Religion and State:
In Rawlsian Political Liberalism and Some Contemporary Iranian Religious
Reformists

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ABSTRACT

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Tahmineh Mousavi

In the United States, there is a lively debate on the relationship between religion and politics. The separation of Church and State is the assumption of most liberal thinkers. From their perspective, such separation not only protects the State from religion, but also protects religion from the State. The first part of the present research will examine the contemporary liberal debate on religion and politics, which is based on Rawls' version of political liberalism and its critics. The second part will explore three religious discourses: the traditional, ideological and democratic discourses in contemporary Islam (in the case of Iran) with particular emphasis on the democratic discourse. This paper will also demonstrate important similarities that exist between the essential claims and arguments of some contemporary Iranian religious reformists and some liberal thinkers. It comes to the conclusion that that Rawlsian political liberalism has no conflict with religious ideas, but provides an ideal environment to flourish religious values in a pluralistic society. Also, it will show that Iranian Islamic reformists, in contrast to their portrayal by some researchers as opposing Western liberal democracy, endorse Rawlsian political liberalism and support it with an Islamic interpretation of life.

Contents

Introduction

The topics of religion and politics has interested and preoccupied many Western thinkers from the 17th century until today. As a matter of fact, the issue has received recently much renewed attention.

In the United States, there is a lively debate about the relationship between religion and politics. The separation of Church and State is the assumption of most liberal thinkers. John Rawls claims that no comprehensive doctrines (include religious and philosophical doctrines) are appropriate as a political conception in a constitutional democracy.

Some religious liberals, such as Robert Audi, maintain that precluding religious argumentation within the public realm best preserves both religious practice and pluralistic democracy. For Audi, most rational religious people try to preserve religious liberty and support the separation between religion and politics. Such a separation is said not only to protect the State from religion, but to protect religion from the State.

Some critics, such as Nicolas Wolterstorff, believe that the maintenance of a democratic culture depends upon the presence of religious political argumentation in the public forum.

Still others believe that this dilemma may be resolved by modifying the two positions. Philip Quinn points out that the exclusion of religious doctrines can be fair only when that exclusion is accompanied by other exclusions. According to Quinn, because Rawlsian public reason excludes all comprehensive doctrines (both religious and secular) in the same way, religious people should be encouraged to be politically liberal, just as liberals should be encouraged to tolerate reasonable religious views. Although

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Quinn believes that religious people can live within the limits circumscribed by Rawlsian public reason, he does not censure those who choose not to accept these limits.

But this discussion is not limited to American philosophers. In a different cultural context, some contemporary Islamic philosophers, such as Abdulkarim Soroush and Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari (two leading Iranian religious thinkers), also maintain that excluding religion from politics protects religion. They demonstrate that the nature of religion is not destructive of civil peace, and that religion should not be concerned with matters relating to political power and social status. Rather, religion is properly concerned with religious questions, and it is neither possible nor desirable to genuinely reduce religion to any particular ideology. Such thinkers do emphasize, however, that reconciling religion and democracy is possible. This is so because they regard democracy as a method of restricting power and rationalizing politics; and democracy does not require believers to abandon their beliefs. In fact, it is religion that stands to benefit the most from democracy, since it is only under such conditions that the true nature of religion can be properly understood.

Methodology

This project is concerned with both political philosophy and the philosophy of religion. It is not a theological investigation; this is a comparative philosophical study of religion and democracy in the current debate.

The first point here is this research does not ask, what are Islamic or Christian positions on democracy? It does not want to know Islam's specific viewpoint or Christianity's specific viewpoint on this issue, nor does it concern itself with the internal

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teachings of these religions. Since this project is concerned with the much broader issue of the relationship between religion and the secular State, the findings are relevant to all religions.

This claim requires further clarification: Theology is concerned with questions about God, evil, salvation, and so on. But questions of religious liberty (as a universal requirement), religious pluralism (as a fact found everywhere in the modern world), and the relationship between religion and politics (itself a global issue) are related to the philosophy of religion and political philosophy, since they address questions of universal interest.

Second, I have to distinguish between two types of religiosity: imitative religiosity and thoughtful or scholarly religiosity. The present research will concentrate on contemporary thinkers who exemplify the latter type of religiosity.

In the first part of this paper, I intend to examine the contemporary liberal debate on religion and politics, which is based on Rawls' version of political liberalism and its critics. The second part of the paper will examine three religious discourses: the traditional, ideological and democratic discourses present in contemporary Islam (in the case of Iran). I will focus on the democratic discourse as a new discourse that has emerged in contemporary Iranian society. This paper will also demonstrate important similarities that exist between the essential claims and arguments of some contemporary Muslim reformists and some liberal thinkers. Finally, I believe that the Rawlsian political liberalism has many lessons for Muslim thinkers concerning the relationship between religion and democracy. Arguing along these lines, I emphasize that Rawlsian

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political liberalism has no conflict with religion, but rather provides an ideal environment

to fulfill religious values in a pluralistic society.

Part I

Religion and Contemporary Liberalism

1. Rawlsian Political Liberalism

One of the most prominent contemporary proponents of liberalism is John Rawls. Rawls principles of liberal democracy are a version of Kant's moral philosophy. So, for Rawls, the principles of liberal democracy are moral assumptions.

In his *Theory of Justice (1972),* Rawls presents a moral conception of justice: 'Justice as fairness'. He outlines two principles of justice; the priority of equality and fair opportunity for all citizens. Rawls attempts to adjust his conception of justice with liberalism. In *Political Liberalism (1993),* Rawls argues that, in a pluralistic liberal society, the public conception of justice is a moral conception that considers citizens as free and equal persons. The nature of political liberalism can be supported by an overlapping consensus constructed out of the comprehensive philosophical, ethical, and religious doctrines of citizens.

To sum up, Rawls derives the principles of liberal democracy from a conception of justice; justice as fairness is an appropriate conception of justice for all contemporary democracies.

I. Justice as fairness

According to Rawls, the main characteristic of modern democratic societies is pluralism of reasonable doctrines; "not simply by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical and moral doctrines but by a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines."[1]

But how is it possible to exist in such a pluralistic society that includes incompatible doctrines? Rawls declares these doctrines can coexist by respecting a political conception of justice, justice as fairness.

Rawls believes there is a deep disagreement between the traditions associated with Locke which focuses on freedom of thought and conscience, and the tradition associated with Rousseau which focuses on the equal political liberties and values of public life. The Rawlsian idea of *justice as fairness* tries to adjudicate these basic principles: the values of liberty and equality. Thus the two principles of justice are, first, that each person has equal rights and liberties; and second, the social and economic offices have to provide fair and equal opportunity, along with the greatest benefit for the least advantaged members of society. In that society, there is a system of fair social cooperation between free and equal persons.

Rawls writes:

> Justice as fairness tries to do this by using a fundamental organizing idea is that of society as a fair system of social cooperation between free and equal persons viewed as fully cooperating members of society over a complete life.[2]

The conception of justice as fairness considers all citizens as free and equal persons who can participate in political decisions based on an overlapping consensus of

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[1] John Rawls, *Political liberalism*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1993), p. xxv.
[2] *Ibid.*, p.9.

their reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines. But "The conception of justice should be, as far as possible, independent of the opposing and conflicting philosophical and religious doctrines that citizens affirm."[3]

Rawls claims that the public conception of justice is a political conception, not a metaphysical one. In a constitutional democracy, the public conception of justice is a moral conception and independent of comprehensive philosophical and religious conceptions, that is, a political conception of justice is neither presented nor derived from comprehensive doctrines.

