proof of velayet-e faqih. But, since the victory of the revolution some of the proponents and defenders (of this thesis) have taken advantage of their media monopoly, and have selectively referred to the Qur'an, and hence have instigated the need for further references. The Qur'an does not allow for an absolute obedience to any governance, neither of the Shah, nor of any ruler, governor, jurist, theologian, etc. The Qur'an requires absolute obedience only to God and no other.”

A Theory of Government

Nehzat-e Azadi proclaims that absolute politico-religious authority (velayat-e motlaq), in the sense of the governance of God, which is referred to by the Qur'an, could have only been conferred upon the Prophet Muhammad and the infallible Imams (A'emmeh ma'soumin). It goes on to claim that even the Prophet and the Imams, despite their legitimate right to velayat, did not use their power in the sense of “depriving the people of their propriety, freedom and discretion”. Rather, according to The Explanation and Analysis, the Prophet and the Imams had sought to earn the allegiance and consent of the people for their legitimate rule.

The authors of The Explanation and Analysis then refer to various meanings that may be extracted from the term “valyy-e amr” (one who has authority over the affairs) in the Qur'an, and claim that in none of its meanings valyy-e amr implies the absolute governance of the faqih. Accordingly, valyy and velayat have been rendered in the Qur'an as “carer and caring”, “protector and protecting”, and also as “alliances of political and military nature”. And the Muslims are advised to put their trust in God, his Messenger and the “monotheist believers” for “care and protection”, and not to give “absolute allegiance” to the “polytheists” or anyone else for that matter.

One should be careful to see that here The Explanation and Analysis is stressing the advisory language of the Qur'an; and that the Qur'an advises the Muslim believers to ally themselves with the “monotheist believers”; and does not force the people to accept the “absolute authority” of anybody. The Explanation and Analysis admits that in some places in the Qur'an, Valyy is used in the meaning of “local governor” appointed by the Prophet Muhammad. However, it suggests that in none of these any absolute powers have been accorded the governors; and that they have never been placed above the law, the principles of the faith, and the rights of the people.

The authors of The Explanation and Analysis refer to the Qur'anic verse: (Osara, 36), which may be rendered as follows: “Do not follow that which you have no

1 The Explanation and Analysis of the Absolute Governance of the Jurist, a publication of the Nehzat-e Azadi-ye Iran, 1367/1988, pp.136-139
2 Ibid, p.137
3 Ibid, pp.137-138
knowledge of; the ears, the eyes and the heart are all responsible for that.” They then offer the following exegesis of this verse: “The Qur'an considers each individual to be generally the proprietor of and responsible for his/her beliefs, actions and conditions, and forbids the blind emulation and worship of anyone but God.” Here, The Explanation and Analysis tackles the notion of “emulation” or taqlid (popularly understood as following the rulings of qualified jurists in the matters of religious law) from a critical standpoint. Accordingly, the way that taqlid is practised at present - i.e. uneducated emulation - does neither comply with the intent of the Qur’an and the Shari’at, nor with the traditions of the Prophet and the infallible Imams.1

Another relevant Qur’anic verse that The Explanation and Analysis invokes addresses the issue of the freedom of belief (Baqara, 256). This verse may be rendered as follows: “There is no coercion or imposition in religion. The path to salvation and the path to sin have been made clear for everyone to see. Thus, those who put their faith in God and reject the taqut (the epitome of idolatry on earth) have certainly secured themselves on a rope that will never break.” For Nehzat-e Azadi, the interpretation of this verse is as follows: “God, out of His high regard for human beings, has invested them with freedom and discretion; and that is why the great Prophets have only acted as teachers. And in teaching the faith, they have always used the language of persuasion and advice, not force and coercion.”

Yet another Qur’anic verse quoted by the authors of The Explanation and Analysis to support the claim of the Nehzat-e Azadi that the interpretation of velayat-e faqih as propagated by the ruling jurists is not in compliance with the Qur’an is: (Ma’ida, 99). This verse is rendered as follows: “The Prophet has no responsibility higher than delivering the Message.” According to The Explanation and Analysis, God has explicitly and repeatedly warned the Prophet of Islam not to take the responsibility of enforcing or overseeing the actions of the people, for which he has neither been equipped nor permitted. The natural conclusion of this kind of rendering of the verse is: “Where the Prophet of Islam is not assigned, and has not been given the right, to coerce people to believe in or practice the faith, nor to subject the beliefs and actions of the people to inquisition; it naturally follows that nobody else including the jurists or the government agents have the right to do so.”

The authors of The Explanation and Analysis go on to refer to the Qur’anic verses that underline consultation and exchange of views in running the affairs of the Muslims: (Showra, 9). The highest point of their critique of the absolutist views of the velayat-e faqih is perhaps where they attack the tendency of these views to institute a dictatorial style in running the social and political affairs of the nation.5 From a religious perspective, they thus attack the absolutist concept of velayat-e faqih as a “dangerous, heretic innovation, which considering its disastrous religious and political consequences must be fully investigated and analysed.”6 In their analysis, the authors of The Explanation and Analysis turn to the Articles in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic that define the role of velayat-e faqih in order to emphasise the significance of the role of the people in running the political affairs of the nation. For instance, they dispute the official interpretation of the fifth Article of the Constitution, which defines the powers of the velayat-e faqih.

According to the fifth article of the Constitution: “In the absence of the Lord of the Age (the twelfth Imam), in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the governance of affairs

---

1 Ibid, p.42
2 Ibid, p.43
3 Ibid, pp.43-44
4 Ibid, p.44
5 Ibid. pp.44-45
6 Ibid. p.132
(velayat-e amr), and the leadership of the community (immamat-e ummat) is the responsibility of the just and virtuous jurist (faqih-eadel va ha taqva), who is knowledgeable and brave, has vision and management skills, and who is recognised by the majority as the leader. ...” According to the authors of The Explanation and Analysis, in interpreting the Constitution, the current ideologues of the Islamic Republic have misconstrued the intent of the late Ayatollah Khomeini, who originally spoke of velayat-e motlaq-e faqih. Instead, Nehzat-e Azadi stresses the subjection of the authority of the ruling faqih to the consent of the people and the essentiality of the consultation of the rulers with the people in decision making. They thus interpret Ayatollah Khomeini’s intent in speaking of “absolute governance” as a tactical move to build a bridge between the proponents and opponents of the traditional jurisprudence, and not to make political absolutism into a matter of fundamental religious binding.

The Issue of Civil Society

Another topic of interest to Nehzat-e Azadi-e Iran current debate in Iran is the question of civil society. For example, in a round table debate on the issue of civil society, organised and published by the journal Kiyan, a variety of views were expressed, which in many cases were critical of the approach of the absolutist theocrats to the issue. Among others, Ezatullah Sahabi, a former “liberal” minister, and a member of the Nehzat-e Azadi, has been vocal in expressing this criticism. I am not going to go into the details of this debate here; however, it is worthy to note that this debate too involves references to religious texts in order to provide new socially and politically motivated interpretations of these texts. For example, Sahabi refers to Imam Ali’s caliphate in the early days of Islam in order to provide an understanding of a style of government that is in affinity with the concept of civil society. Nahj-ul-Balaqa is a source of frequent references in this regard, as it contains a collection of Ali’s decrees, edicts and advises to Malek Ashtar, his appointed governor of Egypt.

Sahabi’s interpretation of Ali’s advises is that they are bent on limiting the power of government to a series of concrete social and economic tasks, such as the development of the land, collection of taxes and instituting social security. His intention is to show that in Ali’s government, which is universally recognised by the Shi'i Muslims as the epitome of just government and one to be emulated, there is no attempt to regulate the behaviour and belief of the people, such as their manner of clothing, prayer, etc. Here, Sahabi criticises the hard-line policies of the Islamic regime, which are bent on regulating social behaviour and particularly the sexual behaviour of the population in accordance with a set of rigid standards set by a dogmatic understanding of religion. These standards are inspired by a strong push for public piety exerted by the conservative jurists in power. It is a problematic issue and, perhaps, one that is most vital to the life of the ordinary people at the moment, particularly women and the youth.

On the Defence of Absolutist Theocracy

In defence of an absolute velayat-e faqih, the latter-day theocrat-ideologues, such as Ayatollahs Azari-Qomi, Jannati, Sane’i, Yazdi and others, insist on the exclusive right of the qualified jurists to interpret the religious traditions in a fashion to support their own version of an authentic Islamic polity and society. In their interpretation, the emphasis is placed on a literal understanding of the Shi'i political

---

1 Ibid, pp. 134-135
ideology as offered by Ayatollah Khomeini, and little significance is accorded to the expressed needs of the people at present. The attack of Ayatollah Ahmad Azari-Qomi against the Nehzat-e Azadi, reflected in his two book length texts, should be considered as part of this refusal to allow for the alternative interpretations of the traditions. Whereas, according to the Islamic modernists, new interpretations are vitally needed for the meaningful and productive development of the nation in the modern world.

It should be noted that in the camp of the theologians supporting the absolutist interpretations of velayat-e faqih, Ayatollah Azari and his newspaper Resaalat are significant players. He has written extensively in legitimising the absolute power of the supreme leader in the post-Khomeini era. In addition to his books exclusively treating the concept of velayat-e motlaq-e faqih, he has also written other books and articles that deal with the same issue in other contexts. For example, in another book-length text dedicated to the interpretation of the last will and testament of the late Ayatollah Khomeini, he has continued to formulate views in support of the velayet-e motlaq (absolute governance) of the jurist.

The intent of the arguments of Ayatollah Azari-Qomi, in his two volumes on velayat-e faqih, is to reject the criticisms of Nehzat-e Azadi in the Explanation and Analysis about the velayat-e motlaq-e faqih. He does this by demonstrating the compatibility of the absolute governance of the jurist with the Our'an and the hadith. In the introduction to the first volume which is entitled: Velayat-e Faqih from the Perspective of the Qur'an, he has explained his intention in writing this book as follows: “The velayate faqih, put forward by the honourable Imam Khomeini, is an essential component of the Islamic fiqh. However, it has not been discussed in depth. Some have taken advantage of this vacuum, and have attempted to induce the minds with their eclectic ideas. They have released publications to deny the Quranic base of velayat-e motlaq-e faqih, and have thus created doubts among the people, especially among the scholastic and academic communities. Therefore, ... in this text, I shall critically discuss their arguments and provide evidence from the Qur'an in proof of velayat-e motlaq-e faqih.”

Ayatollah Azari attacks his opponents in a polemical style right along the line of their two main objections to the velayat-e motlaq. Firstly, the objection that there is no direct references in the Qur'an to this concept. And secondly, the objection that the Qur'an has actually rejected the assignment of velayat-e motlaq to a “non-God”. On the issue of the lack of direct reference in the Qur'an to velayat-e faqih, he follows the traditional method of kalam to divide the Qur'anic verses to muhkamat (firmly grounded/definitive) and mutashabihat (contingent/open to interpretation). Accordingly, for the followers of the scholastic theology of kalam, the definitive verses, or those with firm interpretations, must be considered as the basis of interpretation of the verses for which there is no consensus.

According to the traditional kalam and fiqh, the definitive meanings of the muhkamat have been rendered by the great mujtahids in the collections of hadith over more than a thousand years. And it is the expert job of the living mujtahids to render the appropriate meanings of the mutashabihat in every age. I have already noted that modern philosophers of religion such as Soroush and Shabestari dispute a “static” and “literal” understanding of the muhkamat and mutashabihat. Rather, they believe that definitive or non-definitive, as an attribute of a verse, should be understood in a “dynamic”, “progressive” and “symbolic” sense; and that all the Qur'anic verses may be subject to various interpretations relevant to the age. Accordingly, it is in relation with the type of religious knowledge - which prevails through critical dialogue in each

age - that the *muhkamat* and *mutashabihat* of that age are determined. And naturally, the religious knowledge of each age is determined by its relationship with other fields of human knowledge in that age.

Ayatollah Azari, as an expert in the traditional *kalam*, considers the references of his opponents to the *Qur'an* on the issue of *velayat-e faqih* to be invalid. He devalues the efforts of the opposition on the ground that their point of departure is the *mutashabihat* rather than the *muhkamat*. According to Azari, the contingent or non-definitive verses have been intended by God to preserve the integrity of the *Qur'an* in the face of the attempts of the enemies to distort it. The non-existence of a direct reference to *velayat-e faqih* in the *Qur'an*, therefore, does not mean that there is no support for that thesis in the Holy Book. The support comes, according to Azari, from the “appropriate” and “correct” interpretation of the definitive or firmly grounded verses, based on the authentic *hadith* and the human capacity for rational judgement.

Azari then offers examples of other cases where universal truths of the faith have not been explicitly mentioned in the *Qur'an*, such as the *velayat* of Imam Ali (the divine right of Ali to the leadership of the Muslim community). Although the *velayat* of Ali is not explicitly mentioned in the *Qur'an*, he says, no *Shi'i* believer would doubt its fundamental truth. As another example of the lack of explicit reference to accepted facts of the faith, he mentions the number of times that a Muslim must pray everyday. And yet another example is the details of the rules and regulations of the daily prayer (*namaz*), which although not mentioned directly in the *Qur'an*, have been extracted from its firmly grounded verses, and have thus been established beyond doubt. He finally refers to the lack of direct reference in the *Qur'an* to the issue of government, which is “so vital to the well being and destiny of the Muslim societies”.

For Ayatollah Azari, the Islamic government and the *velayat-e faqih* are essentially identical. Therefore, in responding to the opponents who question the validity of *velayat-e motlaq* due to the lack of any *Qur'anic* evidence to uphold it, Azari poses a question of his own. “Is it conceivable that in a grand and comprehensive book such as the *Qur'an*, there should be no references to such an important issue as government, which is a basic necessity for the Islamic communities?” And, he goes on to suggest that the identity of the concept of the Islamic government with the *velayat-e faqih* is of such importance that without it the religion would be incomplete.

Azari considers the lack of direct reference to certain important issues in the *Qur'an* as something intended. This is because, he argues, the *Qur'an* is “a timeless and universal message”, which must be rendered comprehensible by expert interpreters at any particular time. For Azari, the original interpretation of the *Qur'an* has been rendered by the Prophet Muhammad himself, and following him by the infallible Imams, and in their absence by the *Shi'i* jurists. He claims that *velayat-e faqih* has been extracted from the non-definitive verses of the *Qur'an* by the legitimate authority of the *Shi'i* jurists. Azari goes on to argue that in order to prove the *Qur'anic* base of the *velayat-e faqih*, it is only necessary to prove the necessity of government in Islam. Once this is established, he says, it will legally and logically follow that none other than the *faqih* is qualified to be the supreme leader of the Islamic State.

---

2 Ibid, pp.12-13
3 Ibid, p.13
5 Ibid, p.17
The Essentiality of Government in Islam

Ayatollah Azari sets out to prove the essentiality of government in Islam by referring to selected Qur'anic verses. To establish the basis of his argument, he first defines the terms: velayat and hokumat. His understanding of these terms is the same as and, at the same time, totally different to that of Soroush and Shabestari. It clearly shows how a common symbolic expression may gain various actual meanings. Velayat, he defines, as “protecting” and “looking after”, like in the role of a father with respect to his children. And when extended to include the people in general, the same concept will mean: “looking after the affairs of the people in a manner that will protect their interests.” The relationship between the vahiy (authority) and the people, he admits, must be such that the authority of the ruler be accepted by the people with consent; “they (the ruler and the people) must both work together to institute justice and order in the society.” 1 In practice, however the authority of the vahiy has come to mean absolute authority over public life and property, and vast powers to exercise this authority.

Hokumat, Ayatollah Azari defines, as “the power to prevent and hold back.” Hokumat is from the root: hokm that may be rendered as judgement and command. According to Azari, hokumat provides for the authority to stop “those who transgress against the rights and properties of others.” His language here is very close to the language of “the rule of law” in the Western democracies. (It shows how the same principles means the same and at the same time different things in practice.) Azari concludes that the essentiality of hokumat (government) in Islam is self-evident because “the Qur'an is clear on the question of order in the society”, and because “the absence of government would mean chaos and the rule of the law of jungle.” 2 Azari here interprets the Qur'an in light of a political philosophy that sounds Hobbesian. He sees the existence of the State as a natural and rational phenomenon, which conforms to “reason”, and whose role it is to hold back “the war of all against all”.

To stress the eligibility of the faqih to take a role similar to that of the Prophet and the infallible Imams in running the affairs of the State, he refers to government as a second tier responsibility of the Prophet and the Imams. As a minor responsibility then, it does not require infallibility, and thus can be easily taken up by the faqih. The first tier responsibilities are those belonging to the sphere of the Divine, where the Prophet and the Imams perform the exclusive duty of delivering the Divine Message or the Revealed Word. In government, according to Ayatollah Azari, the running of the social and political affairs of the community is at stake, where the Divine Law (Shari'at) must be implemented. As the agents for the implementation of the Shai'at, the faqih (jurist) is thus fit to perform the same social and political duties that the Prophet and the Imams did. In support of his claim, Azari refers to the Qur'anic duty of amr-e be ma'arouf va nahyy-e az monkar (enjoin good and prohibit evil). He suggests: “this duty, more than anybody else, is upon the jurists, who have been trusted by the Prophet and the infallible Imams.”