Justice as fairness considers society as a fair system of cooperation; that is, in justice as fairness, social unity is understood as a system of cooperation between free and equal persons. 'Overlapping consensus' of reasonable comprehensive doctrines should support this political conception of justice. Justice as fairness is a reasonable conception of justice, and the principles of justice should be adjusted with the virtue of citizenship.

II. The Idea of citizenship

For Rawls, like the ancient philosophers, the virtue of citizenship has an important place in discussions of the State. Like Aristotle, who believed "the good is the same for a city as for an individual", Rawls considers that citizens' political activity and public political arguments should be aimed at promoting the common interest rather than individual interests. Also the virtues of citizenship must be distinguished from the virtues that characterize ways of life belonging to comprehensive religious and political doctrines. According to Rawls,

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[3] *Ibid.*

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> [Citizens have] capacity for a sense of justice and for a conception of the good. A sense of justice is the capacity to understand, to apply, and to act from the public conception of justice which characterizes the fair term of social cooperation. The capacity for the conception of the good is the capacity to form, to revise, and rationality to pursue a conception of one's rational advantage, or good.[4]

So, citizens are free and equal, and each citizen has the capacity to form, revise, and pursue a conception of the good and the capacity for a sense of justice.

The duty of citizenship, according to Rawls, is to treat one another as equal. Citizens' decisions should be reasonably defensible and they should not use power against one another illegitimately. Rawls therefore thinks that the duty of citizenship should be supported by public reason.[5]

III. The idea of public reason

Justice as fairness is a practical and a moral conception, that is, free agreement, reconciliation through public reason. " Public reason is characteristic of a democratic people: it is the reason of its citizens, of those sharing the status of equal citizenship. The subject of their reason is the good of the public."[6]

For Rawls, a political society has a way for formulating its plans and of making decisions. In his conception, citizens and public officials should explain, defend, and promote their political views by employing reasons that are accessible to all reasonable fellow citizens. Citizens are therefore not to be reliant upon any particular worldview, whether religious or secular, when arguing for their political views.

The virtue of citizenship requires citizens to show how their views can be supported by public reason. Each comprehensive doctrine should accept public reason.

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[4] *Ibid.*, p.11.
[5] *Ibid.*, p.217.
[6] *Ibid.*. p.213.

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Virtuous citizenship and compliance with the requirements of public reason lay the basis for foundations of liberalism.

Finally, public reason is not an idea about specific policies; it is an idea about all kinds of reasons of free, equal and reasonable/rational citizens. Rawls does not say that religious citizens cannot participate in political debates based on their religious doctrines, but he believes that their arguments should be reasonable and supported by 'public reason'. Consequently, in a liberal society the religious or philosophical doctrines of citizens should never be restricted when they are reasonable.

2. Robert Audi: exclusion of religious arguments in the Public Square

Robert Audi differs from Rawls since he argues that the political activities of religious citizens along with their use of religion in public political debates should be constrained. Since he is concerned about the reappearance of wars of religion as in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, he defends strict church-State separation and the exclusion of religious arguments for public policy.

According to Audi, there are some significant differences between religious reasons and secular ones. Most religious discourse is unclear. It is often mixed with other types of discourse, and is based on presuppositions that tend to be descriptive rather than persuasive. In addition, the power of religious authorities is based on the belief that they are the ultimate human arbiters of truth, and outsiders neither understand the truth nor have unmediated access to salvation. In this manner, religious authorities can threaten not only non-religious citizens, but also the members of other religions. In

the case of proselytizing religions such as Christianity and Islam, seeking to bring outsiders into the faith is often regarded as a religious imperative that precludes adopting a posture of neutrality in public life. But we need something more general in public discourse; a moderate discourse is more useful than an authoritarian discourse.

Thus, as Audi suggests, for the purposes of their mutual protection and flourishing both secular and religious institutions need a strict separation of church and State.

I. Church-State separation

Audi suggests that most rational religious people try to preserve religious liberty and democratic governments. There are many reasons why conscientious religious citizens support the separation between religion and politics. For them, in order to ensure the protection of religious liberty, religious institutions should not interfere in politics. Most rational religious people prefer to use secular arguments in public policy discussions because their non-religious fellow citizens are unlikely to be swayed by religious arguments.

The principles of the idea of separation of church and State, according to Audi, are: first, the libertarian principle or the principle of toleration; the government has the responsibility to protect religious liberty, because religious liberty is the most important element in a liberal democracy and without this element no society can consider itself a free society. The second principle is the equalitarian principle; the government should take an equal position in dealing with different religions. This principle is against discrimination and against the preference of one religion over another. The third

principle is the principle of neutrality; the government should not interfere in religious affairs nor should the government support any one religion.

Thus, for the protection of religious liberty, churches should refrain from participation in political activities. Audi writes; "The protection of religious liberty, and certainly governmental neutrality toward religious institutions, is better served if, normally, churches as such abstain from political action."[7]

For Audi, churches can act as spiritual institutions. Their participation cannot be considered as "an aspect of religious commitments" but as "a moral obligation of citizenship". Moral leadership by clergy can bring moral authority into politics. Their authority is not official, and their participation could corrupt their authority. Thus churches should be independent and take neutral positions in politics. With spiritual authority, churches can have more power to influence public life and political neutrality could support both moral and religious authority.

A church, finally, should be guided by the principle of ecclesiastical and political neutrality. In accordance with this principle, Audi says:

> In a free and democratic society, churches committed to being institutional citizens in such a society have a prima facie obligation to abstain from supporting candidates for public office or pressing for law or public policies that restrict human conduct.[8]

Audi does not interpret the separation of church and State to mean an absolute restriction on all religious considerations. For example, religious arguments that seek to express one's feelings, or that seek to communicate with other believers or to solicit their

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[7] R. Audi and N. Wolterstroff, *Religion in the Public Square* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997), p.38.
[8] *Ibid.*, p.40.

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agreement, or that serve as additional support for a well-reasoned argument, neither threaten democracy nor religious liberty.

II. The principles for advocacy of law or public policy

In addition to the three principles mentioned above, Audi includes two principles of conscience for advocacy of law or public policy to which all citizens (religious and non-religious) who live in a democratic society should adhere. First, with 'the secular rationale principle', one should have adequate secular reasons for the support or advocacy of law or public policy. This principle asks people what reasons they have for their actions. Any inadequate religious or secular reason could not support law or public policy. For Audi, public reason and "secular reason" are the same. 'Secular reason', according to Audi means; "One whose normative force, that is, its status as a prima facie justificatory element, does not (evidentially) depend on the existence of God, or on theological considerations, or on the pronouncements of a person or institution qua religious authority."[9]

The secular reason is "a prima facie justificatory element" and does not rely on theological or religious considerations or even public considerations, but it has sufficient power to provide a reasonable obligation for action. The secular rationale principle is understandable for religious and non-religious people and provides the possibility of positive dialogue between them. The second principle is 'secular motivation'. This principle asks of people: why do they want to do something? It suggests that without secular motivation no one can support or advocate a law or public policy.

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[9] Robert Audi, *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.26.

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These principles attempt to prevent the domination of religious reasons and presume that it is better to speak with a common voice, which Audi calls a 'civic voice'. But it does not mean that religious reasons cannot be "evidentially adequate" or "motivationally sufficient"; by contrast, these principles allow that religious reasons may be causally sufficient for participating in political debates. Audi declares, " My principles also allow that religious reasons may be motivationally sufficient for a political stance... religious reasons can be causally sufficient for producing a secular justification of a law or public policy."[10] Audi points out that these principles may allow stronger and more important reasons to dominate even if they are motivated by religious ones, but it is best to advocate public policy in secular terms: "To be sure, in public advocacy of laws or policies it seems generally best to conduct discussion in secular terms."[11]

Although these principles are not prerequisites for liberal democracy, the presence of these principles brings positive commitment to liberal democracy. These principles are consistent with both secular and religious reasons and can apply for both secular and religious citizens.

III. The principle of "theo-ethical equilibrium"

For Audi, although most religious arguments are theistic in content, some of them are not reliant on overtly religious evidence and can have dialogue with other arguments. Sometimes there are multiple reasons and obligations for a kind of conduct, and there is some overlap between secular and religious reasons and obligations (which can be difficult to differentiate from each other).

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[10] Audi and Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square*, p.52.
[11] *Ibid.*, p.53.

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According to Audi, the integration between some secular and some religious reasons is possible and can lead to modifications and combinations of moral issues. The equilibrium between them is important for cooperation between citizens. This idea obligates both religious and secular citizens to respect each other's convictions. The principle of "theo-ethical equilibrium" requires that they seek at least equilibrium of their beliefs and attitudes grounded in religious sources with those grounded in secular sources.[12]

As Audi says, there are many paths to truth; we not only have religious paths to truth, but also secular paths to moral truth. Sometimes, the secular reasons might be more powerful than religious reasons; sometimes understanding God through ethics is more reasonable than through theology. Audi writes:

> In some cases, good secular arguments for moral principles may be better reasons to believe those principles to be divinely enjoyed than theological arguments for the principles, based on scripture and tradition. [13]

For Audi, religious obligations and secular and moral obligations have a great overlap. In many cases, there are the same teachings for religious and secular people. The people who are more familiar with religious teachings will generally learn some moral principles through it, and secular people learn such principles through secular teachings.

Finally, Audi emphasizes that religion can play both a positive and a negative role in the development of democracy. Nobody can ignore the importance of religious convictions in the life of religious citizens. Religious discourses can play a positive role in public life; no responsible person in a liberal democracy endorses keeping religion

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[12] Audi, *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason*, p.136.
[13] *Ibid.*, pp.20-21.

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entirely outside of the public square. Although the rational religious people are aware of some moral and secular disagreements, they seek links between their religious and their secular beliefs.

IV. The idea of religious citizens

The idea of religious citizens, according to Audi, shows this integration between religious and secular obligations. This ideal is the result of motivational or evidential cooperation between religious and secular reasons. This cooperation can show not only that religious reasons can be as reasonable as secular ones, but also that religious people can take a neutral position in public life, which in turn brings mutual respect and mutual understanding.

The idea of religious citizens means that rational religious citizens should follow their religious obligations within the limits of moral rights. This is a good pattern not only for religious citizens, but also for religious institutions that act on moral considerations.

For Audi, the secular rational principle is an adequate and appropriate principle to use in the public square, and the commitment to the principles of secular rationalism and motivation does not require giving up one's religious views. Indeed, a secular reason may be fully aligned with a religious reason. It lets citizens and institutions use their language in public discourse with respect for the civic voice. The freedom of expression in a liberal democracy permits religious citizens who respect the civic voice to use religious discourse in the public square. In a liberal democratic society every citizen should speak with a civic voice when advocating or supporting laws or public policy.

V. Civic virtue

Audi, like Rawls, derives the idea of civic virtue from moral ideas. Moral virtues such as the idea of citizenship or mutual respect are common in both religious and secular perspectives. Civic virtue is a moral virtue, requiring respect for all citizens, and can apply to both the religious and the secular virtues.

Therefore, civic virtue is a neutral idea, independent of both religious and secular conceptions. It can be adopted with rational citizens who have a commitment to liberal democracy and are sensitive to moral standards. If citizens in a democratic society respect only their own interests, the democratic society cannot flourish. The survival of the democratic society requires the contribution and cooperation of all citizens.

According to Audi, not only 'citizens of civic virtue' but also churches can participate in political discourses. The citizen of civic virtue can participate in political discourse by respecting 'the principles of secular motivation' and churches can participate by respecting the principle of ecclesiastical political neutrality. According to this principle "churches committed to being institutional citizens in a free society have a prima facie obligation to abstain from supporting candidates for public policies that restrict human conduct."[14]

Although civic virtue is able to make a balance between religious and secular obligations, it cannot replace them; they function in different ways.

Audi connects civic virtues with responsible participation in political life: "Civic virtue in a liberal democracy implies a degree of responsible political participation."[15] Civic virtue requires both secular and religious institutions to teach

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[14] *Ibid.*, p.40.
[15] *Ibid.*, p.16.

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public responsibilities. Civic virtue in a liberal democracy has the responsibility to protect civil society and to help it flourish. Thus, civic virtue is recognized by a citizen's commitment to the principles of secular rationale and motivation because these principles apply to all citizens and institutions.

3. Nicholas Wolterstorff: Critique of religious exclusions of political liberalism

From the perspective of some religious thinkers, Rawlsian political liberalism presents an unrealistic and unachievable model of the State and of the character of reasonable citizens. They criticize liberal thinkers for making strict divisions between private and public reason (as Rawls suggests) and secular and religious reason (as Audi suggests), as well as for assuming too much consensus between rational citizens.

Such critics believe that the removal of religion from public life would create a dilemma for democracy, and the maintenance of a democratic culture depends upon the presence of religious political argumentation in the public forum.

According to these critics, in the real world, the liberal regimes that suggest strict separation of church and State or the depoliticization of religion could not have a neutral stand with regard to religions. They therefore conclude that Rawlsian political liberalism is unfair for religious adherents.

Some religious thinkers, such as Nicholas Wolterstorff, have criticized Rawls and other liberals for these restrictions. Wolterstorff argues that religion is so important to its adherents that they should be able to express their conviction in public debate. In Rawlsian political liberalism, he says that secular reasons take unfair precedence over

religious values. Secularist discrimination is not a fair way to convince religious people who refuse to accept the separation of religious and secular reasons. Use of religious argumentation, Wolterstorff maintains, is not as unreasonable as Rawls, Audi and other liberals think.