For the defenders of the velayat-e moliaq, an important point of reference in the Qur'an is the verse: (Al-e Omran, 104). This verse has been rendered as follows: “A group among Muslims must take the responsibility to persuade people to do good and prevent them from doing evil; the group that takes this responsibility and act upon it will find

1 Ibid, p.46
2 Ibid, p.50
3 Ibid, pp.82-87
salvation.” Ayatollah Azari’s reading of this verse is quite literal. He writes: “Basically
government is nothing other than the instrument of upholding the good and forbidding the
evil; however, this is done not only by preaching or propagating, but also by assuming the
authority to enact and implement laws.”

A Juridical View of Absolute Theocracy

In his second volume on velayat-e faqih, Ayatollah Azari discusses this
concept from the perspective of the grand jurists of the history of Shi’i Islam. His
principle argument in this book is the reiteration of his earlier argument that in the
absence of the infallible Imams, it is only the faqih who can identify the intent of the
Divine at each historical conjunction, and that it is only the faqih who can extract the
most appropriate social and political rulings from the religious texts and traditions in
each period. But in a new twist to his earlier arguments, he suggests that the faqih is
responsible to uphold the principles (usul) of the religion, and if necessary, to
temporarily suspend some religious sub-principles (forou’) in order to preserve the
integrity of the principles.1 He even proposes that “if in a certain period, religious
practices such as praying, fasting, pilgrimage, etc. weakened the Islamic order or
threatened the integrity of the faith,” it would be in the authority of the ruling jurist to
suspend those practices, or render them non-obligatory.2 This flexibility in Azari’s
arguments, however, is not to open up the religious injunctions to unauthorised
interpretations. It mainly arises from the need of the ruling jurists themselves to
justify their own non-conventional interpretations of the religious codes, which has
become frequently necessary in legitimising their political rule.

According to Azari, in order to do his political and social duties, the faqih can
use the power put at his disposal by the Shi’i figh (i.e. ijtihad) to provide new
interpretations of the religion. Although, the faqih is not permitted to re-interpret the
principles of the faith, his powers to re-interpret the sub-principles are practically
unlimited. As such, the regulation of almost every aspect of social, political and
economic life may be claimed by the faqih to be in the sphere of his authority.
Starting from these vast religious powers, it is not difficult for the faqih to claim
authority over the day-to-day social, political and economic affairs of the population
through the exercise of government. Ayatollah Azari’s interpretation of religion thus
confers upon the jurist, who takes the position of velayat-e faqih, vast political and
legal powers. According to the Ayatollah, the role of the faqih is to forge (ja’at) new
rulings that would suit the specific social environment of each age. This authority, he
insists, would not threaten or question the intent of the Word of God and the traditions
of the Prophet and the infallible Imams.4

Ayatollah Azari defies the critics of “the absolute governance of the jurist” for
their attempt to misconstrue the term “absolute” (motlaq). The power of faqih is
“absolute”, he explains, only as much as “the executive power” is concerned, like that
of an elected president or a head of State in the context of Western democracies.
According to Azari: “the jurist-ruler is also accepted by the majority of the population and is

---

1 Ibid, p.109
2 The faqih will thus be permitted to suspend such important religious practices as namaz (the daily prayer), ronzech
(fasting in the month of Ramadhan) and hajj (the annual pilgrimage to Mecca), if he sees it in the interest of the
principles of the faith. The principles of the faith consist of towhid (the principle of the unity of God), nabovvat
(the principle of the prophecy), ma’ad (the principle of resurrection), adl (the principle of the justice of God) and
imamat (the principle of the authority of the descendants of the Prophet).
4 Ibid, p.42
vested with the same powers as the head of a democratic State.” In a democracy, Azari says: “the executive powers of an elected head of State has to be obeyed not only by his supporters, but also by his opponents; and in this sense his government is absolute.” Azari thus presents the faqih as a popular political leader, who also inherits the politico-religious authority of the Prophet and the Imams. Here, Ayatollah Azari, more than anybody else, has the late Ayatollah Khomeini in mind, who in the early 1970's had called on religious believers, scholars and students to gain social and political consciousness, so that they could bring an Islamic government to power.

For the rest of the second volume of his Velayat-e Faqih, Azari attacks the claim of the Nehzat-Azadi and others who claim velayat-e motlaq-e faqih does not even have deep roots in the tradition of Shi'i jurisprudence. According to this claim, it was only in the nineteenth century that the jurist Mulla Ahmad Naraqi spoke, albeit indirectly, of the political aspects velayat-e faqih for the first time; and there had been no other mention of the concept during more than a thousand-year Shi'i tradition of jurisprudence prior to Mulla Ahmad. Azari, therefore, painstakingly tries to extract support for the thesis of velayat-e faqih from the long tradition of the Shi'i jurisprudence. He thus invokes the texts of such highly regarded figures in the history of Shi'i jurisprudence as Kulaini, Ibn-e Babuyeh, Sheikh Saduq, Sheikh Mufid, Khajeh Nasir-ad-Din Tusi, Allameh Hilli, Muhaqiq-e Ardebili, Shahid-e Thani, etc. In none of these, however, there is an explicit reference to the velayat-e faqih as a political ideology. Rather, Ayatollah Azari refers to these texts in order to demonstrate that the arguments of these great jurists can be interpreted in a way that a logical support for the political velayat-e faqih will emerge.

The Theory of Velayat-e Faqih: Alternative Interpretations

There have been various attempts by theologians, religious reformers and even academics to offer alternative interpretations of the theory of velayat-e faqih. A major reform trend in these interpretations confers a significant role upon the people in legitimising the political rule of the faqih as the supreme leader. Interestingly, this approach comes not only from the lay religious intellectual circles, but also from within the clerical establishment.

Without denying the validity of a political velayat-e faqih, Ayatollah Ni'matullah Salihi-Najafabadi, for example, has put forward an interesting argument about the sources of legitimacy of the rule of the faqih in his book Velayat-e Faqih: Hokumat-e Salihan (The Governance of the Jurist: The Government of the Worthy). Ayatollah Salihi is the controversial cleric, who wrote the politically and religiously emotive book Shahid-e Javid (The Eternal Martyr) in the Pahlavi period. In his Shahid-e Javid, Ayatollah Salihi had offered a controversial interpretation of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, which was rejected by some of the high ranking conservative ulama at the time of its publication. In his revolutionary interpretation, which was apt to be adopted by the radical clerics in their anti-monarchist campaign during the Pahlavi period, the uprising of Imam Hussein and his death was seen not as a predestined act of a saint - as it was conventionally understood, but as the action of a

---

1 Ibid, p.13
2 Ibid, p.29
3 See especially the works of Hamid Enayat, Hamid Dahbshi and Amir Arjomand on velayat-e faqih
4 Ayatollah Salihi has been an ally of Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, the heir apparent of Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1980s, who was later on discredited due to his disagreements with Ayatollah Khomeini over the treatment of the political opposition.
socially and politically conscious revolutionary hero. At the time, Salihi’s critics accused him of questioning the infallibility of the Imams.  

In his analysis of *Velayat-e Faqih: Hokumat-e Salihan*, Ahmad Kazemi Moussavi has critically reviewed the Salihi’s interpretation of the theory of *velayat-e faqih*. In his book, Ayatollah Salihi has emphatically argued for the role of “people’s acknowledgement of the supreme faqih” in the legitimacy of the political rule of the jurist. He has thus criticised the conventional approaches to the *velayat-e faqih* as academic and ignorant of the “vital role of the people in validating the faqih’s authority.”

In the current political atmosphere in Iran, Salihi is not alone in his view that the consent of the people should be considered as the only valid sign of the legitimation of incumbent governments. As noted earlier, some politico-religious groups and associations as well as many clerics and lay religious intellectuals and activists have insisted on the role of the people in validating the political authority of the faqih. They have, for example, referred to the notions of *showra* (consultation) and *bey’at* (oath of allegiance) in the Qur’an to emphasise the essentiality of popular participation in the political rule of the faqih. But, as Moussavi has suggested, Salihi’s significance is in his attempt to systematically incorporate the modern concepts of “majority rule”, “social contract” and “representation” into the Shi’i political philosophy.

### Majority Rule, Social Contract and Representation: Islamic Traits

In his bold interpretation of the notion of *velayat-e faqih*, Ayatollah Salihi has argued that concepts of majority rule, social contract and political representation are part and parcel of the essence of the Islamic faith. In order to support his argument on the conformity of Islam with the notion of majority rule, Salihi refers both to the Qur’an and the hadith. He has invoked, for example, the Qur’anic verse: “fulfil your obligations” (Chapter 5: 5/1), and to a certain hadith, whereby the Prophet recommends the soldiers under the leadership of one of his disciples to elect a new leader should their incumbent leader be killed in combat.

On the question of social contract, Salihi refers to the Islamic notion of *bey’at* (allegiance) as the legal channel for the validation of the contract between the leader and his people. He defines *bey’at* not as a confirmation of the ruler - as it is conventionally understood - but as “investing the ruler with authority”. Against the traditional jurisprudence whereby *bey’at* creates an obligation on the part of the people to fulfil their vows made with the Holy Imams, Salihi purports that since the modern rulers are not divinely appointed, therefore the *bey’at* creates for them a
reciprocal obligation toward the people. Thus, “the authority of the leader is not established before the social contract is concluded.”¹

On the question of political representation, Salihi invokes the Islamic concept of vikalat (power of attorney) to argue that “the leader of an Islamic community is the deputy of the people, not the Imam.”² As Moussavi has suggested, Salihi’s reference here is to Nahj-al-Balaqa whereby Imam Ali tells his governors: “You are the treasures of the people and the deputies of the community.” On the account that the power of attorney is revocable, Salihi concludes that the people could dismiss the leader, if he did not fulfill his obligations. But he insists that the leader, although he is not a saint, must nevertheless possess saintly qualities of justice, piety and virtue in dealing with the people; otherwise the people will have the right to dismiss him all the same.

Ayatollah Salihi then resorts to the tradition of Islamic rationalist philosophy, and particularly to Ibn-Sina, in order to establish logical justifications for his religious arguments. He argues that the political authority of the velayat-e faqih does not imply religious allegiance on the part of the people since it is essentially an issue concerning “human intellect” not “religious tenets”.³

The rise of the concept of popular participation in politics is a clear outcome of the significant role of the people in bringing to power the current Islamic regime. The heating up of such debates at present is particularly indicative of the resistance of the people to the push of certain politician-clerics to use traditional Islamic concepts to pose their own rule as divine and hence free from popular checks and public obligations.

**The Last Will and Testament**

A contemporary politico-religious document, which is currently playing an important legitimising role in the State politics in Iran is the last will and testament of the late Ayatollah Khomeini, which has been published posthumously under the title: Vasiatnamey-e Siyasi-Elahiy-e Emam Khomeini (The Political-Divine Testament of Imam Khomeini). This document may be considered as an important political text of the post-Khomeini era, particularly because it has become a source of frequent invocations for politico-religious groups, both inside and outside the government. The Divine-Political Testament of Imam Khomeini, therefore, is a document, which despite its contemporary nature, has already been subject to multiple interpretations with serious political implications.

An example of such interpretations is Ayatollah Azari-Qomi’s Commentary on the Testament, which highlights the important role that the interpretation of this document plays in domestic and foreign policies of the Islamic Republic in the absence of Ayatollah Khomeini. Azari refers to this document as “the fundamental law of the Islamic Revolution”, and a document that identifies “the main components of the revolution”. According to him, two of the main components of the revolution are “the export of the Revolution”, and “the construction of the Islamic government in its material and spiritual dimensions.”⁴ In his Commentary, Ayatollah Azari has also highlighted four main legacies handed down in the Testament: 1) the theory of the Islamic government, or the velayat-e faqih; 2) the program for a world revolution; 3)

---

¹ Ibid, p. 104
² Ibid, p. 105
³ Ibid, p. 106
the traditions of Ayatollah Khomeini himself; and 4) a model for the world Islamic government. Due to the political significance of the last will and testament of Ayatollah Khomeini, I shall discuss its main points in more detail.

The Testament begins with a quote from the Prophet Muhammad: “I leave among you the thaqaleyn, the Book of Allah (the Qur’an) and my etrat. Verily they will be inseparable from each other until the day that they return to me at the hawd.” From the outset, the Testament reminds the Shi’i believers of the betrayals that have been perpetrated against the thaqaleyn since the demise of the Prophet, particularly the betrayal of the Umayyads a millennia and a half ago. The Testament then warns the contemporary Muslim believers against the conspiracies of the modern enemies of Islam; i.e. the United States and Israel. It also alerts the Muslims against the leaders of the Islamic States, who have friendly relations with the U.S. and Israel, including King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, King Hussein of Jordan, King Hassan of Morocco, and President Mubarak of Egypt.

The Testament repeatedly refers to the Islamic Revolution as a divine phenomenon and hence distinct from all other revolutions. It emphasises that the secret of the perpetuation of the Islamic Republic, despite the conspiracies of the enemies, is in the divine motivation that drives it toward building an ideal Islamic government. It goes on to reiterate the harmony of Islam with science and technology, as well as its essential concern with politics and the manner that the affairs of Islamic societies are run.

The Testament also emphasises the importance of the political and legal institutions of the Islamic Republic in upholding the principles of the Shari’at. In his testament, Khomeini calls on the people to support the government not because it has already achieved the status of an ideal Islamic State. Rather, he demands this support because “this government is still in its childhood”, and as such is like “a fragile being on a dangerous path”, which is destined to lead to the institution of the ideal government of Islam. He insists that “this government is under constant threat by the internal and external enemies,” and as such needs the unequivocal support of the people. He also praises those who have sacrificed their lives for the Islamic government and encourages the believers to be always prepared for the ultimate sacrifice, i.e. the achievement of the honour of martyrdom in defending the Islamic government.

The Testament rejects the calls to curb the intervention of the clergy in politics as a colonial and imperialist plot against Islam. This plot, allegedly, aims at weakening the empowering influence of Islam in creating a culture of protest against the West. The call for the exclusion of the ulama from politics, according to Ayatollah Khomeini, particularly seeks to make the younger generation of Muslims believers feel that their cultural values are outmoded and inferior to the Western culture. It thus tries to alienate Muslims from their roots and hold back their progress.

---

1 *Ibid*, pp. 10-21
2 The Arabic word *thaqaleyn*, the dual form of *thiqal*, is derived from the root *thagal*, which was used in Arabic to refer to anything that was precious, momentous and weighty. The *thaqaleyn* has been rendered in the *hadith* as the two precious things that the Prophet has left among the Muslim believers, i.e. the Holy Qur’an and his etrat (household).
3 The *etrat* refers to the members of the Prophet’s *ahl-ul-beya* (household) including Imam Ali, his daughter Fatimah, the sons of Ali and Fatimah, Imam Hassan and Imam Hussein and their descendants up to and including the Hidden Imam, Muhammad Ibn-e Hassan, *Valiyy-e Asr* (the Lord of the Age).
4 *Hawd* is understood as the place in the hereafter where the *thaqaleyn* will be reunited with the Prophet.
The View of the West

In the Testament, Khomeini has made it abundantly clear that his will was not intended only for the Iranian people, and that it addressed "all Islamic nations and the oppressed of the world from whichever nationality and religion." This theme has had serious implications in the foreign policy development in Iran. It has created a variant of the old interpretation of the image of the West in the political life of Iran.

If we agree with Edward Said that the "East" exists in the imagination of the "West", by the same token, we should be able to also declare that the "West" also exists in the imagination of the "East". The imaginary of the West has occupied a large part of the raison d'etre of the existence of the Islamic government on earth. The image of the West is the main theme around which the Islamic Republic has built an elaborate ideological structure for foreign policy development. The image of the West also occupies a large part of the imagination of the ordinary people in Iran. The modern image of the West has been perpetual intellectual concern because of the constant confrontation of Iran with the West since the colonial period. Ever since the ancient wars with Greeks, Iranians had not had any direct hostility with the West until the nineteenth century. The influence of the Western political and social ideas on the course of development in Iran since the late nineteenth century has been significant and well documented.

Ayatollah Khomeini's last will and testament reiterates this modern image of the West, whereby the Western powers and particularly that of the United States appear as a source of "evil" in the life of the "oppressed of the world". This pessimistic view of the West, along the negative view of Islam in the West, is a major contributor to the present hostility of the Iranian government towards the United States. In his Testament, Ayatollah Khomeini calls on the Muslim writers and scholars "to correct the mistaken ideas of the Muslims" about the political world order. "What is said, and is being said - that the Prophets were only concern with spiritual matters; and that they rejected participation in government and worldly political leadership; ...and that we must do the same - is a tragic mistake; and (if followed) will make the Islamic nations deprived, and hence will force them to open the doors for the blood sucking colonisers to come and take over."