In discussing the place of religious argument in political debate, Wolterstorff introduces himself as an adherent of liberal democracy because he believes that the liberal democratic model treats all citizens as free and equal. Citizens enjoy equal protection and equal freedom under the law; through the vote they possess an equal voice in political decisions; and the State takes a position of neutrality regarding the diversity of religions and other worldviews within society. He proposes: "Equal protection under law for all people, equal freedom in law for all citizens, and neutrality on the part of the State with respect to the diversity of religions and comprehensive perspectives."[16]

Wolterstorff believes liberal democracies all deviate in some ways from the ideal of the liberal position. Because the liberal position holds that the proper goal of political action is justice, the meaning of the liberal position is to be determined by a process that is neutral with regard to religious and other worldviews. This is what Wolterstorff says, but according to the Rawlsian liberal position, "citizens should hold their political views for reasons derived from the independent source."[17] So, the Rawlsian liberal position imposes "restraint on religious reasons" and has "conflict with the idea of liberal democracy."[18]

Wolterstorff also criticizes Rawls' independent position. According to this principle, participation in political debates should be independent of any and all

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[16] Audi and Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square*, p.70.
[17] *Ibid.*, p.79.
[18] *Ibid.*, p.77.

comprehensive philosophical and religious doctrines. For Wolterstorff it is not fair to ask all citizens to base their political decisions on this principle. He believes that John Rawls is influenced by John Locke in his defense of the independent-basis position. This principle (independent base position) derives from Lockean arguments, but Locke did not intend to apply it as a criterion to all political debate. According to Wolterstorff, Locke was not a proponent of liberalism. Locke believed that it is our obligation to support rational morality and rational religion and not to use uncertified religious beliefs. Locke believed that by using rational religious arguments we could achieve 'substantial beliefs about God' as well as revise our understanding of the Gospel. Finally, Wolterstorff writes:

> Locke's rationale or the restraint he proposes on the use of uncertified religious beliefs as reasons in decision and discussion on political issues is eminently clear: we should not use uncertified religious beliefs in that manner because we should not have such beliefs.[19]

Wolterstorff maintains that, according to Locke, only rational religious beliefs have the ability to participate in political discussion. Locke thought that moral truths were sufficient and could be considered as an independent source for practicing in our private and public life. But, according to Wolterstorff, we cannot rely on traditional arguments in discussing political matters. The political discourses cannot be based on independent positions that derive from a liberal position as Rawls suggests. Finally, despite Wolterstorff accepting the idea of liberal democracy, he is opposed to the Rawlsian liberal position and to Audi's requirement that we support and advocate political law or public policy solely on the basis of an independent position or 'secular rationale reasons and motivations'. Wolterstorff's alternative to the liberal position is

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[19] *Ibid.*, p.86.

what he calls 'the consocial position'. He argues that the consocial position is fully

harmonious with liberal democracy.

Wolterstorff writes:

> The consocial position agrees with the liberal position and opposes the competition-of-interests position concerning the goal of political discussions, decisions, and actions: the goal is political justice. But it departs from the liberal position on two defining issues. First, it repudiates the quest for an independent source and imposes no moral restraint on the use of religious reasons. And second, it interprets the neutrality requirement, that the State be neutral with respect to the religious and other comprehensive perspectives present in society, as requiring impartiality rather than separation.[20]

Wolterstorff concludes that the maintenance of democracy depends upon the

presence of religious political arguments in public discussion. Then he asks, do the ethics

include a restraint on the use of religious reasons for political decisions and discussions?

Wolterstorff believes that the ethics of citizens do not limit people to using only the

independent position (as Rawls suggests) or secular rationale or motivation (as Audi

suggests) for the advocacy of political law or public policy in liberal democracy. In

contrast, according to the liberal democratic principles of freedom and equality, citizens

are free to employ any kind of reason for their advocacy or discussions. Thus, in this

regard they should be allowed to act as they see fit. Wolterstorff believes that what

Rawls and Audi are claiming "is incompatible with the ethics of citizens in liberal

democracy for the religious person to conduct himself or herself in that manner." [21]

Rawls and Audi both believe that their respective positions can achieve public

consensus and agreement. But, for Wolterstorff we can never achieve this agreement

because some citizens are always opposing our view. The achievement of agreement

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[20] *Ibid.*, p.114.
[21] Ibid, p.148

between reasonable citizens on some comprehensive philosophical or religious doctrines

is too difficult. Wolterstorff writes:

> Let religious people use what reasons they wish, and offer them to whomever
> they wish. Let non-religious people do so as well. Of course, if the religious
> person wants to persuade the non-religious person, or the person of another
> religion, of his position, he will have to do more than offer his own idiosyncratic
> religious reasons.[22]

4. Philip Quinn on religious citizens within the limits of Rawlsian public reason

According to Philip L. Quinn, the mingling of religion and politics is 'a

dangerous mixture'; "combining them, even in academic discussion, risks generating

more heat than light."[23] But, the inclusive discussion between them not only has a non-

destructive effect, but is also necessary for health of the pluralistic society.

Quinn rejects Audi's requirement that we always be motivated in politics by

secular reasons. Quinn argues that Audi's principles make unfair constraints on religious

citizens. According to Audi, only people who have 'adequate secular reason' or

'adequate secular motivation' can support or advocate law or public policy. A secular

reason is one whose normative force, its status as a prima facie, does not depend on

theological considerations or religious authority. Audi believes these principles are

principles of conscience; then, all conscientious citizens in a democratic society should

follow these principles. Even a religious conscientious citizen should have secular

motivation for actions in support of laws or policies. Thus, according to these principles,

no one has the right to vote on religious grounds and some religious believers should

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[22] Ibid, p.165

[23] Philip L. Quinn, "Political Liberalism and Their Exclusions of the Religious" in *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism,* ed., Paul J. Weithman (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), p.138.

refrain from full participation in political debate and political action. Audis'

understanding of his principles is "as a principle of obligation specifying what one ought

to do."[24]

Quinn emphasizes that religious believers reasonably have the right to consider

Audi's principles unfair to them and they could reasonably disagree with these

principles. By citing Rawls' distinction between the public and non-public sphere, in

which both religious and secular comprehensive doctrines are excluded from the former,

Quinn argues against Audi's sole exclusion of religious reasons. In other words, all

people who participate in political debates should do so only within public reason.

Quinn believes the exclusion of religious doctrines can be fair only when that

exclusion is accompanied by other exclusions. Thus, Rawls' public reason is not unfair

in its exclusion of religious doctrines. Quinn argues that Rawlsian public reason excludes

all the comprehensive doctrines in the same way, including both religious and secular

comprehensive doctrines, and "cannot be accused of unfairly privileging the secular over

the religious."[25] It is not unfair to apply these exclusions, if these exclusions are

accompanied by overlapping consensus.

Quinn, however, states that "even [if] a Rawlsian overlapping consensus is not

utopian, no such consensus exists in our society here and now."[26] He claims that as the

history of modern secular political theory shows, an overlapping consensus on a political

doctrine will not ever be achieved in a pluralistic democracy, nor would it last long if it

were achieved. As Robert M. Adams says, "nothing in the history of modern secular

ethical theory gives reason to expect that general agreement on a single comprehensive

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[24] *Ibid.*, pp.139-141.
[25] *Ibid.*, p.148.
[26] *Ibid.*

ethical theory will ever be achieved - or that, if achieved, it would long endure in a climate of free inquiry."[27]

For Quinn, it is unrealistic to expect the ideal of public reason to be attained. Even if it was attained it could not impose the moral duties such as the duty of civility.[28] According to Quinn, comprehensive doctrines lie outside of the exclusions of public reason. These restrictions can be moral, not legal. Rawlsian political liberalism does not suggest such legal duty. Rawls thinks it is a normative ideal. Thus it imposes on citizens "a moral, not a legal duty - the duty of civility - to be able to explain to one another on those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason."[29]

Rawls emphasizes that the duty of civility is a moral duty not a legal duty. So, according to Rawls, religious citizens should be morally obliged not to found their political activity on their religious arguments. And, for Quinn, some religious or secular doctrines have to be excluded on moral grounds if they are against public reason and the duty of citizenship

Quinn also rejects Wolterstorff's account directed against the independent-basis principle as well as against the separation principle. According to Quinn, "Rawls does endorse a version of the independent-basis principle when he includes the duty of civility within public reason, the argument applies to his view."[30]

[27] Robert M. Adams, "Religious Ethics in a Pluralistic Society," *Prospects for a Common Morality,* eds. Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) p.97.
[28] . Philip L. Quinn, "Religious Citizens Within the Limits of Public Reason", *The Modern Schoolman,* January/March 2001, p. 124.
[29] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism,* p.217.
[30] Quinn, "Religious Citizens Within the Limits of Public Reason," p. 121.

As Quinn points out, Wolterstorff believes that Rawlsian liberalism is unfair to religion and to religious people. But Quinn, like Audi, thinks that some rational religious people like to act politically in a manner independent of their religious reasons. In contrast to these people, there are some non-religious people who devote their life to their comprehensive doctrine, such as Marxist adherents. So liberalism is also unfair to these kinds of people. Quinn calls all of the members of these groups (religious or non-religious ones) the integralists 'who strive for lives by their comprehensive doctrines'. Quinn says that, instead of asking whether liberalism is unfair to religion or religious people, we should ask whether liberalism is unfair to the integralists. Finally, Quinn claims that Wolterstorff fails to show "that Rawlsian political liberalism is unfair to integralists, much less to religion as such."[31]

Quinn argues that "there remains no good reason to think that religion as such or integralism in general has been unfairly treated if integralist forms of life, religious and otherwise, fail to pass the historical test of enduring and gaining adherents in a liberal democratic society."[32]

Quinn believes that the liberal society is a pluralistic and moral society "in which there is a pluralism of reasonable comprehensive religious doctrines realize some very significant values."[33] Quinn points out that not all religious people are illiberal, just as not all liberals are irreligious. However, religious people should be encouraged to be politically liberal, just as liberals should be encouraged to tolerate reasonable religious views. Quinn writes:

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[31] *Ibid.*, p.123.
[32] *Ibid.*
[33] *Ibid.*, p.105.

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Secular liberals would have an excuse for thinking according to which all religious people are illiberal, and religious conservative would have an excuse for thinking to which all liberals are secularists. But if religious liberals were to resist the temptation, they would have a way to challenge this polarization. They would be in a position to argue for liberal laws and policies from religious premises and thereby show secular liberals that some religious people are their allies. I am convinced that such a challenge would be good for the health the American body politics.[35]

Finally, Quinn argues that religious people can live within the Rawlsian limits of public reason, but he suggests if they do not accept these limits, then they should not be considered guilty. Quinn writes:

> So, to ask the Kantian question, should religious citizens here and now live within the limits of Rawlsian public reason? I think it would be, morally speaking, very good indeed if they did, and I would encourage them to try to do so. I do not, however, think they presently act contrary to duty or are guilty of wrongdoing if, chafing at even the modest restrictions implied by the wide view, they choose not to live within those limits.[36]

Conclusion

The liberal democratic model, as understood, requires the complete separation of religion and politics. Some religious thinkers, such as Wolterstorff, believe that political liberalism is aimed at restraining religion by defending the moral principles of State neutrality and the strict separation of State from religion. They believe that political liberalism could not have a neutral stand with regard to religion. Political liberalism is therefore unfair for religious adherents. In the first part of this examination, I have defended Rawlsian political liberalism by showing that Rawls did not say that religious citizens could not participate in political debates based on their religious doctrines. Rather, he believed that their arguments should be reasonable and supported by 'public reason'. I then showed that Robert Audi's liberal model, while arguing for some

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[35] Quinn, "Political Liberalism and Their Exclusions of the Religious," pp 159-160.
[36] Quinn, "Religious Citizens Within the Limits of Public Reason," p. 124.

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constraints on the political activities of religious citizens and on their use of religion in public political debates, does not endorse the strict separation of church and state. For Audi, some religious arguments (which threaten neither democracy nor religious liberty) should be allowed.

My first claim, then, is that Rawlsian political liberalism should be neutral with respect to secular and religious convictions and institutions, but cannot be neutral, as Quinn points out, with respect to non-liberal and non-democratic doctrines or groups (fundamentalists, integralists, and so forth) who threaten the foundations of liberal democracy.

My second claim is that the relationship between religion and State should not be reduced to "strict separation" or "complete separation". I argue that, in order to flourish, rational citizens (religious and non-religious alike) should support democracy and some form of separation of church and state. Such a separation not only protects the State from religion, but protects religion from the State. Finally, I am convinced that in a liberal democratic society, the religious convictions of citizens should never be restricted when they are reasonable.

Part II

Three Religious Discourses on Religion and State in Contemporary Islam: in the case of Iran

Religion in contemporary Iran is highly politicized and ideologized. The *wiláyat al-faqíh* or "theocracy or guardianship of the jurist" which considers *faqih* (a religious scholar) as governor- is dominant. This idea is the result of the combination of two discourses; traditional and modern-ideological. This idea has been propounded by Ayatollah Khomini, the Iranian revolutionary leader, and by Ayatollah Montazeri, who was vice leader until 1988. Despite the dominance of the traditional and ideological discourses in Iran, the relationship between religion and politics, and the compatibility of religion with the modern world, is the most important topic of discussion between Iranian intellectuals. We observe now the signs of the emergence of a new modern discourse, namely, democratic discourse. This discourse has resulted from the efforts of some liberal religious thinkers, most significantly Abdulkarim Soroush and Mohammad Mojtahed-Shabestari. In the following sections I will examine these three discourses, with particular emphasis on the democratic discourse.

I. Traditional discourse

In pre-modern societies, the belief in a sacred power and mysterious world was prominent. In *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade refers to "the sacred" as the subject of worship of religious humanity. "The sacred" appears as the source of power, significance and value. And "the sacred time" is a feature of the religious aspect of

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humanity. The man of sacred time feels himself connected with the cosmos. Eliade enumerates the salient features of the ontology of archaic man:

1. For archaic man, reality is a function of the imitation of celestial archetype. And every act is performed that symbolically repeat the act of creation of the world.

2. Reality is through participation in the "symbolism of the center".

3. "Repetition of the cosmology", every creation repeats the creation of the world. And through this repetition concrete time is projected into mythical time.