The theme of questioning the status-quo political order of the world as unjust and hypocritical is the main theme of Khomeini's view of the Western global dominance; and one of the main purposes of the Islamic government is considered to be its mission to correct the world order. In this sense, the Islamic government has a global as well as national responsibility to reject "Satanic governments, dictatorships and tyrannies".

But Khomeini's concerns are not merely political; for him, political power is a tool for "spreading ethics and social justice." He thus emphasises in his Testament on the role of the Islamic government to reject "perverse and worldly motives, accumulation of wealth and power, and leaning towards false gods." The role of the West in alienating the colonised people from their original identity by spreading false identities is a recurring theme of the Testament. For example, it says: "This sad story is lengthy, and the blows that we have received and will continue to receive from it are deadly. Sadder than this is the fact that they (the West) have kept the oppressed and enslaved nations back and forced them to become mere consumers (of the Western products)."

---

1 See especially the works on the Constitutional Revolution by Algar, Arjomand, Abrahamian, Bayat, and Fischer.
3 Ibid, pp. 7-8
4 Ibid, pp. 10-11
The Testament criticises the existing Islamic States other than Iran for their “mindless and blind obedience to the West”. It proclaims: “This artificial and mindless nonsense has led us to the point that we can no longer rely on ourselves, and instead blindly imitate the West in every aspect.” In his Testament, Khomeini continues his struggle against what he calls the "Westoxicated (Gharbzadeh) intellectuals. To him, “the total surrender of these intellectuals to the West in all matters related to thought has made the cultural, literary, scientific, and industrial accomplishments of Iranians in the past subject to criticism and ridicule.” He especially criticises the secular intellectuals of Iran for their attempts to present religious commitment as a sign of backwardness, and to equate “lack of regards for religious and spiritual matters” with “being enlightened and urbane”.

Khomeini also invokes ethnic and racial discriminations as a theme of his attacks on the West and the “Westoxicated” intellectuals. “You must realise”, he says, “that the Aryan and the Arab races are no less than the European, American and Russian races.” Although the delineation of race along the line of nationality, used here by Ayatollah Khomeini, does not correspond to the accepted academic concepts of race, it shows how the question of nationality still plays a dominant role in determining the language of various conflicts in the minds of the Muslims. In an effectively political language, Khomeini is addressing himself to the collective feelings of the ordinary Muslim believers, who sense that the Western treatment of their civilisation and ethnicity carries a strong measure of condescension and superiority. This sentiment is based on the perception that the West has treated the Muslims, in general, and the Iranian people, in particular, as a people of inferior race. Muslim Iranians feel very strongly the arrogance and insensitivity in the American and European rhetoric about the Islamic civilisation, which has connotations of racial and ethnic superiority of the West. In fact, there could be no ambiguity about the distinct difference between the derogatory language that is used collectively by the West to address Muslims as backward and uncivilised people, and the more dignified language that is used between the Americans and their European allies. Khomeini’s reference to Russia is perhaps due to the concern that he still had with the threat of communism to Islam up to the time of his death in 1989.

It is important that he puts Russia in the category of the West and not as he had done earlier, at the level of a super power of the East. In fact, toward the end of his political career, and before the official end of the cold war, Khomeini dropped the language of division of the world between the superpowers of the East and the West, and referred to the ultimate manipulation of the Soviet Union by the United States.

A Message to the Oppressed of the World

Ayatollah Khomeini’s message in his Testament to the oppressed people of the world is: “If you have found yourselves, you need not despair; so, refuse to trust anyone but yourselves; in the long run, you will be able to do anything or build anything that you wish.” The Ayatollah’s economic message is heavily burdened with the rhetoric of a kind of

---

1 Ibid, p.11
2 Ibid, pp. 11-12
3 Ibid, p. 12
4 It is worth mentioning that the political instinct of the Ayatollah in the mid-1980s was somewhat sharper than many other political leaders in the world. He almost predicted the downfall of communism in the Soviet Union. Sensing that big changes were forthcoming, he even sent a special envoy to the then Soviet leader, Michael Gorbachev. In his message to Gorbachev, he warned him against the slippage of the Soviet block into “the American trap”, and invited him to join forces with Islam.
5 Khomeini, R. The Last Will and Testament, pp 12-13
nationalist protectionism. Accordingly: "The government and political leaders must not allow the importation of goods that create consumerism and destroy the domestic economy. Instead, you should be satisfied with what your own economy can produce until such time that the domestic economy can produce whatever is needed."\(^1\)

The Testament proposes a kind of social democracy in socio-economic administration. It declares that Islam neither approves of the "unbridled capitalism of the West", nor does it oppose private property like communism. According to the Testament: "Islam provides for a balanced regime in which private property is recognised and respected with proper limitations on the origin of property rights and consumption, such that if it is properly implemented ...social justice will be realised."\(^2\) The Testament then warns against the interpretations of religious text that wish to push Islamic economy towards capitalism or socialism.

### The Enduring Legacy of the Hostility toward the West

As I have hinted earlier, the hostility toward the West is based on the understanding of the West as a monolithic phenomenon, which is perceived to be the main source of political, social, cultural and economic problems of the Islamic societies. This perception was emphasised by Ayatollah Khomeini throughout his political career, and particularly in his role as the leader of the Islamic Revolution and the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and as I have noted, was also reiterated in his last will and testament. As such, it has deeply influenced the post-revolutionary political and intellectual thought. Of course, as we have seen earlier, the anti-Western rhetoric was not peculiar to Khomeini, and had been conceptualised by a generation of modern intellectuals.

The hostile view of the West found intellectual formulation particularly since the 1960s following the publication of Jalal Al-e Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication).\(^3\) The anti-Western legacy of Ale-Ahmad was the key to the formulation of the Shi’i ideological quest for a religiously based modern collective identity for Iranians as a modern nation. It influenced the main ideologues of the Islamic Revolution, notably Shari’ati, Motahhari and Khomeini. Al-e Ahmad himself was raised in a religious environment. At a young age, he was sent to the Shi’i shrine city of Najaf in Iraq to become a seminarian.\(^4\) It is true that Al-e Ahmad’s anti-Westernism was influenced by his affiliation with the Tudeh Party in the 1940s, which was based on the Marxist-Leninist ideological and political critique of the West as an imperialist power. This view of the West was based on the theory of “imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism” developed by Lenin. In the bipolar division of the world to the Soviet and American block during the Cold War, the necessity of an international anti-imperialist struggle was further emphasised by the Soviet ideologues. By contrast, the anti-Westernism of Al-e Ahmad, as developed after his dismay with the Tudeh Party and communism, was rather deeply religious, cultural, phenomenological, existential and increasingly nativist. It had mainly to do with the nature of the West, and as such presented similarities to the philosophical critiques of modernity of the type offered by Heidegger and Sartre. It also became increasingly connected with the modernist cultural critique of the West, which had developed in

---

1. Ibid, p.13
2. Ibid, pp. 23-24
Iran since the late nineteenth century and had continued throughout the twentieth century.

This intellectual tradition reached new heights in the late 1940s and afterwards. As Mehrzad Boroujerdi has argued in his study of the encounter of Iranian intellectuals with the West, intellectuals like Seyyed Fakhroddin Shadman and Ahmad Fardid, who were equipped with both traditional and modern training, were among the early initiators of the nativist discourse that anticipated Al-e Ahmad's discourse of *Gharbzadegi*. Shadman and Fardid, in fact, were the first thinkers "to detect the rise of an intellectual enigma with respect to the West."¹ Shadman, who was form a clerical background and learned literature, jurisprudence and logic in Iran, and law and history in France and England, had reflected on the problematic of the encounter of Iran with the Western modernity since the late 1940s. Referring to the memories of Iran's humiliation at the hand of the Western colonial powers in the nineteenth century, he advocated a thoughtful appropriation of the Western civilisation, which by preserving the integrity of the Persian language and the Iranian-Islamic cultural heritage would prevent Iran's turning into a "powerless captive" of the West.² But as Boroujerdi has explained, his "fixation" on the Persian Language and his simplistic views of the cultural encounter with the West indicated that "he had not discerned the multidimensional and fundamental nature of the challenge of modernity."³

Fardid, who also had both traditional and modern training, was well versed in the philosophy of Heidegger, and gave a philosophical twist to the dichotomy of Orient-Occident.⁴ He argued: "All Islamic countries and indeed all oriental nations, without exception, are situated in a phase of history in which, contrary to their Western counterparts, they can no longer be in possession of their own history."⁵ According to Fradid, the Orient as the seat of the divine revelation and ecclesiastical thought was the original source of the Greek logic, the medieval theology and the modern Western humanist philosophy. But the Renaissance humanism, for all its concern with human dignity, "has given rise to a technological all-encompassing ethos that has deprived modern humans of morality" by becoming the seat of the world domination.⁶ Fardid saw Western modernity entangled in an ethical crisis, which is almost impossible to escape. Nonetheless, he insisted that Occidental modernity had become "the historical destiny" of the world, and for the people of the Orient to resist total alienation, it is necessary "to become Westernised" in the sense of becoming "cognisant about the adversary." According to Boroujerdi, Fardid's treatment of the "essence" of Western modernity was a precursor of the intellectual trend that later addressed the need for a distinct collective identity and the notion of *Gharbzagegi* in Iran. It was left for Al-Ahmad to enhance the notion of *Gharbzadehigi* to the level of a religious-nationalist ideology.

In the early 1960s, Al-e Ahmad published his *Ghanzadehigi* in which he both, offered a critique of the Western-oriented Iranian liberal and socialist intellectualism,
and put “the question of national and ethnic identity” on the political agenda. He spoke of Gerbzadegi as a disease, which should be diagnosed in order to identify its cause and possibly its cure. For Al-e Ahmad, the malady of Westoxication was a sense of “otherness” caused both by both, foreign intervention, and domestic submission. In this context, he viewed the Western science and technology as the instruments of human mastery, which he called the “essence of the Western civilisation.” He thus warned against submission to the Western dominance in Iran, which would destroy its “cultural authenticity”, undermine its political independence and plunder its economy.

In his other work Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat-e Roshanfekran (On the Services and Treason of the Intellectuals), Ale-Ahmad criticised Iranian secular intellectuals for abandoning the tradition of indigenous Shi‘ism and their resultant distance form the majority of people. He thus advocated an intellectual return to native traditions and a cultural and political alliance between the intellectuals and the radical Shi‘i ulama in order to defend Iranian national and religious identity against Western dominance. For him Shi‘ism became the pillar of modern Iranian national identity, and the Shi‘i ulama the natural leaders of the masses. He was harshly critical of the ignorance of secular intellectuals of the political virtues of the Shi‘i ulama, their historical role in offering resistance against injustice and their capacity to mobilise the masses.

Instead of the West, Al-e Ahmad looked to the East to find models for native political movements against Western domination. For him Gandhi and his movement for independence were the perfect examples of how modern resistance against Western domination could take shape, and end up in victory. However, Ale-Ahmad has been criticised for the harshness of his criticism of secular intellectuals, as if they were solely responsible for the modern misfortunes of Iran. His thought also reflected an eclectical combination of nationalism, socialism, existentialism and religious conviction. As such, he generated a trend that represented a confused but productive dual tendencies, tendencies that inspired a generation of religious modernist intellectuals, such as Shari‘ati and Motahhari.

These dual tendencies, as Boroujerdi has noted, were a product of a “puzzled” and “tormented” state of mind. This state of mind was inspired by the West, but was compelled to oppose it; was fearful of religious traditionalism, but searched in the traditions for a modern identity; aspired to modern ideas of freedom and social justice, but had anxiety about the Western origin of these ideas. Al-e Ahmad’s thought epitomised this “puzzled” and “tormented” mental state. His turn to religious traditions, although it seemed to reverse the tendency initiated in the early twentieth century toward secularism, but in fact it was an attempt to bridge the historical gap between the secular and religious intellectualism in Iran, a task that is yet to be accomplished.

Ale-Ahmad’s legacy was instrumental in the formation of the Islamic revolutionary ideology, but not because it succeeded to bring the secular and religious intellectuals to a lasting alliance. In, fact the secular intellectuals did not view the religious Al-e Ahmad favourably. However, he was warmly received by the radical ulama, encouraging them to appropriate the revolutionary aspects of the secular

1 Ibid, pp. 67-68
2 Ibid, p. 68
3 Al-e Ahmad referred to the leading role of the clergy in modern political movement form the Tobacco Movement, Constitutional Revolution, oil nationalisation movement to the 1963 uprising in order to emphasise the capacity of the ulama in inspiring and leading political and social movements.
4 Boroujerdi, M. pp. 74-75
thought in pursuit of their own interests. Sadly, Iranian secular intellectuals largely remained blunt with respect to the political potentials of the religious tradition, and increasingly moved away from it. The enduring legacy of Al-e Ahmad proved to be his phenomenological anti-Westernism, which has become the subject of new interpretations by post-revolutionary religious intellectuals.

Modern Philosophers of Religion and the West

Examples of the continuation of the tradition of treating the West as an alienated other in the post-revolution era is reflected in the views expressed by Muslim scholars, and particularly modern philosophers of religion inside and outside Iran. As we have seen, the intellectual fascination with the crisis of Western modernity has been going on among the Iranian secular and religious intellectuals for decades. Dariush Shayegan, Seyyed Hussein Nasr, Reza Davari-Ardakani, Abdol-Karim Sorouh and Muhammad Mujtahid Shabestari are four of the later representatives of philosophers of religion who have dealt with the issue of the encounter of Iran with Western modernity.

In the 1970s, in his Asia Dar Barabar-e Gharb (Asia Facing the West), Shayegan warned Iranians about the crisis of modernity. In his views, Shayegan has been influenced by the critiques of modernity offered by such Western thinkers as Nietzsche and Heidegger. Nor was he unaffected by the Marxist tradition. But more than following in the footstep of the Western traditions of thought, he also brought his own insight about the Oriental traditions of thought into understanding the nature of the confrontation of the Orient and the Occident. He criticised the first generation of Iranian modernists, who thought they could adopt selectively from the Western tradition, i.e. accept the elements such as technology, which comply with the Iranian traditions. He wrote: “We cannot say that we accept the Western technique, but avoid its consequences.” Shayegan acknowledged that modern techniques are upon us and their denial is absurd; but the warned that the developing world, and particularly the Islamic societies, must be concerned about the consequences of modernism in the West as well as the consequences of modernisation in their own societies. And that, they should never lose sight of the fact that modernism of the West, and modernisation of the Third World, are not one and the same phenomenon.

Shayegan identified the technical thought with the “process of reduction of nature to objects”. In this, he in fact followed the Marxist tradition of thought. Marx, Lukacs, Marcuse, Althusser and others had already pointed to the process of reification and fetishism as a disastrous consequence of the Western industrialisation. Shayegan also referred to the “descent from phenomenological to mechanical understanding of things”, which has resulted in what has been called “demyssification of the sacred” and “disenchantment of the magic”. In this, he borrowed from the Western sociology and phenomenology. It was the ideas of sociologists such as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, as well as the phenomenology of Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty that initiated this new understanding of modernity.

But, Shayegan also appropriated the Persian tradition of irfan (mysticism) when he spoke of the role of modernity in “cornering the spiritual nature of humanity”, and in giving rise to historicism. He did not see irfan as a deterrent to future developments that can be nothing but modern, but as a form of awareness with which the society should be equipped on its path to future. He objected to the

---

1 Shayegan, D. Asia Confronted with the West. Amir Kabir Press, Tehran, 1356/1977, p.3
2 Ibid, p. 47
fashionable intellectual trends, which celebrated the demise of the Iranian-Islamic mystical heritage, because he still saw value in the collective memories of Iranians. For him, these values were still able to produce an environment for the blossoming of new creativities.

Although Shayegan’s personal emotions in favouring the Islamic against the Western philosophical and scientific tradition some times blurred his objective observation, this was not to the extent of making his basic message silent. His main message resonated loudly that technological development was no protection against the danger of nihilism. Nietzsche had also issued this warning to the people of the West around the turn of the century. Shayegan’s reference to the basic difference between the development of scientific knowledge in Islam and the West was also highly credible. He suggested that modern Western sciences were based on the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, or “thinking ego” and “ordered reality”, which was totally different to the rationale of Islamic scientific knowledge based on the necessity of keeping knowledge within ethical constraints. Nasr had also raised this argument, although in a slightly different context.