4. Every act has a divine model and in some way participates in the sacred.[1]

Applying the above consideration to the belief in Divine Grace (*farrih-I izadi*),[2] we can understand the aristocratic and theocratic nature of politics in the pre-Islamic period in Iran. It was believed that sovereigns are mirrors of the sovereignty of God. The authority of kings was an expression of divine authority. God was portrayed as an absolute bearer of rights and free of all duties toward human beings. Accordingly, kings were viewed in the same light, assuming a minimum of responsibility and carrying a full measure of rights. Thus, whether a governor was cruel or just, it was the result of God's revenge or God's mercy.

In the following pages we will review the traditional discourse on the idea of *wilāyat al-faqih*. According to this idea, the authority of the *faqih* is an expression of divine authority, so the *faqih* is a charismatic leader.

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[1] Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton University Press,1974), pp.12-21.
[2] Bernard Lewis, *The Origins of Islamism* (Cambridge University Press, 1940), p. 24. [Cited in Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (Macmillan, 1982), P 18].

II. Ideological discourse

The most important event in human history which led humans from the pre-modern into the modern period was, according to Max Weber, the disenchantment and ensuing rationalization of the world. Karl Marx has suggested that, whereas pre-modern philosophers only sought to explain the world, in the modern period the world is in need of transformation. If the thinkers of the past were merely observers, the thinkers of the present are actors. Humans want to change the old structures in order to fashion a new world and a new man. Ideology has become the new religion of a new humankind.[3]

In the case of Iran, we can outline two important factors that led to the emergence of the ideological discourse.

First, Western imperialism: The context of the development of new political ideas among the Ottomans, Egyptians and Iranians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exhibit significant similarities. They always confront modern Western civilization with both appreciation and resentment. The Constitutional Revolution reveals the former, while the Islamic Revolution exhibits the latter.

The transformation in Iran from the traditional to the modern world began with the Constitutional Revolution (1906). This revolution represents the first direct encounter in modern Iran between traditional Islamic culture and the West. The Shiite scholars were rethinking their doctrines, particularly concerning the legitimacy of the monarchy. Shiite political thought during the absence of the *Imam* rejected the legitimacy of

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[3] Abdulkarim Soroush, *Modara Va Modiriyat (Administration and Tolerance),* (Tehran: Serat, 1994), pp.419-422

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temporal powers and the State.[4] But with the Constitutional Revolution, the necessity of following a living authority was emphasised.

Second, the influence of leftist thought: During the 1960's, as in many other Third World countries, Marxism had great appeal to the Iranian intelligentsia as a progressive ideology that promised freedom from the existing conditions of social oppression. The influence of revolutionary Communism, Leninism, Maoism and Castroism, was at its peak among the Iranian university students during this period. Imported ideologies, especially Marxism, had infiltrated the Iranian intellectual mind.

Leftist thought has had two fundamental effects on Iranian Shiite political thought: First, "the idea of social justice", and second, "the theory of maximal religion" (or idologization of religion). The latter is perceived as a complete order that encompasses the entirety of knowledge and promises an answer to all of mankind needs. In the following pages I will examine two prominent ideological discourses in contemporary Iranian society.

1. Ali Shariati and Ideologization of religion

Ali Shariati was born in Mazinan, a suburb of Mashhad, Iran. He completed his elementary and high school in Mashhad. After graduating from college in 1960, he pursued graduate studies on a scholarship in France. Shariati received his doctorate in sociology in 1964 from Sorbonne University.

He began teaching at Mashhad and Tehran University. Very soon he gained popularity with the students and different social classes in Iran. His lectures at Hossein-e-

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[4] Enayat , *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, P. 291.

Ershad (a religious institute) attracted many thousands of people from different backgrounds who were fascinated by his teachings.

The first edition of his book ran over sixty thousand copies which were quickly sold-out. He remained under close inspection by the security agents of Iran, and was arrested several times. He realized that he should migrate out of the country. Finally, he went to England but died three weeks later on June 19, 1977. [5]

During his schooling in Paris, Shariati had been heavily influenced by the works of Jean Paul Sartre and his school of existentialism. Shariati viewed man as responsible for all his actions and capable of choosing his destiny, faith, and spiritual and social life. Shariati was also, without a doubt, greatly influenced by Marx. His conceptions of history, class, economy, and society, as well as his program of political action all drew heavily on Marxist theory. In his extensive writings, Shariati tried to present a revolutionary ideological picture of Islam. The reconstruction of Islamic theology into an Islamic ideology of liberation was his lifelong project. This Islam was not one of individual salvation, but rather of collective salvation through collective political expression.

Shariati recognized the essential role of ideology in mobilizing the masses toward social changes. According to his view, modern Western ideologies could not solve the variety of political and cultural problems that confronted Iranian society. Shariati strongly believed that these problems could only be successfully addressed by "returning to ones roots"- in other words, by embracing an authentic Shiite ideology. He emphasized that if the intellectuals and new generation realized the truth of this faith,

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[5] http://www.shariati.com/

attempts toward social change would be successful. Naturally, young Iranian revolutionary Muslim intellectuals found in Shariati's thought a revolutionary Shi'i response.

Shariati recognized the importance of politicizing Islam as an ideology of liberation of the Iranian people. In his attempt to revive the authentic Shi'ism, Shariati undertook the task of reinterpreting the religion from its original sources and redefining the values and the responsibilities of an authentic Muslim in the modern world. One of the most important aspects of Shariati's project was his use of the concept of *ijtehad* (use of legal reasoning), independent judgment, as a dynamic intellectual process. He considered *ijtehad* to be absolutely necessary to the task of reinterpreting the religious texts in order to meet the challenges to contemporary Muslim society posed by the modern world.[6]

2. Khumayni and the idea of *wiláyat al-faqih*

Ayatollah Khumayni (1902-1989), who openly declared the monarchy to be anti-Islamic, believed that the kingdom of justice of the twelfth Imam must be represented and anticipated by the *wiláyat al-faqih* or "theocracy or guardianship of the jurist," i.e. by the government of a qualified scholar who knows *shariat* (the system of Islamic law and the rules of order). It was necessary that the *fuqaha* (religious experts) proceed to establish a government in order to implement the laws of Islam and protect its territory. The term *wilaya* means "exercise of rule"; this newly formulated principle

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[6] http://student.bennington.edu/~nirjanrai/NIRJANONLINE/webstuff/allStuff/shariati.html

referred to the direct rule by the clergy in the absence of another Islamic government.[7] In his book *Islamic Government*, Khumayni mentioned four major points: The first was the necessity of establishing and maintaining Islamic political institutions. The second was the duty of religious scholars to bring about an Islamic state, and to assume legislative, executive, and judicial positions- in short, to implement the doctrine of "government of the *faqih*" (theocracy). The third major point advanced by Khumayni was that the *faqih* (a religious scholar) should act in exactly the same capacity as the prophet and Imam in overseeing all aspects of government. The fourth was that the necessity for Islamic government is actually prior to other religious rulings, and that maintenance of government is legally essential. Khumayni sets out a program of action (the religious establishment) for the establishment of an Islamic State.[8]

The religious leader who has contributed most to the philosophy of *wilāyat al-faqih* (theocracy or guardianship of the jurist) after Khumayni is Ayatollah Montazeri, who was vice leader until 1988, when he had to resign due to but some political differences with Khumayni. The meaning of *wilāyat al-faqih*, according to Montazari, is not tenacity in all affairs by the *faqih* himself; rather, he envisions that the expert delegate tasks to specialists and the relevant institutions, while the *faqih* serves in a supervisory capacity. To govern the affairs of the Muslim community is the most important of religious duties; thus it is essential that the *fuqaha* (jurists or religious scholars) should govern.

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[7] Ruhullah Mousavi Khomayni, *Sehife Noor*,vol.9 (Tehran: Entesharat Vezarat Ershad, 1989), p.253.
[8] See Hamid Algar, Trans. *Islam and Revolution*: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini , (Berkely,1981).

According to Montazeri in his "*wilayat al-faqih,*" the teachings of Islam are comprehensive and complete; they include everything that is necessary for both the individual and the communal life. In other words, Islam includes knowledge, morality, law, politics, and economics. It is, according to Montazeri, in order to fulfill all these teachings, that the Prophet Mohammad founded an Islamic government in Madinah.[9]

Montazeri also enumerates specific virtues of the ruling jurist (or jurists). He must be, above all, the most knowledgeable and competent. He must execute Islamic laws. He must, in addition, be fully qualified (*jami al-shará'it,* that is, both just and pious, and fully competent in the law), and must be aware of the times.[10]

The government founded on *wiláyat al-faqih* is based on three important ideas.

First, it is based on a maximal theory of Islam that regards Islam as an all-encompassing ideology. According to this theory, Islam has a program for all aspects of life, from individual life to social and political life.

The second is *wiláyat al-faqih,* which stems from platonic idea of the philosopher-king as well as from the idea of Divine Grace (*farrih-I izadi*) in pre-Islamic Iran. The main question of ancient political thought regarding the State was "who should govern?" Both the Greek and classic Muslim philosophers, following Plato, answered: the philosopher-king. The idea of *wiláyat al-faqih* follows this paradigm and says that the one who governs should possess a God-like character and hold ultimate power.

The third important idea is the religious law *(fiq'h),* which views human beings as duty-bound. Everything starts with obligation: people are obliged to vote, to obey the

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[9] See Hosseinali Montazeri, *Wilayat al-faqih* (Qom: Entesharat Jamea Modaresin Qom, 1987).
[10] *Ibid.*

leader, and to form a government because they have already accepted a series of religious principles.[11]

This idea of governance is clearly in conflict with modern political philosophies that are based on the principle of minimal government intervention. Furthermore, modern political philosophy emphasizes rights rather than duties, and therefore asks "how should we govern?" rather than "who should govern?" We can observe the modern transformation of duties into rights in the sphere of religion as well.

C. Democratic Discourse

(a) Based on traditional Islamic arguments

Criticisms of the theory of *wilāyat al-faqīh* (theocracy or guardianship of the jurist) were articulated by leading members of the religious class itself. Important contemporary clerical critics are Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi and Ayatollah Mohsen Kadivar.

1. Mehdi Haeri-Yazdi

The idea of *Wilayat al-faqih* has caused many challenges and criticism, and in his book "*Hekmat va Hokumat*"(*Wisdom and State*) Mehdi Haeri Yazdi (1923-1995) advanced two basic critical ideas.[12] First, establishing a government and political

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[11] Abdolkarim Soroush, *"Reason, Freedom &Democracy in Iran"*, trans. by Mohammad and Ahmad Sadri (Oxford Press University, 2000).
[12] Mehdi Haeri Yazdi, *Hekmat vaa Hukumet.* (London: Shadi Press, 1995).

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leadership is not part of the mission of prophecy. The only reason the prophet

Mohammad established an Islamic State during the period of Madinah (the city in which

the Prophet established Islamic government) was so that the place of revelation – that is,

the sending down of the Qur'an, the literal word of God- should be pure from any pagan

abomination. Haeri believes that the only reason that an apparently Islamic government

was established by the Prophet was to present a model of morality to mankind. Madinah

was not meant to be a model of statecraft.

Moreover, says Haeri, if there is any model of government suggested by the

Prophet's experience, is that of democracy, for we see that Prophet Mohammad acquired

his leadership as a governor through the people's allegiance. To sum up, we do not find

any evidence that Islam or the Prophet recommended a particular political system, either

in the conception of prophecy or in the conception of *Imamate*. Indeed, the advent of the

Prophet was not to construct a particular society, State or science. The main purpose of

Islamic law, says Haeri, is not government or politics, but salvation of the people and

their moral improvement. So in studying Islamic political thought we should notice that

the Prophet's society (*Madineh*) is not a model of government.

The second critical idea is that *fiqh* (religious law or jurisprudence) was never

meant to manage government. Haeri also adduces as evidence for the non-political nature

of Islam the history of Islamic *fiqh*. It was Mola Ahmad Naraghi,[13] a contemporary with

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[13] Mola Ahmad Naragh who cited "*the tradition of 'Umar Ibn Hanzalah*" - "This famous "acceptable" (*maqbulah*) Tradition is usually invoked to justify the authority of the *mujtahids* or the '*Ulama*' to adjudicate the affairs of Muslims in the absence of Imams, and by extension, to act as their leaders in general." Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, p. 294.

FathAli Shah-e Qajar, who first suggested that *fiqh* may interpreted in such a way as to support government policies. According to Haeri, Naraghi first suggested that *fiqh* be politicised simply because he wished to curry favour with the Qajar shah of Iran at the time, FathAli Shah. Haeri criticises not only Naraqi's premises, but his method. He did not, Haeri said, properly employ *iijtihad* (as all *fuqaha*, of course, are bound to do when introducing novel matters) in order to reach his conclusion. He simply declared the rather startling premise that government is mainly the political leadership of the jurists. Not only this, but he declared the sovereignty of the *faqih* to be infinite, putting him, in effect, in the place of God!

Now Haeri turns to the concept of *t wiláyat al- faqih*, as it was understood in the classical sources before its use as a politicized term. *wiláyah*, he says, means simply "guardianship," and this is conceptually and essentially different from political sovereignty. *wiláyah* is , in fact, in the classical law nothing more than the right of a guardian to take possession of the property and allocate the rights of a minor. This is obviously a world away from political sovereignty and the management of State affairs. Put another way, the relation of a government is to the citizenship as a whole, while *wiláyat al- faqih* designates only a relationship between a guardian and a minor.

It is only, Haeri says, Mola Ahmad Naragh and some of his followers (such as Ayattollah Khumayni) who deduce that the "judgment" (*riwáyah*) referred to in Islamic texts means sovereignty, and then extend the meaning even further to indicate political rule. Thus, in Haeri's view the very concept of an "Islamic Republic" under *Wilayat al- faqih* is paradoxical, irrational, and entirely illegitimate.

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2. Mohsen Kadivar

Another critic is Mohsen Kadivar, who believed that the issue of political legitimacy within religious thought is raised in response to the following fundamental question: Has God granted sovereignty over a people to a specific person or class of people, or has He granted the right to self-determination within the framework of *sharia* (Islamic teachings) to all the *ummah* (Muslim community). Two principles of political legitimacy may be derived from the responses made by the Shiite *fiqh* to this question. The first would be that the basis of "direct divine legitimacy" upon which the administration or *wilayet* (guardianship) of the people is founded, is solely within the hands of just *faqih*. The vote, consent, and will of the people therefore has no effect on the legitimacy of the State. The second would be divine-democratic legitimacy based on the notion that God granted political wisdom to the people so that they could exercise the right of sovereignty within the context of religious regulations. Therefore, both the vote and the consent of the people are important to the legitimacy of the State.[14]

A government based on *wilayet* (guardianship) believes that the fulfillment of Islam is to be achieved through the execution of Islamic instructions and law. Thus without establishing Islamic government, the important parts of Islam do not get applied.