Shayegan, however, diverged from his ideas of the 1970s in his recent book: _Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confront the West_ (1992). In this book, he appears to have come under the heavy influence of Orientalist views. The extreme pessimism, which the tendency toward Orientalism has created in his views of the “Oriental mentality”, is probably the result of the undesirable manifestations of the Islamic Revolution in the 1980s, which has affected most of the Iranian intellectuals. In a radical departure form his earlier views, Shayegan, in his _Cultural Schizophrenia_, has illuminated the darker side of the Islamic civilisation. As such, he has portrayed the Islamic mentality as part of the Oriental worldview, entangled in “subjective distortions”, which have kept it stranded in the margins of modern history without allowing it to play any significant role in modern global developments. Accordingly, the West and the East are two “heterogeneous worlds”; and it is the pathological consequences of the entanglement of the “Eastern psyche” between these two heterogeneous worlds that Shayegan refers to as “cultural schizophrenia”.

The recurrent theme in the thought of Shayegan is the epistemological difference between the Eastern and Western thought. However, in his later work, he has come under the influence of the Orientalist dogma that equates an extreme version of this epistemological difference with the conflict of tradition and modernity. But, as many of his critics have suggested, it is not at all clear that one could actually equate the East with traditionalist mentality and the West with modernist mentality. For example, Ali Banuazizi has rightly pointed out that “even in the post-industrial Western societies both of these mentalities exist concurrently,” just as they exist in the East. He has criticised Shayegan’s strictly “dualistic” approach to the concepts of “tradition” and “modernity”, in which the Western thought is seen as “a rational, progressive and productive worldview” whereas the Eastern mentality is portrayed as “rigid and devoid of any creativity.”

According to Banuazizi, religious thought as a traditional view is not necessarily rigid or backward. And the fact that many secular intellectuals have

---

1. Ibid, p.50
4. Ibid, pp. 708-709
chosen to dismiss religion and tradition as the basis for political despotism ought not to be taken as the final verdict on the role of traditions in history. He writes: “Modernity and tradition are understandable only in a dialectical relationship with each other, and none of them alone can create a sustainable and authentic value system in a modern society; nor could they sufficiently respond to the material and spiritual needs of the people.”

Banuazizi also criticises Shayegan for his assertion that religious resurgence is a symptom of the “Oriental ignorance” of the philosophical foundations of the Western modernity. He writes: “Contrary to the perceptions of the secular intellectuals, in no historical period, has the majority of the members of a community shunned their traditions in their entirety.” And he rightly emphasises that there is no firm evidence in the historical experience of the human societies that the break-up of traditions is essential for social and political progress.

Although one cannot deny the existence of an epistemological difference between the East and West, it is simplistic to conclude from this that this difference amounts to backwardness on the part of the East and progress on the part of the West. Instead of two the worlds of tradition and modernity, which follow each other linearly, one may more appropriately speak of two parallel universes of thought, which may co-exist, and contribute to each other in a critical dialogue. Another contemporary Iranian philosopher, Seyyed Hussein Nasr, has noted the fundamental difference in the development of philosophy of science in the Islamic world and the West in his book Science and Civilisation in Islam. Without any need to agree with Nasr on all issues regarding scientific knowledge in Islam, one may readily acknowledge that he has raised important arguments in this area. For example, one may agree with him on the assertion that Islam has recognised three levels of knowledge.

The first level is the passive knowledge of Divinity invested in all human beings by the Will of God. This is the non-conscious knowledge inherent in the universe, which makes everybody and everything surrender to the Will of God, whether or not there is any self-consciousness of this surrender. The second level of knowledge is reflected in the conscious surrender to God’s Revealed Law. This is where an individual consciously professes his/her belief in Islam as his/her religious faith. And the third and highest level is that of pure knowledge that is of “contemplative and gnostic (irfani) nature”.

The mode of knowing nature, as an object of study in this contemplative knowledge is the unity of the subject with nature itself. It is different to the Western concept of abstract or analytical science, which advocates a clear separation of the subject and object. In this sense, in its philosophical outlook, gnostic or mystical knowledge may be considered to be close, but not similar, to the Western phenomenology. And in its literary outlook, as noted by Nasr, it may be considered to be close to the Western Romanticism, which advocated a sentimental unity with nature, and objected to the analysis of nature in order for its domination. However, sentimental poetry and literature are not the only features of the gnostic knowledge. It is also a cosmological outlook, which strives to show the cosmological unity of all existence. In short, as Nasr has suggested: “the gnostic’s relation to Nature is intellective, which is neither abstract, nor analytical, nor merely sentimental.”

---

1 Ibid, p. 709
2 Ibid, p. 709
4 Ibid, p.23
5 Ibid, p.22-24
The method of understanding used by this contemplative knowledge is not factual; it is rather symbolic. It is in this sense that Islamic mysticism comes into clash with the attempts of the scholastic theologians and jurists in rendering a mere literal understanding of the Qur'an. As Nasr has put it: "If the tradition of the symbolic interpretation of the text of the Sacred Book were to disappear, and the text thereby reduced to its literal meaning, man might still know his duty, but the cosmic text would become unintelligible."  

In the symbolic understanding of nature, one cannot grasp the meaning of the individual object in itself. The object is truly intelligible only in the context of the unity of cosmos. "Unity itself is alone deserving of representation; since it is not to be represented directly; however, it can only be symbolised... There is no concrete symbol to stand for Unity, however; its true expression is negation... Hence, it remains abstract from the point of view of man, who lives in multiplicity." In other words, for the gnostic knowledge, the events and objects are only signs and appearances, which may be understood only in terms of the cosmological unity.

For the West, science of nature is associated primarily with its application in technological development. "Islamic science, by contrast, seeks ultimately to attain such knowledge as will contribute toward the spiritual perfection and deliverance of anyone capable of studying it; thus its fruits are inward and hidden, its values more difficult to discern. To understand it requires placing oneself within its perspective, and accepting as legitimate a science of Nature, which has a different end, and uses different means, from those of modern science... However important its uses may have been in calendrical work, in irrigation, in architecture, its ultimate aim has always been to relate the corporeal world to its basic spiritual principle, through the knowledge of those symbols which unite the various orders of reality. It can only be understood, and should only be judged, in terms of its own aims and its own perspectives."

In his History of Islamic Philosophy, Nasr has re-emphasised that despite conventional understanding of Islamic philosophy as being a continuation of Greek philosophy in Arabic, the Qur'an and the hadith have been the primary sources of "inspiration" and "knowledge" for the Islamic philosophers. The foundational role of these purely religious texts in the Islamic philosophy is particularly evident in the development of concepts of Haqiqat (ultimate Truth) and God's Knowledge of the world.

Reza Davari is my third example of modern philosophers of religion who have dealt with the nature of the West as the other of the Iranian psyche. After the revolution, he has been particularly active in research and cultural activities, and has occupied various academic positions. He has also been a vocal voice in support of the anti-Western rhetoric of the Islamic Revolution. Like his predecessors, he has combined religious and modern learning. He is interested in both the early Islamic philosophy and the modern Western phenomenology. Similar to Seyyed Hussein Nasr, he has offered a phenomenological critique of the "essence of Western modernity". But his critique of the West as a domineering and alienating force also presents similarities to Al-e Ahmad. Davari offers a wholistic view of Western modernity whereby the West is portrayed as the seat of a way of thinking that sees...
itself as the “focus of the universe”, and seeks to bring the whole world in its own possession.¹

According to Davari, the nature of the West and its political and moral impact on the world could be better understood in terms of “the essence of the West”, rather than in terms of its “representations”. He sees the West as “a historical mode of thought and action”, which began four hundred years ago in Europe and ever since has spread to almost every where in the world.² In a language burdened with hatred, he goes on to philosophise the essential destructive nature of the West. “The West may be rendered as the place where the sun of the truth of divinity sets; and where a man in search of appropriating the whole world, including the world of divinity has taken root... Denying (the destructiveness of) the essence of the West goes hand in hand with the defence of status quo. This denial means that the West has had no part in world domination; it means that it was the colonisers, and not the West as a whole, that sought to dominate the world... Such a denial rejects the appearance of colonialism but keeps its content, which is the very essence of the West.”³

Davari views humanism as the centrepiece of the Western ideology of modernity, which was incepted in the Renaissance, and which, in the name of man, science and history, has subordinated all other modes of thought. His critique of modernity is therefore a critique of the role of humanist philosophy in vanquishing metaphysics and impoverishing religious philosophy.⁴ In this, he sounds like Nietzsche and Heidegger, as well as Shari‘ati. Davari blames Western instrumental rationalism, scientism and materialism as responsible for undermining the true freedom of man in the name of freedom. He thus advocates a religious revolutionary break with the ideology of modernity.⁵

Nonetheless, in the new social and political atmosphere in Iran, alternative views are being expressed from within the religious ranks, which stand against the views that support the romantic hostility toward the West. For example, Abdol-Karim Soroush in an article entitled: “Vojoud va Mahyyat-e Gharb” (The Being and Essence of the West), takes on the task to criticise the “zero-sum” views of the West, which to him are “naïve” and “dangerous”; views that see no possibility in which Islam and the West can share mutual interests.⁶ Soroush, who advocates a cultural exchange with the West, criticises such views for their “dogmatism, certitude and self-righteousness.”⁷ He accuses the ideological justifications of the wholesale hostility toward the West as attempts to perpetuate intolerance toward alternative thinking, a misguided logic that understands the rationale of the existence of the West as the continued plot of the Umayyads to subvert the “true path of Islam”. As such, stakes are limited; “you can either win or lose to the West”.⁸

Instead of seeing the West as a “monolithic” entity, Soroush proposes a view that portrays the West as a “mixture of a variety of thoughts, arts, techniques, industries, politics and customs”, which has had both, positive and negative influences on Iranian culture. For him, the West as a unitary entity has never existed in reality. Rather, he asserts that “the unitary concept of the West exists only in our minds”. Soroush rejects the blind hatred toward the West also for its hindering the process of

---

¹ Ibid, p. 159
² Ardakani R. D. “The Requirements and Consequences of Denying the West”, Keyhan-e-Farhangi, No. 3, 1984, pp. 18-19
³ Ibid, p. 18
⁴ Boroujerdi, M. 1996, p. 160
⁵ Ibid, p. 160
⁷ Boroujerdi, M. 1996, p. 162
⁸ Soroush, A. 1984
self-criticism, contributing to the tendencies that blame others for all domestic problems.

The theologian-philosopher Mujjahid-Shaberstari has also entered the debate over the anti-Western rhetoric in modern Iranian politics. He is also concerned with the nature of Western modernity and its inevitable impact on the Muslim world. In an article entitled “Modernism va Vahyy” (Modernity and the Divine Revelation), Shabestari, like Soroush, suggests that as a result of modern social, political, cultural and economic developments in the Islamic world, the Muslim believers have faced a fundamental question; namely “how to reconcile modernity with the Divine Revelation?”¹ The answers to this theological question have radical political implications due to the intertwining of theology and polity in Iran since the 1979 Revolution.

Shabestari sees this question as one pertaining to the religious science of kalam and theology, rather than to law and jurisprudence. And hence, he finds parallels with the Iranian situation in the theological developments in the Catholic theology in the early twentieth century. He thus refers to the Catholic and Protestant theologians who have tried to address the problems of Christian theology in its encounter with modernity by justifying the continued relevance of religious spirituality to modern life. Theologians, such as Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and Karl Rahner, according to Shabestari, have tried to answer this question by using the concept of “religious experience”, and by evaluating religious spirituality on the basis of this experience. He, therefore, sets out to shift the basis of the validity of religious belief from the knowledge of religious rules and regulations to the purity of the religious experience of the believer. I have already hinted at Soroush’s attempt to develop the same sort of argument by references to the Persian mystical tradition, particularly the story of Moses and the Shepherd in the Masnavi.

According to Shabestari, the “divine revelation” is the very contact of man with the “spirit of God”. This revelation finds expression in human experience of God, and in the role of that experience in changing life in this world for the better. Thus, the “divine revelation” should be sought in the positive developments caused by the human experience of faith in the world, not in the knowledge of the religious laws. In this sense, theology may be seen as the constant effort of the theologian to interpret this experience. Naturally then, the theologian’s primary premise for a valid effort at interpretation of the religious experience must be that such interpretations are varied. The theologian must accept from the outset that due to the historical limitations that are imposed upon him, his interpretation can at the best be one of the many valid interpretations. In this manner, Shabestari attempts to free the Shi’i faith from the outmoded scholastic dogmas, and make it relevant to the modern world. But in his appropriation of the reform-minded Christian theologians, he is cautious of the danger that his theory may end up in agnosticism, or be accused of this.

For Shabestari, as for Soroush and Shari’ati, Muhammad Iqbal Lahuri, the Pakistani philosopher of the early twentieth century, is the precursor of religious reform movement in the Islamic world. Iqbal saw religious experience as the basis of religious knowledge; or, more accurately speaking, he saw religious knowledge as the interpretation of religious experience. Iqbal even viewed the phenomenon of prophecy as a particular form of religious experience, which tended to overflow the limits of individuality and extend itself to others. In the modern age, which Iqbal calls “the age of critical reason”, the divine revelation has lost the absolute dominance that it had in

¹ Mujtahid-Shaberstari, M. “Modernism va Vahyy” (Modernity and Divine Revelation). Kiyan, Vol. 5, No. 29, Mar-Apr 96, pp.18-19
the traditional age. In this age, the divine revelation has had to lend itself to critical
observation by reason. However, the critique of the revelation is in itself the evidence
of the persistence of religious experience in the modern world; and this experience
will continue to influence human life forever.

According to Iqbal, the claim of the Islamic Prophecy to be “the seal of the
prophecies” should not be interpreted literally in terms of the end of the Divine
Revelation. Rather, it should be interpreted metaphorically in terms of the end of the
age of absolute domination of religion; and the beginning of the age of critique of the
Revelation. In this sense, Iqbal presented the Revelation as a living phenomenon with
a vital role to play in modern social and moral life, rather than a mode of scholastic
learning that was increasingly pushed to the margins of modernity.

The significance of Iqbal to Shabestari, as it was the case for Soroush, is in his
quest for reconciling the religious truth, which he considered to be eternal and
absolute, with the incessant developments that have been brought about by modernity.
According to Shabestari, this type of religious reformation has created a modern
theology, which is increasingly related to social and political life of the modern
societies.

Shabestari, for example, refers to modern theological developments in
Catholicism and particularly to the modern “transcendental theology”, which tries to
erase the barriers between the divine and human nature.¹ In Islam too, the need for
such developments has become evident with the increasing role of religion in
motivating and leading political movements. In such an environment, Shabestari is
taking an important role in developing a new Islamic theology, which is concerned
with using philosophy and human sciences in order to offer new interpretations of
religious experience.

Two Views of the West

Broadly speaking two approaches could be discerned from the views of the
Muslim intellectuals and activists toward the West. These two views of the West,
expressed by two opposing religious discourses in Iran, are basically philosophical
views. But in philosophical disputes, just as in domestic politics, it is essentially
politics that is understood in religious terms. These two discourses represent two
historical experiences of the Iranian Muslims of the West. In this historical
experience, the Christian West has appeared in two contradictory roles, which is not
much different from the Western appearance to the Arab Muslims.

The first appearance of the West is exemplified by the Crusades of the
Western Christianity against Islam. The language of the present violent confrontation
between Iran and the West is heavily burdened by the images of the hateful
relationship of Islam and Christianity during the centuries of the Crusades. It is almost
equally so on both sides. On the Muslim side, this language has also incorporated the
afflictions suffered by the Muslims in modern times, which are mainly associated with
the Western push for colonial and post-colonial expansion. It expresses the antithesis
of the Western religious rhetoric of mission to spread the Western Christian
civilisation in the early colonial period, and the later rhetoric of modernisation.

The second appearance of the West is through the experience of Iranians with
the West as a source of knowledge and ideas, which has offered tremendous
opportunities in scientific, technological and social development. The language of the

¹ Ibid, p.19
present critical dialogue with the West is associated with this positive image of Western modernity. It deals with such issues as the influence of Greek philosophy on the Islamic philosophy, the role of modern Western literature in the contemporary social thought, and the positive impact of the advancements of the Western science and technology on the quality of life.

This argument may, at least partly, explain the development of two various religious cultures in the Muslim lands along the line of division of the world into West and non-West. One culture views all religions including the Western Christianity as good, and respects all religions, particularly the religions of the *Ahl-e al-Ketab* (People of the Book), which is referred to the believers of monotheist religions, i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In this view, Islam is not in competition or animosity with other faiths, but is a religion that complements and enhances Judaism and Christianity. And the other culture sees Islam as superior particularly to the Western Christianity and Judaism, and sees these religions at best as competitors, and at worst as enemies.

This latter culture has been politically dominant in Iran since the Islamic Revolution due to its conformity with the negative emotional views of the West inherited from the time of the Crusades and the colonial period. To this must be added the appearance of the Jews as an anti-Islamic force since the creation of the Jewish State. On the one hand, the Western push for global expansion under the banner of spread of the Christian civilisation has created among the Muslim Iranians a serious fear from the political alliance of the Church and State in the West against the Islamic faith. On the other hand, the Western unequivocal support for the Zionist State in Israel against the Muslim inhabitants of the Middle East has created a deep sense of threat, which is perceived as being posed by the alliance of the Western Christianity and Judaism against Islam.

This negative view of the other is, however, basically defensive, although it is expressed in an aggressive tone. It sees modern Christianity and Judaism as Westernised, and hence, as cunning, deviant and conspiratorial. It is not difficult to show that these attributes have also been attached to Iranians in the encounter of the West with Iran. The texts written by the Western colonial functionaries as well as those of fiction writers during the nineteenth century are strewn with condescending and derogatory remarks and statements about Iranians.¹

The colonialist construction of the Orient by the West in fact imposed the modern versions of political dualistic views upon the Muslim world. The inherent irrationality of the so-called “objective reason”, which was exposed in the colonial period, led to an emotional need on the part of the West to create an opposite image of itself as the other in order to offer a moral justification for its domination of other lands. This situation put the Muslim societies in a desperate situation that forced them to understand their modern existence in terms of the Western categories. The other of the West, which was understood as alien, suspicious, inferior, and dispensable, had to either accept this Western imagery, or create its own imagery of itself vis-à-vis the West.

The “Orient” was invested by the West with such characteristics as “sentimentality”, “feminine behaviour” and a “chaotic nature”, as against the Western characteristics of “rationality”, “masculine behaviour” and “commitment to law and order”. It, therefore, responded by investing the West with characteristics, such as “Satanic”, “world-devouring”, “blood-sucking”, “arrogance”, “domination”,

¹ Among such literature, Lord Curzon’s: *On the Persian Question*, and James Mourier’s book: *The Travels of Haji Baba* are significant.
"invasion", etc. It is, thus, not the cultural traditions per se that feed the modern political dualism of Good and Evil; it is rather the heritage of colonialism that has revived and enforced this dualism in the modern time.

Thus, although it is true that the Constitutional Revolution and the Islamic modernist movement both have identified themselves as the reverse image of the West. But, in the early twentieth century constitutional movement, the secular modernists identified themselves with the concepts of the “Western grandeur” and the “Eastern inferiority”. Whereas, in the 1970’s, the Islamic modernists talked about “distance” of the West, its “selfishness”, its “hegemony”, and its “corruptive influence”; and about the symbols and instances of Eastern glory. Also, one may argue that the first generation of Iranian modern intellectuals had been mainly secular and rather submissive to the West (Britain, the United States of America and Russia), and thus offered an uncritical view of the Western modernity. On the contrary, the second-generation of modernists were religious, confrontational with the West, and created a cult of admiration of the East.

The Iranian modernists of the early twentieth century were under the heavy influence of the European Enlightenment. Social reformers, such as Malkom khan, Mirza Aqa Khan, Taqi-zadeh and Kasravi, had a worldview that expressed optimism about Western secularism and modernism, and looked forward to modernity as a universal reward for humanity, which would bring freedom and happiness to people everywhere. They were clearly fascinated by the views of Enlightenment philosophers, such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu and Comte, and held in high regard the idea of universal marsh of humanity towards a scientifically based bright modern future.

The Muslim modernist thinkers, such as Al-e Ahmad, Shari’ati, Bazargan, Tabataba’i, Taleqani, Motahhari and Khomeini were, however, privileged to have observed modernity as a lived experience in the era of the crisis of modernity. They had no illusions about the Western magic and called for “a return to self” in religious, sociological, political, philosophical and economic terms. They had a deeply pessimistic view of the Western modernisation and its influence on Muslim societies. Ale-Ahmad’s Gharbzadegi, Shari’ati’s Return to Self, Tabataba’i and Motahhari’s philosophical writings, Bazargan’s political writings, Taleqani’s Islamic Economics and Khomeini’s Islamic Government exemplify this trend.

Ayatollah Khomeini’s understanding of the West, reflected particularly in the speeches, interviews and declarations, was strongly influenced by the negative views of the West. After his demise, Khomeini’s hostile views of the West have continued to dominate official political discourse. Such views are routinely expressed by Iranian politicians, although recently alternative views are being voiced as well. As a classic example of the anti-Western political strategy, one may recall the statement of Muhammad Javad Larijani, Member of Parliament and the Secretary of the Foreign Policy Committee of the National Security Council. When questioned by the press in 1995 about the main strategies of the revolution’s foreign policy in the post-Khomeini era, in deference to the late Ayatollah Khomeini, Larijani enumerated three main “dimensions” in the Islamic Republic foreign policy. These were: 1) “retaining the position of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the entire Muslim world, 2) providing for the growth and development of the Islamic Republic, and 3) spreading the tide of Islamic awakening throughout the world.”

The questions about the foreign policy direction of the Islamic Republic arose in the context of the repercussions of the fatwa against Salman Rushdi, which

---

1 Interview with Sobh: Political, Cultural, Social & Economic Weekly, Tehran, July 11, 1995.
Ayatollah Khomeini issued before his death. These repercussions had raised questions about the international posturing of Iran after Khomeini. Larijani interpreted the fatwa as a “religious opinion” of a highly respected member of the ulama and not as an official court “verdict” or government “policy”, which did not amount by any means to the violation of human rights as claimed by the West. Directing his arguments against the “Western accusations”, he said: “Do you want our ulama not to mention their views on an author who has written a book against our sanctities?”

Stressing that the fatwa was a religious opinion rather than a government policy, Larijani tried to turn the accusations about the lack of freedom of expression in Iran against the West. He thus said: “When they say that the fatwa should be declared vain and void (by the government), this is against the freedom of expression that they amply speak of.” In justifying the strategy of “spreading the tide of Islamic awakening”, he said: “When the Americans want to sell goods to a country, they say that human rights also goes with the said commodities... Well, if Americans are so bold in spreading their own ideology and philosophy, there is no reason for us to be shy in spreading ours.”

The Islamic Revolution: The Sublime Time

A significant feature of the post-Khomeini discourses is their attempt to provide new interpretations of the Iranian/Islamic Revolution. An article in the journal Nashr-e Danesh (Propagation of Knowledge), entitled “Enqelab-e Iran: Zaman-e Malakuti, Zaman-e Hadeseh”, (the Iranian Revolution: Subtle Time, the Time of the Event) is an interesting example of attention to novel interpretations of the Islamic Revolution and its symbols. This article was written on the occasion of the publication of a book in French, which had provided a mystical interpretation of the Islamic Revolution. In this book entitled: Un Temps Entre les Temps (Paris, les Editions du Cerf, 1992), the author, Leili Echghi, had suggested that the Islamic Revolution occurred in an alternative dimension of time known by the Sufis as zaman-e malakuti (sublime, or subtle time). As such, Echghi had claimed that this revolution was an existential revolution, which could not be understood in terms of historical time. In this book, the Islamic Revolution was seen as the last link in the chain of events that had begun fourteen centuries ago with the tragedy of Ashura; a revolution whose task had remained unfulfilled until the victory of the Islamic Revolution.

The article in Nashr-e Danesh provides an interesting reading of the book that is worth covering in some detail. Referring to Shari’atī’s famous line: “all time is Ashura, and all space Karbala”, the article portrays the revolution as “a scene of the play of Karbala”. As I have noted earlier, to the Shi’i believers, the tragedy of Karbala is the fundamental event of reference in the history of Shi’ism. This article, however, does not follow the official pattern of propaganda that is routinely used to push the revolution down the people’s throat. Rather, it tries to demonstrate how emotional factors, such as religious belief, enthusiasm, passion, ecstasy and love can effectively motivate collective political action.

---

1 Ibid
2 Ibid
3 Ibid
4 The concept of zaman-e malakuti is rooted in the Islamic cosmology, which divides the cosmos into various levels of Being with separate time dimensions. Sufis derived this terminology from the Qur’an, and spoke of lahut (the world of divine qualities, or pure being), jabarut (the world of angelic substances), malakut (the world of sublime, or subtle beings), and nasut (the terrestrial world, or the world of existence).
According to the *Nashr-e Danesh* article, for a people to answer the existential questions pertaining to their identity and purpose in the world, it is necessary to transcend the historical time and break away from the shackles of the false identities that history has placed upon them. This is in concord with my earlier arguments that for a people in search of a proud national image of itself, it is necessary to have a high level of enthusiasm, an enthusiasm that comes from creative interpretations of the collective memories and imaginations, contained in traditional texts and narratives.

Secular analysts of the Iranian Revolution have often acknowledged the role of the narrative of *Ashura* and the cult of Martyrdom of Imam Hussein in giving this revolution a religious character. However, these analysts, particularly the leftist intellectuals and activists, have largely ignored the real force of this religious character in instigating and driving the revolution. Rather, the real cause of the revolution has often been searched in political, social and economic parameters. The concept of an existential revolution being expressed in political forms is rarely taken seriously in analytical writings about the Iranian Revolution. Secular intellectuals have often resented the symbolism of *Ashura* due to its traditional character, alleging that it reflected the backwardness of the revolutionary movement in Iran.

On the other hand, as I have noted before, there has been a huge amount of ideological propaganda to emphasise the religious symbolism of the revolution. But, the main purpose of these efforts has been to rationalise and hence legitimise the transfer of political power to the Shi'ite jurists.

The significance of such writings as "The Iranian Revolution: The Sublime Time, the Time of the Event" is in their attempt to use the Iranian mystical tradition to provide an explanation of the political power of religion as a modern political phenomenon. This is important especially because Iranian mystical literature is often understood as apolitical, anti-social, and ignorant of the material life, caught in meditative and contemplative practices, practices that value the transcendence of death over trappings of life on earth.

According to the author of "The Iranian Revolution...", the Iranian people, in their reference to the imaginary of Karbala, did not dream of *Shahadat* (martyrdom) as their final destination; nor were they trying to repeat *Ashura* as it had actually happened. This is perhaps why the comparison of the revolution with the play of Karbala is not accurate. The end that people pursued in their revolutionary struggle was yet to be determined. The people were putting themselves to the historical test of altering the tragic end of Hussein in Karbala by producing a victory on his behalf, a victory that would fulfil Hussein’s unfinished business fourteen centuries earlier. The people had been deeply touched by the cult of personality of Hussein, in a way that it had turned into a powerful source of reference for political enthusiasm. It was not death that captured the popular imagination. What moved the people was an enthusiasm that had led them to the understanding that in order to conduct a meaningful life, one had to be prepared to let go of meaningless attachment to life.\(^1\)

The scenes of revolutionary violence were not to be taken literally as a sign of fascination with death, nor was it a fascination with victory. Strangely enough, the people did not refer to the symbols of victory in their religious traditions, such as the victorious wars led by the Prophet Muhammad himself (*ghazavat*). They referred to an apparently unsuccessful event, which had involved defeat. They, therefore, were not after re-enacting the past; rather, they meant to use the model of past traditions for a creative building of an unknown and uncertain future.

---

\(^1\) Ibid, p.67
Using mystical-cosmological allegories, the “Iranian Revolution...” refers to Shi‘ism as a political movement, or rather a transformation, from the “sensual world of terrestrial beings” (nasut) into the world of “the sublime” (malakut). This movement is thus virtually never ending; and the only possible ending that the believer can conceive for this movement is the emergence of the Concealed Imam. Although the author of the “Iranian Revolution...” may not agree, this type of reading of Shi‘ism implies that even the mystery of the emergence of the Concealed Imam itself may be resolvable only in an alternative transcendental world, and not in any terrestrial context.

The article emphasises that this movement toward the sublime world is basically driven by its own internal motivations, and to a minor degree by external factors, such as the passing of the traditional society, rapid modernisation of Iran, dependent economy, and political despotism. The internal factors, however, are basically associated with the role of Shi‘ism in defining a “supra-national identity” for Iranians. An identity which, since the early 1960’s, had been used by Iranian religious modernists to answer the existential questions such as “what is Iran”, and “who is an Iranian”?1

The praise for a revolutionary reading of religion through Shi‘i symbolism is so strong on the part of the author of the “Iranian Revolution...”, that he even offers a revolutionary reading of the fall of Adam from the Heavens. In embracing modern political history, he writes, “Iran behaved like Adam, who gave up the calm and serene, but ignorant and politically submissive atmosphere of the Paradise, and took up instead a movement that is represented by enthusiasm, political consciousness and revolutionary dynamism.”2

Secular Views of Religious Government

As I hinted earlier, there has been a limited interest among Iranian secular intellectuals in exile to tackle the influence of religion on politics in post-revolutionary Iran. The journal, Kankash (Search in Depth), printed outside Iran, has published some of these views. Such views, despite their rarity, contain the seed of an intelligent critique of recent politico-religious developments in Iran, and their continued persistence may play an important role in bringing the secular and religious intellectuals into a critical dialogue.

Secular intellectuals do not exercise much political force in Iran at present as the domestic politics is dominated by religious discourse. However, they represent the aspirations of the large population of Iranians in exile, who overwhelmingly resent the preponderance of religious politics in Iran. Yet secularism has a deep-rooted intellectual legacy within Iran, which has been mainly expressed in various literary pursuits, and still sets standard for artistic and literary expression despite the repressive censorship, which is being applied by the Islamic regime. As I have noted earlier, the politicisation of secular intellectuals in Iran goes back to the early twentieth century, to the time of the Constitutional Revolution. The political activities of Marxist and liberal persuasion continued unabated until some years after the victory of the Islamic Revolution. As I have explained earlier, secular political activities underwent a lot of organisational and theoretical transformations between the 1920s and the 1980s. Revolutionary Marxism, in particular, played a large part in the ideological and political activities against the Shah’s dictatorship.

1 Ibid, pp.67-68
2 Ibid, p.70
The leftist intellectuals actively supported the revolution of 1979 in the hope that it would help materialise their socialist dreams of equality and justice; but, with the establishment of the Islamic Republic, they found themselves under a new regime of repression, which replaced monarchical dictatorship with religious persecution. Many of the leftist intellectuals and activists had lost their lives in combat against the Shah, had been imprisoned and tortured, or had gone into exile. Many more suffered the same fate under the Islamic regime. Many of those who went into exile after the revolution resorted to political and intellectual activities against the Islamic Republic, and felt that it would not take long before the regime would be overthrown under their leadership. But with the fall of communism in the Soviet Union, most of the leftist activists lost their moral and ideological fortitude. Many gave up socialist ideals; others went through a period of soul searching.

The secular intellectuals whose views I am about to discuss are mostly the remnants of the ideologically minded leftist activists of the 1970s and early 1980s, who have acknowledged the sustainability of the Islamic government in Iran, albeit grudgingly. The journal Kankash has been publishing mainly the writings of the academic minded leftist intellectuals in exile. The articles that I discuss here have put forward arguments about the nature and prospects of a religious government in Iran. I believe that the secular intellectual traditions, despite its present political weaknesses, may still play a role in the intellectual and political future of Iran. Here, I have excluded from consideration, other secular intellectuals in exile who are still insisting on the imminent fall of the Islamic Republic, or are involved in armed struggle for the violent overthrow of the regime. Their writings are almost totally devoid of sound analysis of the Iranian situation and burdened with propaganda, rumour and innuendo.

I have divided the critical views of the politico-religious developments in Iran, offered by the intellectuals and activists in exile, into three categories. First those which criticise the high position that the religious political movements within Iran give to the West as a “reference culture” in determining the political and cultural identity of Iran. These criticisms emphasise that even the anti-Western pose of the Islamic Revolution is strewn with Western imagery as “culture of reference”. Second those, which criticise the negative influence of the Iranian politico-religious movements on the development of civil society in Iran. These criticisms point to the incapacity of a religious political culture to initiate or effectively implement the project of building the socio-economic infrastructure necessary for the development of a civil society. And third the criticisms that question the capacity of the philosophy of irfan and Islamic mysticism as a cultural resource from which to draw motivation and historical precedence for progress in the modern world.

Critique of the West as Culture of Reference

M. Tiva, a main contributor to Kankash, has taken issue with the dominance of a confrontational view of “East” and “West” in the mentality of the Iranian intellectuals. I shall consider two of Tiva’s articles because they can serve as typical examples of intellectual development among the Iranian secular and particularly leftist activists in exile. In the first article - entitled “Confrontation of East and West” - he develops his argument on the basis of the concept of the West as “culture of reference”.1

1 Tiva, M. “Taqabol-e Sharq va Gharb” (Confrontation of East and West), Kankash, Vol. 1, No. 2&3, spring 1988, p.28
Tiva argues that the development of political culture in the context of the Islamic civilisation, and particularly in its confrontation with the Western civilisation, created a worldview that understood culture in dualistic (sanaviyyat-gara) terms. According to this argument, which closely follows the line of the Western Orientalist tradition, the dualistic worldview of Islam divided the world into dar-ul-Islam (house of Islam) and dar-ul-harb (house of war), which then developed into the formation of the concepts of East (Sharq) and West (Gharb). It is thus argued that in this process, the Islamic culture produced an “exclusion-inclusion” mentality, which looked at other cultures at best as competitors, and at worse as enemies.

In the tradition of the modern secular intelligentsia, Tiva is keen to demonstrate that this duality is a special characteristic of the Islamic and particularly Iranian culture. He thus neglects that the modern concepts of the East and West have Western origins, and were developed primarily in the West in the context of the construction of modern dualistic models such as “civilising and barbarian”, “progressive and backward”, “citizens and aliens”, and “North and South”. But he rightly points to the infatuation of modernist Muslim intellectuals with the hatred of the West as the source of what they called “the disease of Westoxication”.

To be sure, both the Constitutional Revolution of the early twentieth century and the Islamic modernist movement of the 1960s and 1970s were burdened by the visions of the West as a cultural point of reference. But, the fascination with the West was also intense among the mainly secular intelligentsia of the early twentieth century. Although, these latter intellectuals had an admiring view of the West seeing it as a “knell of awakening” that would usher in modernity and progress.

Tiva’s main criticism is targeted at the new religious understanding of the West, whereas he by and large favours the approach of the secular (liberal and socialist) tradition of the early part of the century. In this sense, he is himself using the West as a point of reference for evaluation of cultural values. He suggests that the return to religious identity is a deterrent to any hope that Iranians might have in establishing a critical view of the past. And finally, he understands the religious modernist movement as one, which rejects modernity in its entirety; and one, which refers to the backward traditions to express the hatred of the West. He writes about the religious modernists: “The existence of a culture of reference, in the form of an stereotype of the West; and the existence of a dualistic worldview in the consciousness and the unconscious of Iranian intellectuals, have led these (intellectuals) increasingly toward tradition, religion and indigenous culture, in order to defend and justify themselves before the West.”

Tiva searches for the cause of the strong influence of the dualistic views among Muslim intellectuals in the knowledge of Being, based on the teachings of the traditional philosophies of the medieval Muslim sages, such as Ibn-e Sina and Mulla Sadra. Although it is true that some modern religious intellectuals refer to the likes of Ibn-e Sina to justify their modern anti-Western views, this should not lead us to the abandonment of the progressive interpretations of the early Islamic philosophical tradition. Reading Ibn-e Sina (Avecinna) too literally, Tiva virtually confuses the philosophical understanding of the East and West on the part of this Muslim sage with the modern geopolitical concept of the East and West. Ibn-e Sina, as many modern Muslim scholars have noted, used the allegories of East and West in an illuminationist (ishraqi) fashion, identifying the East with the light of illumination and purity of the

---

1 Ibid, pp.11-47
2 Ibid, pp.12-13
3 Ibid, p.12
4 Ibid, p.13
soul, and the West with darkness, materialism and nostalgia. According to Seyyed Hussein Nasr, “Oriental philosophy” (hekmat-e Sharqi) was a significant “dimension” of Ibn-e Sina’s philosophy, which would lead to the ishraqi philosophy of Sohrevardi. Evidently, Ibn-e Sina had no understanding of the modern West as a political-ideological enemy; he only projected his own philosophical turn from the Aristotelian rationalist philosophy to illuminationist philosophy.

It is true that these philosophical views have had important political-ideological implications in the modern time. But, these implications are only brought about as a result of contemporary interpretations of such views in political and ideological terms. Therefore, it makes no sense to blame Ibn-e Sina’s thought as the cause of contemporary mistakes, because both regressive and progressive interpretations of his philosophy are possible at present. In other words, it is not Ibn-e Sina, who shapes our present situation; it is our reading of Ibn-e Sina today, which does that; and for that we are alone responsible.

The texts of Ibn-e Sina and other texts from the Islamic and pre-Islamic Persian literary and philosophical heritage act as an environment in which we are enveloped, and to which we can make references to validate our present situation. Their schools of thought per se are not responsible for our present failures or successes as a nation. Here, one may be guided by Max Weber, who showed how in the modern West a resurgence of references to traditional Christian texts in search for a puritan religion resulted in rationalisation, secularisation, bureaucratisation, industrialisation and, in short, to what we call modernity.

Progress Understood as Rejection of Traditions

Ironically, Tiva, an apparently secular thinker, is in agreement with the religious philosopher Soroush, in that a religious thought, which advocates death instead of life, and aspires to a spiritual rather than a material world is not fit to be used as a culture of development in today’s Iran. Against this, one may suggest that the existing traditions should not be seen only as deterrent to progress. In fact, just as Hegel has established, the existing traditions are the necessary condition for the human endeavour to cope with his/her actual position in the world.

As Tiva would admit, the traditional discourses, due to their deep and encompassing influence on the language, shape an important part of the consciousness of the individuals and the collective conscience of any society. Therefore, it would not be constructive to discard these traditions, which may then turn out to be indispensable. None of the modern societies that have sought “progress” with success have shed their cultural traditions. And those that have done so (such as the Communist States) in the hope of rebuilding a totally new humanity, have either been unsuccessful in achieving “progress”, or have put themselves in disadvantage, or have risked their own survival.

All social and political groups in Iran can and must use the available cultural traditions in order to create new imaginaries of the future and promote their own ideals. These traditions would become unproductive and even destructive if they were to be appropriated exclusively by one group. The traditions of Islam are available to

---

2 In his Oriental Philosophy, the great Islamic philosopher rejected his own earlier Aristotelian views as mediocre. That was why Ibn-e Sina said that his earlier views were intended for the common people, and considered the Oriental Philosophy as intended for the sophisticated minds.
everybody, and no one group should deprive others or itself from using the models that these traditions can provide for the promotion of their social and political dreams.

As I have argued earlier, the creative imaginary interpretations of the past religious, literary and philosophical traditions are of powerful motivational import in driving collectivities to action aimed at fundamental social and political change. It is the constitutive nature of these traditions that make them apt for creating models for collective utopias of a better future. The question is; just what religious, literary and philosophical traditions should Iranians refer to for the validation of their present existence on earth, and for building their ideal future? Every viable community or group survives not on the basis of the mechanics of its organisation, but primarily on the basis of its "mission statement". It is this "mission statement", which would not only provide for the rationale of the present existence of that community or group, but could also create the enthusiasm and energy that is required to fulfil its future destiny via innovative interpretations of the past.

Without the Persian Islamic traditions flowing from the existing mystical, philosophical and literary texts, to what other modern or ancient traditions could Iranians turn? The Americans after their revolution turned to the Greco-Roman traditions. Could the Iranians turn to their pre-Islamic mythology and history? Experience of the Shah does not give much credibility to this option. Is there a modern option, such as Marxism, available to Iranians? Marxism, as we know it, was capable to provide various possibilities for the Third World liberation movements for decades. The experience of the Soviet Union, however, has discredited that option as well.

The new developments in Iran indicate that there is still the possibility for the institution of a civil society under the umbrella of the Islamic imaginary. These developments also raise the hope of the institution of a variant of democratic polity under the empowering influence of Islamic legitimacy, a polity that would not necessarily follow the model of Western democracies, but would promote the essence of political pluralism nonetheless. It is not at all clear that the Persian mystical tradition would only result in one form of development that is a deterrent to progress and civil society.

Tiva offers some kind of scientific culture as the main reference point of social development. But, even in the most scientifically based societies of the West, some form of nationalist, historical, mythological or religious imaginary constitutes the central values (be it cultural, social, political or economic) around which these communities exist and thrive. The engagement of these societies in various fields of social and political action is still validated and directed by their central value systems.

Tiva's pessimism about the role of religion in politics is such that he can not accept the possibility that religion could still provide a discourse for its own criticism. He writes: "This (the religious) view, contrary to the scientific view, does not question the realities of life; nor does it put to test what has been assumed as absolute; it tries to provide a critique of the accepted realities in terms of a greater truth. The religious knowledge cannot admit fallibility; it must be accepted beyond doubt." But, the role of irfan or Persian-Islamic mysticism, and other forms of religious philosophical and speculative thought in Iran, has historically been just the reverse of what Tiva suggests. The role of religiously inspired literary tradition, for instance, has mainly been to criticise the monolithic interpretations of the religion by the conservative orthodox theologians.

As I have discussed earlier, Soroush, for example, has proposed the acceptance of a field of religious knowledge that operates at the level of other fields of

1 Tiva, M. 1988, p. 17
knowledge. This knowledge is fallible; it must be put to critical discussion; and its role is to take a critical look at the existing interpretations of religion without necessarily giving authenticity to any of them. Such endeavours, of course, are by no means unique or unprecedented. Habermas, for example, has noted the huge potential of the Jewish tradition as a source of reference for alternative interpretations; interpretations that have not conformed to orthodox religion, but have prevailed by creating real opportunities for new and creative forms of social and political thinking and organisation.¹

Who is to deny that such alternative interpretations have been the basis of the success of the Jews to build a religious and at the same time a secular State? One may also claim that, in Israel, a government of a much more liberal attitude toward the Palestinians, and Muslims in general, could still refer to the Jewish religious texts for its validation. This claim may attract support from the theoretical assumptions about the real power and creativity of the collective imaginations of the past. It may thus be possible to claim that just as the creative interpretations of the Jewish traditions have influenced the present Israeli government, they could provide for further and more productive imaginaries of the future. In the same vein, this argument may be extended to support the validity of the claim that the philosophy of Ibn-e Sina, for example, could influence the course of development in Iran in a positive manner and not just as a traditional deterrent. The philosophy of Ibn-e Sina and the Jewish philosophical traditions may thus be conceived as meta-historical imaginaries that can be invoked to provide new models of the future in accordance with the ways that they are interpreted at present.

Tiva, however, like many other Iranian intellectuals of the secular leftist persuasion, does not recognise the possibility of a secular-religious government in the modern world. Nor is he prepared to hope for the realisation of civil society and political pluralism under a religious government. But, the incongruities of the conventional Marxist interpretations with the empirical realities of the political development of non-Western societies in the post-modern condition have forced him to consider motivational parameters, rather than mere class interests, in instigating social and political action in these societies.

The Deterrents of Civil Society

In an article entitled: “Mavane’ va Cheshmandaz-e Rushd-e Jame’-ye Madani and Ma’refat-e ‘Orfi dar Iran” (the Deterrents and the Outlook of the Development of Civil Society and Secular Knowledge in Iran), M. Tiva takes further his earlier arguments on the relationship between secular and religious thoughts in Iran. In this article he has come a long way away from his earlier pessimism about the political potentials of Iranian Islamic heritage. Here, he goes as far as suggesting that Iran under the Islamic Republic has shown potentials for moving toward a civil society for the first time in history. However, he is still pessimistic that such a development is possible through any interaction within the State. Rather, he thinks that the opposition forces, particularly those in exile, must give up attempts at revolutionary seizure of power and begin to defend the institutions of civil society in Iran. In criticising

revolutionary action, he even borrows Theda Skocpol’s idea that revolutionary
struggles, so far, have strengthened the State authority vis-à-vis the civil society.¹

Following a review of the process of development of secularism and civil society in the West, Tiva enumerates three reasons for the lack of success of civil society in Iran so far. The first two reasons, he believes, are the delay in the formation of a nation-State, and the weakness of democratic institutions along with the lack of the political culture of citizenship in Iran.² In a confusing manner, however, he adds the third reason as the resilience of Islam in adapting to modern social developments.³ In fact, later on, he ends up interpreting the third reason not as a deterrent to civil society, but as a factor potentially in its favour. Due to the importance of the issues raised in the “Deterrents and Outlook…”, I shall discuss this article briefly.

In search of sources of the delay in the process of State-building in Iran, Tiva goes back to the time of the ancient Sassanian Empire more than 1500 years ago. During the Sassanian period, according to Ibn-e Khaldun in his Moqaddameh (Introduction), the signs of the decline of the Sassanian State had already been evident due to the war with the Greek and the internal sectarian differences. Although Tiva mentions elsewhere that the sixteenth century was the turning point in the history of the West in terms of its move toward creating the nation-State, it is not clear why he looks to the Sassanian period to find the source of the weakness of nation-State in Iran.

Following Benedict Anderson, he accepts that nationalism in the West was a “cultural artefact”, and nation an “imaginary community”, which then became the basis for the creation of the nation-State as the principle form of political organisation and the main reference frame for the identity of the modern man. Tiva also recognises such elements as religion, language, myths, arts and literature as the common denominator of a nation, which form the background stock of knowledge out of which political symbols, such as national flag, national anthem and the tomb of the Unknown Soldier are extracted.⁴

However, the view that the rise of nation-States in Europe was primarily a result of the decline of religion still persists in Tiva’s writing. He basically sees the Protestant movement as a movement, which was to weaken the religious grip on politics. He therefore neglects the fact that Calvin, Luther and Cromwell advocated various forms of religious government in the European context in order to revive a religion in decline. If the consequence of Protestantism as a religious revivalist movement was the separation of Church and State, this should be taken as a light in which to look more carefully at the present condition in Iran.

Continuing with his effort to pinpoint the historical sources of the delay in nation building in Iran, Tiva offers a quick tour of political history of Iran since the rise of Islam. He refers to the problematic nature of the relationship of Iranians with Islam, in that they had accepted Islam as part of their “identity”, but not as part of their “nationality”. Following Montesquieu, he then suggests that this incongruity between “identity” and “nationality” can explain why Iran did not go through the Western feudalism of the Middle Ages and ended up with an “Oriental despotism”.⁵ Apparently, it was because of this incongruity that the monarchic system in Iran

¹ Tiva, M. “The Deterrents and Outlook of the Development of Civil Society and Secular Knowledge in Iran”, Kankash, No. 8, N.Y. Spring, 1992, pp.13-44
² Ibid, 18-23
³ Ibid, p.30
⁴ Ibid, pp.17-18
⁵ Ibid, pp.19-20
remained "tribal" and hence, "despotic", whereas, in the West it became "civil" and hence, "democratic".

However, one may offer totally different reasons for the tribal nature of the monarchic State in Iran, namely that Islam was from the beginning an urban phenomenon, growing around urban centres of Mecca and Medina; and as such, it flourished in the urban centres in Iran. As Tiva himself acknowledges elsewhere, this urban nature of religion in Iran led to the fusion of religious and political establishments, and created an orthodox religious legitimacy for the State. This might be cited as the reason why only those forces that were outside the geo-political sphere of the religious-political power were able to effect change of government. And hence, it usually fell on the tribes to bring down old despotic dynasties only to establish new despotic dynasties. Meanwhile, the religious establishment remained the common source of legitimacy for all dynasties up until the modern time.

Although, it may be objected that in Arabia Islam was initiated in a tribal rather than an urban context, one must accept that at least in Iran, Islam was mainly urban-based, and as such had the opportunity to take part in the development of State politics, based in the cities. But the religious establishment, as Algar and Arjomand have shown, never became a part of the State. Its heartland mainly remained in the centres of religious learning and the orders of the Sufis.

The Persistence of Despotism

How can we reconcile the two different reasons for the persistence of despotism in Iranian history? Was the problem of Iranians the social-psychological problem of incongruity between identity and nationality, or the social-historical problem of Islam being urban-centred? The answer to this question is important because it will lead to a more important question: Whether Iranians or history should be blamed for the historical conditions of Iranians? One could basically, and perhaps rationally, find the Iranian people responsible for their own destiny. One could even blame Iranians for their adherence to despotic thought in their social relationships, especially in the family; as well as for their reluctance to take their social and political responsibilities seriously. One could also blame Iranians for their creation of the culture of "secrecy", "intrigue", "suspicion" and "rumour-mongering". However, one could then absolve all the sins of the people by turning them upside-down. As such, even "anti-values" could be turned to "values" in suitable conditions.

To be sure, the public cynicism and unwillingness to participate in politics reflect the fearful resentment of politics on the part of Iranians. The tragic end of fictional characters, such as Sohrab and Siavash, and the historical figures such as Amir Kabir and Mossadeq, has lent an aura of eulogy to the Iranian history. Conspiracy theory that is so widespread among Iranians is perhaps a subjective and sentimental revenge on the States and Statesmen, who undermined the honour and dignity of Iranians as a nation. The Iranian social and political activists, therefore, should take seriously the social role of traditional values.

Indeed, there are numerous traditional values that are dear to the Iranian people, and at the same time, are favourable to the formation of civil society. Values such as sanctity of the private sphere of family, upholding public charity, respect for others, commitment to one’s oath, aspiring for social honour, and loyalty to one’s nation, are inherent in the Iranian-Islamic heritage. There is no doubt that the

---

1 Ibid, p.25
grounding of such values in the collective consciousness of Iranians would be conducive to values endeared by the civil society, such as plurality of ideas, the defence of privacy against the State intrusion, democratic participation and the respect for the rule of law.

However, it is also important not to provide too rosy a picture of the development of civil society either. None of the societies in the West that has established this from of social organisation is devoid of elements of impurity, which weaken the very principles of civil society. By the same token, Iranian intellectuals ought not to forget that civil society is only an organised and orderly mechanism regulated by legal institutions. The unofficial, chaotic space filling in between the institutions, is also part of the civil society.¹

The development of civil society is therefore a long and painful process. Nonetheless, Iranians must take this course, if they ever want to be proud of themselves as a nation that has something to offer other than anger and violence. The pain of the process pertains to the stark choices that Iranians, as a nation, should make. Choices, which many millions of Iranian immigrants have already had to make in order to adjust themselves to their host societies, choices such as preservation of family structure and values in an unfamiliar and aggressive dominant culture. Iranians within the geographical space of Iran also have to make difficult choices, choices like defending the privacy and sanctity of their individual and collective freedoms against the intrusions of the government by rejecting the persistence or return of authoritarian patriarchal traditions.

Is There a Political Role for the Mystical Tradition?

As I mentioned earlier, apart from the issues of identity and civil society, the critique of the development of a modern religious political philosophy in Iran is concerned with the capacity of references to the religious traditions, such as heritage of mysticism, in enhancing modern socio-political and socio-economic developments there. Some have seen huge potentials in the religious heritage for promoting social tolerance, political emancipation, democratic pluralism and economic progress. Others, even within the religious camp, have not been that optimistic with the potentials of religious culture and philosophy for social and economic developments in Iran. And yet others have totally rejected such potentials and have referred to mysticism as another form of religious dogma concerned with metaphysics and supernatural powers that can hardly be compatible with the modern world, which demands non-religious, secular worldviews. These views are expressed from various political standpoints. Some express their views from within the religious political discourse; others from a liberal-secular position; and yet others from a socialist standpoint. Here, I shall focus on the views of some of the exiled secular intellectuals on the political and social role of irfan (Islamic-Persian mysticism) in modern Iran.

In an article entitled: “Irfan, Azad-andishi va Farhang-e Demokratik” (Mysticism, Freethinking and Democratic Culture), the author, K. Dastan, criticises mystical worldviews from the view of a leftist thinker and activist. This article is in fact written in response to another author, Hamid Hamid who, in an article under the title: “Irfan-e Ejtema’i” (Social Mysticism), had presented a favourable view of the progressive potentials of the Persian mystical tradition. Hamid had depicted irfan as a tradition of thought that promoted “humanism”, “egalitarianism” and “social justice”.

¹ Ibid, p.26
paying particular attention to the condition of the lower classes. Hamid had in fact urged the leftist movement to pay attention to the political potentials of mysticism as a resource to promote the cause of socialism in Iran.\(^1\) “Social Mysticism” seems to have been written in support of the idea that *irfan* could play an important part in a reform political movement, bent on social justice, freedom and equality. These are the objectives that the political groups of the left, or what has remained of them, apparently pursue in their own right.

*Irfan* is thus claimed to be able to serve an “emancipatory” purpose by providing a rich history of struggle against religious fanaticism and political despotism, and for the promotion of the cause of political tolerance and social justice. According to Hamid, the Persian *irfan*, although Islamic in nature, has inherited substantially from “egalitarian pre-Islamic religious movements”, such as the *Manikaean and Mazdakite* movements.\(^2\) The *Manikaean* movement was a rebellion against the “corruption” and “fanaticism” of the *Zoroastrian* politico-religious establishment under the *Sassanian* Empire. To Mani the stagnation of the *Zoroastrian* creed had been due to the wrong interpretations offered of the “creed” by the official clergy, which were designed to legitimise the despotic political establishment. Mani’s teachings were basically gnostic, advocating a personal crusade of illumination against darkness. According to Mani, the way the world was ordered was conducive only to “pollution” and “evil”. Such a world had alienated not only the human beings but also God, the symbol of Goodness. Illumination would free humans from this world and rejoin them with God, the source of light, in a world beyond.\(^3\) Mazdak agreed with Mani that the world order was basically evil; but contrary to Mani, he explained evil as a historical process that could be reversed in this world. The key was to take action to effect change in the social order, and not to be totally lost to a transcendental world.

Hamid compares *Manikaeism* with *Hegelianism* and *Mazdakism* with *Marxism*.\(^4\) Mazdak found the source of evil on earth (envy, prejudice, wrath and arrogance) in social injustice and inequality. Therefore, rather than advocating an individual effort for the purification of the soul, he initiated a movement against the politico-religious establishment of the *Sassanian*; an establishment whose job it was to justify social inequalities. To confront the *Zoroastrian* priesthood, he offered new interpretations of the *Zoroastrian* religious texts, which went beyond the official literal interpretations. He thus offered an esoteric reading of religion, which was to legitimise a popular struggle for social and economic equality.\(^5\) The heritage of these pre-Islamic Persian movements was a kind of utopian socialism, which influenced the Persian *irfan*, and ultimately caused its breaking away from the body of the scholastic theology and jurisprudence.\(^6\)

The *Sufi* movement has thus been the representation of this breakaway mystical movement. The *Sufi* movement has in turn offered a humanistic and at the same time non-rationalist worldview, which has presented both modernist and post-modernist tendencies. The modernist tendency identifies *irfan* with liberalism and socialism; and the post-modernist tendency identifies it with cultural multiplicity and political pluralism.

---

2. Ibid, p.232
3. Ibid, pp. 229-230
4. Ibid, p.230
5. Ibid, p.231
6. Ibid, 227
A Negative View of Irfan

Another article published in Kankash under the title “Mysticism, Freethinking and Democratic Culture” questions the role that irfan could possibly have in a modern project for social and political emancipation in Iran. K. Dastan, the author of this article, rejects any affinity between irfan and modern socialist ideology. He suggests that irfan is the remnant of a bygone era and must belong in “a museum of cultural artefacts”.1 He refutes the notion of humanism attributed to irfan and insists on the metaphysical worldview of irfan, which connects it to a divine power beyond this world.

Dastan is fascinated with anti-religion as a necessary attribute of both modernism and post-modernism; and as such, he rejects the idea that irfan can play any role in bringing about secularism or pluralism in Iran. For Dastan, irfan is “the narrative of return to God”, and as such defiant of earthly attachments, which is necessary for any “humanism”, “naturalism” and “materialism”.2 He agrees that irfan had played a positive role in rebellious movements for justice in pre-modern history: But, he claims, “in the modern age, irfan as a political project is a reactionary phenomenon. Even where irfan supports populist, egalitarian movements against capitalism, it presents fascist tendencies. The modern political projects, i.e. liberalism and socialism, are fundamentally different from pre-modern rebellious movements; and it is dangerous to attribute to pre-modern movements and ideas the qualities, which are exclusively modern, and are the fundamental basis for the legitimacy of the modern age.”3

Here the author of “Mysticism, Freethinking...” offers an argument that reveals the fundamental fallacies of the assumptions of the Iranian left about the nature of the relationship of traditional and modern thought. He seems obsessed with an arbitrary and unreal line of division that separates past and present in a mechanical manner. This line of division supposedly marks a break, which sets the modern world free from traditions. It even severs the conceptual relationship between the past and present. Dastan is convinced that there must be no links between the “modern projects of liberalism and socialism” on the one hand, and the age-old human project of emancipation from oppression and alienation on the other.

In his reductionist approach, the author of “Mysticism, Freethinking...” forgets the huge impact of the Greek thought on the Western Renaissance and hence the rise of modernism. He also ignores the significant influence of traditions in the modern philosophical hermeneutics. More than anything, he neglects the metaphysical origins of the post-modern thought. He makes it look like that all modern nations have completely shed their traditions and have embraced “universal values of secularism and scientific philosophy” in place of “cultural and religious prejudices”. He assumes that the need for cultural particularism and religious legitimacy has totally left the scene in the modern societies of the West. His stress on the exclusive role of the modern ideas (liberalism and socialism) as the fundamental basis for the legitimacy of the modern age indicates the author’s belief in the fallacy of “ideas being the creator of history”.

In fact, as many Marxist and non-Marxist historians have shown modern ideas did not shape the modern world; it was the pre-modern social movements, which gave rise to modernity, which in turn prepared the necessary condition for the emergence of modern ideas. There was not a sharp line of division between the medieval and

---

2 Ibid, p.239
3 Ibid, p.240
modern Europe. Modernity had already begun within the context of Middle Ages. Modern ideas did not come out of no-where to save humanity from pre-modernism; they came as a result of new interpretations of the already existing traditions.

Dastan refers to the messianic element of mysticism, and particularly the belief in the concept of the Mahdi, as well as the submissive relationship between the mystic follower and the Sufi master (morid va morad), as the vestiges that run against the nature of modern political developments. He also refers to the concept of mystical love as source of the acceptance of the "reactionary teaching" of "shahadat", or sacrifice of one’s life in the hope of reunion with the beloved Allah, which, he insists, is responsible for "the vindictive nature" of religious rebellions.

There is no doubt that the morad and morid relationship in Sufism has the potential of being abused. But, the basis of this Sufi teaching, as Saheb-az-Zamani has suggested in his Khatt-e Sevvom (The Third Script), is not the forceful submission of the follower to the leader, but an exercise of voluntary surrender to a trustee in order to free the soul from the bondage of the self. Also as Zarrinkoub has explained, the Sufi yearning for the reunion with God after death make reference to a symbolic death or what is known by the Sufis as “death before death”. Moreover, it is strange that the author, who clearly identifies himself with socialism and the leftist politics, totally neglects the fact that the cult of leadership in the Communist States drained the humanist claims of socialism. He also ignores that the brutality that was perpetrated under the banner of socialism in this century could only be compared with German fascism. If the horrendous record of the cult of personalities and indiscriminate brutalities does not disqualify socialism as a system of thought with potentials for political emancipation and social equality; why must religious traditions per se disqualify irfan as a source of reference for human liberation and social justice?

Dastan goes on to insist that the modern concepts, such as “humanism”, “democracy”, “individual freedom”, the “right of expression”, etc. belong to the modern problematic of the separation of the Church and State; and that they will lose their meaning when detached from this “problematic”. He then suggests: “Concepts such as right, equality before the law, just distribution of wealth and citizenship responsibilities are not the same as egalitarian tendencies of religious sects... All religious rebellious movements have had sectarian prejudices; and where they have come to power, they have engaged themselves in bloody sectarian rivalries in order to impose their moralities on others.” Here, again one may note how the author is burdened by the assumption that bloody sectarian rivalries are peculiar to religious movements. Have we not had numerous examples of bloody sectarian in-fights between the comrades-in-arms within the modern Communist parties? Or, Have we not witnessed the racial and prejudicial discriminations within the modern liberal democracies, which were not inspired by religion?

Finally, the author refers to the “irrational nature” of irfan in order to prove its incompatibility with modernism, and to its “teleological character”, in order to prove irfan’s incongruity with post-modernism. He attributes the project of modernism to the rise of “reason”, “rationalisation of economy and techniques”, and “rationalisation of the sense of time and space”. He also emphasises the “acceptance of the logic of identity in the use of language and concepts”, the rational creation of laws, and the “creation of civil society on the basis of a social contract”. And finally, he poses all this as in contradiction with the teachings of irfan. He claims that irfan deplores
economy and technology, advocates "timelessness", destroys the logic of normal language, and does not recognise human laws.

On the issue of incongruity of irfan with post-modernism, Dastan admits that irfan shares with the post-modern thought in its denial of the "Logos". However, he emphasises that post-modern thought is anti-religion and celebrates worldly desires; whereas, irfan is defined in terms of "faith", "repentance", fear of and submission to God. To the Sufi, then, the world is a mystery to be solved in order to reach to the "ultimate Truth". The mystery of post-modernism, however, is due to the understanding that there is no "ultimate Truth".

A Critique of the Critique of Irfan

The arguments of the author of "Mysticism, Freethinking and Democratic Culture" are flawed on three grounds. Firstly, his outmoded understanding of modernism as a project based on the towering figures of reason, rationality and social contract could be rejected on the basis of philosophical arguments of Nietzsche and his post-modernist followers, who have exposed the fallacy of this understanding. As I have noted earlier, the social and cultural crises that led to the Holocaust and the projects of mass extermination has left no credibility for the arguments that consider the power of reason and social agreement as the guiding principles of modernism. Secondly, it is equally absurd to attribute to irfan a mere ascetic search for the "ultimate Truth" and rejection of desire. The body of the mystical poetry is full of references to the objects of desire and a clear recognition of human fallibility. It does not see human imperfection as a sign of disbelief; rather it sees human tendency to sin as natural, which marks lower stages of human progress toward higher religious experiences. And finally, it is premature to view post-modernism as a unitary entity with an anti-religious bent. If post-modernism is understood in a broad rather than a parochial sense, various types of experiences with religion, and attempts at their understanding, will definitely fall within its domain. The literary works of Bataille, Bachelard and Bakhtin, and the philosophical works of Ricoeur and Gadamer are but a few examples of attention to the significance of religious experience in contemporary human consciousness. If anything, the mystical pursuit of the universal Truth involves the acceptance of the validity of other attempts in search of the same Truth. This approach at least may save mysticism from the threat of relativism. The position of the Author of "Mysticism, Freethinking and Democratic Culture", however, seems to have been completely overtaken by philosophical dogmatism.

An Overview of the Secular Objections to Religious Culture

In the Western philosophical tradition, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Foucault, Habermas, Laca and Derrida have noted the constitutive role of language in shaping thought. It has been recognised that discourse is not only the environment in which relations of power are constituted and reproduced, but also the domain in which power is handed to some and denied others. But, in the case of religious discourse, and particularly the religious-political discourse, modern Western philosophy has been dominated by mainly negative views. Many Iranian secular intellectuals, who follow the mainly negative views of the Western secular philosophy about religion.

---

1 Ibid. pp.243-244
2 See Zarrinkoub’s Serr-e Ney, two volumes, Elmi, Tehran, 1374/1995
have expressed concern that with religious appropriation of power, the “culture of guilt” will become the dominant feature of the social mind. In support of this view, they particularly refer to the push of the Islamic regime of Iran for the regulation of sexuality through its campaign against “lust”, “hedonism” and “bodily pleasures”. They thus conclude that the persistence of religious thought and the “guilt culture” have been instrumental in deterring the formation of civil society in Iran.

The latter-day secular intellectuals, therefore, do not see any possibility, for example, that within the domain of the religious culture new forms of artistic expression would open new ways of sexual expression, which play a meaningful role in the understanding of the nature of sexuality. The films of the Muslim filmmaker Muhsein Makhmalbaf are good examples of this development. These films, without any need for cliché acts of violence and nudity, convey the depths of sexual desires and relationships in subtle poetical language. This type of modern artistic expression is a creative development of the forms of sexual expressions in the Persian literary traditions, such as that of Hafiz, Mowlavi and Nezami.

There has also been new forms of gender expression by the Iranian woman in the post-revolution period, which have given rise to new forms of both secular and increasingly Islamic feminist movements. Still in their genesis, these movements have yet to present explicit political concerns, but they have been vocal in offering novel social, cultural and economic trends. There has been for example a surge of women’s activities in employment at various levels, particularly in professional and academic positions, and in businesses. Women are also being recruited in the military not only for administrative posts, but also to be trained for combat. For the first time, women researchers, writers, painters, filmmakers and journalists are emerging in prolific proportions. The works of these women are concerned with sensitive and highly important social, moral and cultural issues, such as sexuality, discrimination based on gender, the rights of women, etc. According to Azadeh Kian, in her “Gendered Occupation and Women’s Status in Post-Revolutionary Iran”, the valuable professional skills of women and their capacity to perform in the public sphere have been increasingly recognised since the revolution. As such, the inroads of women into “prestigious and well-paid positions” have forced the political leaders to adopt a “more tolerant and moderate ideological discourse” toward the women.

Many secular Iranian intellectuals refer to the prevalence of “the culture of death” in the Islamic tradition, and the desire for spiritual reunion with God after death, as cultural deterrents to the development of modernity in Iran. Following the secular intellectual tradition of the West, they insist that modern culture values social and material life over the life after death. They thus equate the religious culture with religious superstitions, and see the only possibility for progress in discarding the religious culture. The following passage by Tiva in praise of the European Enlightenment is typical of this trend: “Rationalism that had begun with the Renaissance was born again in the age of Enlightenment. Now the picture of the universal reason, progress, and freedom took all value systems and socio-political thoughts in its shadow... The rationalism of the age of Enlightenment saw the universal interests as the basis of political life, and led to the replacement of superstitions with rational logic.” 2

But, even in the Western tradition, the romantic and post-modern philosophers have put forward powerful critiques of the Enlightenment version of progress and reason. The contemporary secular intellectuals appear impervious to these critiques.

---

1 Tiva, M. 1988, p. 18
3 Tiva, M. 1988, p. 19
when they condone the pitfalls of Enlightenment as forms of ignorance that any culture might have, but are quick to highlight the weaknesses of religious thought. For them, the crisis of modernity does not dismiss the values of modernity; but the crisis of religion must lead to the total dismissal of religion. It must be noted, however, that in the mystical tradition, the reference to spiritual death and rebirth must not be taken literally. As the Iranian literary scholar Abd-ul-Hussein Zarrinkoub has explained in his *Serr-e Ney* (the Secret of Flute), by death it is meant the transcendence of the Sufi beyond obsession with material life. Accordingly, *irfan* does not reject life on earth, nor does it ignore the human activities for betterment of the modes of their survival; but it encourages occasional transcendence beyond mere material attachments. These values are well recognised in modern psychology as a way toward the creation of a “sane society”, as the works of Karl Jung and Eric Fromm indicate.

Many of the Iranian secular intellectuals in exile are basically convinced that no good can come out of the Iranian religious and mystical heritage. Carrying the common syndrome of *Islamophobia* these intellectuals desire a cultural heritage that is free from fascination with the past traditions, and has no deep attachment to history and mythology that they abhor. They deservedly resent what they call the absolute dominance in Iran of the “culture of worship of the past”, and the “obsession with finding enemies”; and thus they sincerely seek to make Iranians alert to their current position in the world. They remind Iranians that in their beloved cultural heritage there were numerous instances of disgrace; instances of the “Eastern despotism”, and instances of “oppression”, “repression”, “injustice” and “intrigue”. They wish to convince Iranians not to be too fond of even the good part of their collective past; because they believe that only then would the Iranian nation be able to make past a torch to shed light on the path to the future.

In short, the secular intellectuals in exile want to see the present generation of Iranians attached to the future, a future that is not what had been promised in the past. They see themselves as the “inheritors of a world, which has no essential past, and is faced with an insecure future.” Interestingly, Ayatollah Khomeini’s position on the state of culture in the late 1970s and early 1980’s was the opposite of this view. He saw Iranians by and large as a people who had neglected their religious culture, had lost their attachment with the past traditions, and had plunged deeply in the fantasy of a modern future.

The publications of the Iranian secular intellectuals in exile are typically full of criticisms levelled at the modernist religious thinkers. Writers, such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Ali Shari'ati, Seyyed Hussein Nasr, Dariush Shayegan, Reza Barahani, Reza Davari and Ehsan Naraqi, are subject of heavy criticism for their emphasis on guarding the collective memory and heritage of the past against the invasion of Western culture. Instead, it is clear to the secular intellectuals that the key to progress is to build a new intellectual culture in Iran. A culture, that does not advocate a return to the heritage of the traditional thought. Rather, a culture that is based on “the universal principles of reason and science, freedom and democracy, equality and social justice, secularism and belief in humanity, modernity and socialism.”

However, these intellectuals are not in fact practising what they preach. In the list of the attributes of the new culture that they propose, one can see their own fascination with the past, a past that has not kept its promises. They adhere too firmly to the Enlightenment ideas of “universal principles of reason and science”, and “secularism and humanity”, ignoring the crisis of the instrumental rationality in the

---

1 Ibid, pp.42-43
2 Ibid, p.43
West itself. The leftists in particular are fascinated with the socialist utopia of equality and social justice, although the “really existing socialism” has not yet delivered on its promises. At times, they even advocate the model of democracy and freedom of North America and Western Europe as the ultimate guide for averting the flourishing of religious culture in Iran.

There are a number of important questions that the secular recipe for the development of Iran fails to answer satisfactorily. Is the universal capacity of reason sufficient to do the job of validating the actions of the people? Or, are human actions validated by a combination of rational and irrational justifications inherent in their cultural traditions and their collective imagination of the past. Do not such values as national and group interest, cultural and historical sensitivities, collective moral values and religious and ideological convictions play an important part in motivating people to act? Could anyone imagine a society without prejudices and particularities and at the same time with preparedness for sharing products, technologies and values with others? And finally, should ordinary Iranian youth refer to such cultural symbols as Superman and Batman to gain spirit and motivation on their perilous path to the future? Or, should they not bother about referring to any cultural symbols at all?

The secular intellectuals must remember that it is not cultural particularities alone that produce historical failures of humanity: and it is not the universal culture of the West that will save it either. Those who urge Iranians to value their cultural heritage are not all wrong; what is wrong is to resign to the absurdity of life on earth and become absorbed into otherworldly spirituality. But, I do not think that any of the modern proponents of return to self, such as Shari’ati, Nasr and Shayegan, have advocated an uncritical return to the past. The people in Iran themselves, by and large, show no sign of intending to resign to spiritual asceticism and an uncritical acceptance of the past; nor do they show any preparedness to accept the Western colonial and imperialist culture uncritically.

Pathological political tendencies are more prevalent among the Iranians outside Iran. For many of these the choices seem to be either blind rejection of one part of the past (the Islamic mystical heritage), or blind praise for another part (the pre-Islamic imperial heritage). Many others have opted for either an uncritical acceptance of the superiority of the West, or for nostalgia for a socialist paradise lost. But, one must acknowledge that among these there are also those who have seen the possibility of a proud, constructive and critical interaction between the Persian-Islamic heritage of knowledge and the Western philosophical and scientific heritage.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I tried to cover the main post-revolution political discourses in Iran, which have continued to be expressed in religious and philosophical debates and disputes. I noted that these discourses have given rise to a new religious reform movement, which tends to attract mainly those holding alternative views of religion and politics not recognised by the official politico-religious establishment. Naturally, the critics of the absolutist theocratic versions of Islam have come under severe persecution by the jurists in power, who advocate the notion of the velayat-e motlaq-e faqih (absolute government of the jurist). These critics have been invariably accused of diverting from the true path of the faith. Interestingly, the proponents of the theocratic State have engaged in an ideological polemic with their opponents as they have been increasingly at a loss to justify brutal means of repression of the growing political and intellectual dissent. Two main areas of contention are of course the
question of the supreme politico-religious leadership or the *velayat-e faqih*, and the hostility with the West.

According to the dominant ideology of the current Islamic regime, religion can be protected only if the letter of religion is saved from distortion and modification. They try to attribute any deviance from the official interpretations of the religion to the domestic and foreign enemies of Islam. In their view, the State politico-religious ideology is under threat by its secular and religious critics, who ultimately serve the West and particularly the United States. The critics of this view argue that the letter of religion to which the clerical ideologues of the regime refer is, in fact, their own human interpretations of religion. According to these critics, this could prove to be the *Achilles' Heel* of the regime, and could be manipulated by a wise and serious opposition to expose the deep hypocrisy of the regime's ideological system.

However, the secular critics of the Islamic regime, particularly those in exile, have so far failed to mount any serious opposition to the State due to their ignorance of the political potency of the religious ideology, which is based on the deep-rooted philosophical, mystical and popular traditions of Islam. By contrast, the religious critics of the absolutist theocracy have initiated a curious and effective religious-philosophical movement, which has challenged the doctrinal legitimacy of religious absolutism by providing new interpretations of the same religious and mystical traditions that are invoked by the regime for its legitimacy.

The bearers of the official State ideology believe that only instituting the absolute political power of the official class of *Shi'i* jurists could preserve religion; and hence, they strive to institutionalise a full-fledge theocratic regime in Iran. Many of the highly regarded jurists of the scholastic centres for religious learning belong to the camp of such ideologues. The arguments of these ideologues bear great political import, in that these arguments form an important part of the ideological structure that legitimises the currently dominant theocratic style of polity in Iran.

Despite the claims of the opposition-in-exile to the contrary, the persistence of the Islamic Republic has not been due to its brutality alone. It has survived because it has been able to maintain, alongside coercion, a large degree of politico-religious legitimacy for its existence. There could be no denial of coercion as a part of the existence of the regime that came out of the Islamic Revolution. However, no government can survive and remain stable for a long period of time only by relying on force and coercion. A coercive government may stay in power only if it is still representing a large constituency that is still seeing it as legitimate. Once the broad legitimacy of a regime is established, then coercion is effective in suppressing the dissent at the margins.

The opposition-in-exile has not yet been successful to weaken any of the main components of the religious legitimacy of the Islamic regime, not least because it suffers from a deep lack of legitimacy itself. At any rate, since the political power of the Islamic regime is based on its religious legitimacy, its coercion will not diminish in nature unless the religious illegitimacy of political repression is exposed. In other words, unless a religiously legitimate challenge is effectively mounted against the justifications of brutality and against the historical roots of political absolutism in Iran, there could be hope for any successful opposition to the endemic intolerance and brutality that pervades the relations of power in contemporary Iran.

It must be made abundantly clear that the brutal acts committed against the people under the Shah, and other despots of the Iranian history for that matter, did not come only from the evil personality of the Oriental despot. Rather, they also emanated from the political culture that the despot felt he had to sustain for his own survival in
There could be little doubt among those who cherished the Iranian Revolution of 1979, that a profound source of attraction of this revolution was its spiritual message to diminish the brutal nature of power relations in the Iranian politics and society. The preponderance of the religious spiritual element in this revolution was, perhaps, due to this heartfelt popular aspiration for extinction of the unnecessary violence of power.

Ayatollah Khomeini echoed this sentiment, when on his triumphant return to Iran from exile in 1979, he said in Behesht-e Zahra (the main Tehran cemetery) that our predecessors had no right to impose their ways and views on the future generations. When he said this, he was deeply aware of the brutal tragedies that the single-minded adherence to obsolete relations of power had brought upon the Iranian society. He was also exposing the consequences of this brutality when he sarcastically said - standing the ground of the cemetery besides the graves of the martyrs of the revolution - that “the Shah ruined our cities, and built up our cemeteries.”

Those, who have remained true to the aspirations of the revolution, have inherited this awareness. They know that there would be no guarantee for the continued sustenance of legitimacy, if the revolutionary regime continued to use coercion only to sustain its hold on power. It is in this context that the people have already begun to question the fundamentals of this legitimacy by creating a religious discourse that is tackling the religious hypocrisy of the proponents of the absolutist theocracy. The threat of this discourse has been taken seriously by the ideologues of the regime due to its potential to become an effective political tool in the hands of a wise opposition.

The strength of this discourse is due to its head-on challenge to the narrow versions of religion. And thence, it is potentially capable of weakening the ideological structure that tries to justify the sustained state of coercive intolerance. People have experienced the spread of injustice and corruption since the Islamic revolution, but they have largely refused to see Islam as responsible for their woes. Instead, they have increasingly been prepared to reject the version of Islam imposed by the proponents of despotism within the context of an Islamic political culture. It goes without saying that if the government fails to address the wish and will of the people, it will have to face severe consequences.

At present a domestic opposition to absolutist theocracy, which has remained true to the religious and spiritual essence of the Islamic Revolution, has taken off. The main theme of this opposition is challenging the notion that the laws and regulations of the State are of sacred value, and hence may not be challenged. For this opposition, religion and particularly the Islamic and political heritage has created an undisputed advantage. The orthodox clerical class cannot sustain, any longer, the claim that religion is their exclusive domain. Although the class of official Shi'i theologians has, for centuries, despised popular versions of religion as heresy, and thus isolated itself from socio-political developments, the modern rise of political religion, that brought them to positions of power, does not allow their resistance to change.

It was the move by Ayatollah Khomeini to popularise religion (by posing it as a source of political empowerment) that created the opportunity for the clerics to wield power. Khomeini made the people see the irrelevance of the political impotence of the conservative clergy, and inspired a new clerical movement seeking political power in order to address the cultural, political, social and economic problems of the people in the modern age. He realised that to make religion relevant to the people once again, it was necessary to adapt the religion such that it would be able to tackle the problems of a modern society. The latter-day conservative clerics may now be
challenged on account of their failure to use the gained political power of Islam in improving the lot of the people by further adapting the religion with the age. They may also be challenged on the account of their tendency to use religion in order to protect the political and economic interests of a class of clerical elite, and not for the fulfilment of the ideals of the revolution.

The clerical elite cannot rebuff this new challenge to the regime for its alleged anti-religion. This challenge is not, in fact, targeting the religion as such. Rather, it is targeting the interpretations of the religion that have been offered by humans. This new version of popular religion also seeks to make religion relevant to the people by turning it into an empowering agent. It is using the same revolutionary rhetoric that Khomeini and other popular leaders of the Islamic Revolution used to enable the people to say loudly that they did not consider the faqih at an equal footing with the infallible saints. It would thus empower the people to further say that they see the jurists and theologians as human and as such subject to human errors.

Even many within the government have expressed awareness that religion can only survive by retreating to centres of religious knowledge, and to the social and political institutions where it has a strong base, working from there to force the State to redress the grievances of the community of believers. Accordingly, only that religion is worthy of faith, which can secure a genuine relevance for itself by addressing the modern spiritual, social, political, economic and cultural needs of the people from an advisory and educational, cultural and spiritual position.

President Khatami and his supporters, for instance, have proclaimed that the people would embrace a religion that would be on their side to further their demand for the fulfilment of their legitimate needs; a religion that would press the State not to renege on its promises to the people. They have made it abundantly clear that they believe, the people would not tolerate a clerical elite that seeks to gain dominance in the State in order to impose a new mode of political domination, and in order to repress the legitimate popular aspirations for freedom and justice. To be sure, the generation of the Iranians of the post-revolution era will be unlikely to consent to a new power structure that refuses to address their spiritual, cultural, political, social and economic needs. Not least, because they know that the legitimacy of these needs have been endorsed by the purity of the Islamic faith.

Nonetheless, the theocratic ideologues have sought so far to enforce Islam as a rigid code of social and political behaviour. They have tried to substantiate their claims by referring to certain traditional interpretations of religion. These sources of reference belong to a tradition of scholastic religious learning that goes back to more than a thousand years ago. In this tradition, the mujtahids, who have been recognised by their peers to be of exceptional religious and scientific qualities, are well established among the Shi'i theologians. As we have seen, the mujtahids are believed to have reached excellence in kalam (theology), figh (jurisprudence), tafsir (exegesis) and to a lesser extent hekmat (philosophy) and irfan (mysticism).

The Shi'i mujtahids with their knowledge of jurisprudence have undoubtedly dominated the centres of religious learning, and have thus narrowed the scope of interpretation of religious texts justifying their position by holding that interpretation of religion must stay the privilege of the few. Originally, those few qualified to interpret the essence of religion were limited to the Prophet and the infallible Imams on the basis that these figures were not ordinary humans. The advantage of the members of the House of the Prophet over the ordinary humans is believed to be that they had direct access to the source of Divine Revelation.

---

1 See the list of grand mujtahids in the appendix to Fischer & Abedi's Debating Muslim (1990).
While it was accepted that only people of such calibre could claim exclusive access to the ultimate interpretation of the Revelation, then no body else, not even the mujtahids, could claim such exclusivity. Only with the advent of the Mahdi was it possible to have a complete interpretation of the Revelation relevant to the age. And before that, there must not be any attempt at such an interpretation, because it might end up in heresy. This was in fact the position of the Akhbaris, whose views prevailed in the Shi'i faith until the seventeenth century. Nonetheless, with the weakening of the Akhbari School and the final doctrinal victory of the Usuli movement in the eighteenth century, the Shi'i jurists successfully extended the authority for interpretation of religion in the absence of the Hidden Imam to the theologians, expert in Shi'i fiqh.

The secret of the success of the Usuli movement was its rational and fair attempt to endorse the legitimate aspirations of the ordinary believers on earth. It was this rationality and fairness that made the Usuli ulama the representatives of the people vis-à-vis the State, and in a long and tormented historical process led to the ascendance of the Shi'i jurists to political power. But, the present critics of the absolute theocracy insist that with this power came a huge burden of responsibility, which had always been reiterated by the great spiritual figures of the Shi'i faith. It is this responsibility, they claim, that is sometimes lost to the clergy in power. It is these critics, inside and outside the centres of religious learning, who are contributing to the emerging religious reform movement in Iran. This new movement is now in the offing. It is a movement, which expresses the need for the reassertion of the responsibilities of the religious leaders in positions of power. This movement reminds the leaders of their responsibilities to the people, and advocates a more creative and productive approach to the question of interpretation of religious texts.

This movement shares with the Akhbari School the view that only the Prophet and the infallible Imams had primary access to the knowledge of the ultimate meaning of the Revelation. It also shares with the Akhbaris the view that the religious knowledge at a secondary level must not be an exclusive domain of the ulama. But it goes beyond the Akhbaris in asserting the right of the ordinary people in understanding and interpreting the religion at a human level. It asserts the right of the people to experience the human essence of the religion. Accordingly, at this human level, every believer should be permitted to have a direct relationship with God, and this right should not remain exclusive to the highly qualified theologians. This movement, although it may be identified with the Islamic modernist movement that began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Iran, is in fact based on more than a thousand years of mystical tradition. And as such, it is more than just another modernist challenge to the latter-day proponents of theocracy.