Kadivar claims that the essence of religion is mysticism and spirituality, and the expansion of religion depends on religious culture, not on religious political power. Religion, in other words, is meant to govern hearts. When religion can freely grow, it

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[14] Mohsen Kadivar, *The Theories of State in Shiite Fiqh*, (Tehran: Nashr-e Nay, 1998).

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will find its way into the hearts of people. If religion can capture the spirit of people, it can take power.

Kadivar also has much to say on the role of law, that is of *fiqh*. *fiqh*, essentially, is not for the management of social and political life, but for their evaluation. We cannot, for instance, derive scientific, social-economic, and political instructions from *fiqh*, since these subjects are not covered in the classical texts. As a result Kadivar, like Haeri, argues that the traditions which are mentioned by Mollah Ahmad Naraqi are not rooted in the proper documents, and therefore the *faqih* does not have *walayt* (guardianship) over the people.

To conclude, the criticisms of Haeri and Kadiver show that the end result of the entry of religion into the political realm is, in fact, the secularization of religion. In religious government, religion acts mostly as an instrument of political power. Thus, in order to protect religion, they suggest a separation between religion and politics.

(b) Modern Democratic Discourse

3. Mohammad Mujtahed-Shabestari

One of the most influential proponents of the modern democratic discourse in contemporary Iran is Muhammad Mujtahed-Shabestari (1936-). Between the years 1969 and 1979, he was director of the Iranian Islamic center in Hamburg and was influenced by modern German theology. The most well known work of Mujtahed-Shabestari on the subject of hermeneutics is *Hirminûtîk, Kitâb wa Sunnat (Hermeneutics, Qur'an and*

Tradition), which was published in the early 1990s. In this book, he presents his critique of traditional Islamic epistemology and its reliance on Aristotelian logic. He suggests that the interpretation of sacred texts must be aided by the methodology of modern phenomenology. Mujtahed-Shabestari argues that a 'hermeneutical circle' *(daur-i tafsîrî)* exists in understanding, and that the purpose of interpretation is to capture the "spirit" of the author; texts should be interpreted according to their intrinsic meanings, which are disclosed in the act of interpretation. He believes that the hermeneutical task should go beyond scientific investigation and attempt to articulate the question of truth as it emerges in experience.[15]

Mujtahed-Shabestari maintains that such understanding is only possible by recognizing the interpretive horizon that predisposes one towards a given text. Since all interpretation is conditioned by its prior history and stands in a tradition of interpretation, the interpreter, like the translator, renders the text through the fused horizons of the text and the interpreter.[16]

According to Mujtahed-Shabestari's hermeneutical approach to religious texts, however, there is interaction between interpreter and text. Hermeneutics is concerned with human understanding and the interpretation of written texts.

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[15] See Mohammad Mujtahed-Shabestari, *Hirminûtîk, Kitâb wa Sunnat*, (Tehran: Tarh-e Now, 1996), pp.16-22.
[16] *Ibid.*

I. The critique of the dominant reading of Islam

Mujtahed-Shabestari claims that the dominant reading of Islam in contemporary Iran is based in jurisprudence, as promoted by the government. This dominant approach assumes that *wilāyat al-faqih* is the best, most unique and superior kind of State. The adherents of this approach believe that Islam has its own political and economic system that is suitable for all Muslim societies and for all time. For them, any knowledge, and most significantly, political theory, must be derived from religious texts. *wilāyat al-faqih*, according to them, does not need public legitimacy because it derives authority and approval from God. The proponents of this approach also believe that the proper religious interpretations can only be given by the charismatic *walee al-faqih* (religious leader), who possesses a divine mandate through his direct descent from the *Imam*. For them, the *walee al-faqih's* understanding of religious texts is beyond all the presuppositions and values that characterize common understanding.[17]

Mujtahed-Shabestari strongly criticizes this approach based on his hermeneutical position. He maintains that there is neither absolute certainty in our understanding, nor understanding beyond presupposition. Thus it is clear that all Muslims understand and interpret the Qur'an and the tradition according to their values and presuppositions.

Mujtahed-Shabestari also attempts to find answers for important socio-political questions. For example, what kinds of attitudes must Muslims have regarding politics or

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[17] See Mohammad Mujtahed-Shabestari , *Naqd-e Qaraa-et Rasmi az Din (The critique of the dominant reading of Religion)*, (Tehran: Tarh-e Now, 2001), pp. 30-31, 45-46.

political action? How should Muslims evaluate their political actions? Should political participation be regarded as a duty or a right?

Mujtahed-Shabestari believes that there are two different positions in response to these questions. The first one can call a "duty-bound" position. From this perspective, religion is primarily the worship of God. Humanity needs to satisfy God, that is, to do what is pleasing in His sight. In this way service to God is an intrinsic desire of humanity. Indeed, it implies that the human being is essentially a creature of legal-religious obligation and responsibility. The adherents of this position maintain that the human being is by nature duty-bound, and that political action and participation is one of its primary duties. The main duty of politics, according to this position, is to worship God and serve the people. In order to develop spiritual life, religious people must participate in political life, deriving their political theory and decisions from religious scripture.

According to the second position, participation in social-political life is a natural human tendency rather than a religious obligation. The adherents of this idea believe that, although in particular situations the Qur'an has offered political-ethical guidance (for instance, the command to do right and the prohibition against doing wrong, or the command to rebel against cruelty), these moral norms do not advocate the establishment of a particular political system. According to this position, we cannot derive any specific political theory from Islamic texts, and we can only discover political-ethical guidance.[18]

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[18] See Mohammad Mujtahed-Shabestari, *Iman wa Azadi (faith and Freedom)*, (Tehran: Tarh-e Now, 1998), pp. 65-78.

Mujtahed-Shabestari points out that St. Augustine, in his book *The City of God*, said that our socio-political life is based upon our selfish and extravagant demands. As such, we cannot fundamentally change it, and we can only criticize our socio-political life from a religious perspective. Religious ethics, therefore, tend to reduce rather than eliminate sin from our lives.[19] Mujtahed-Shabestari therefore encourages us to think about how to reduce evil in our political institutions with reference to some verses in the Qur'an. Although these verses describe our socio-political life as evil, they also recognize that such evil has a place in God's purpose and wisdom. It is not our place, therefore, to attempt to remove evil, but rather to reduce it and improve socio-political institutions.[20] In this way Mujtahed-Shabestari tries to answer the questions regarding how we should organize our socio-political institutions, who should hold political power, and the critical role of religion.

II. Religion and democracy

Mujtahed-Shabestari emphasizes that democracy is one of the most important and problematic issues in contemporary Iran. Mujtahed-Shabestari's idea for reconciling religion and democracy provides a critical answer to two important groups: first, to those scholars who believe that western liberal democracy is the non-religious version of Christian thought, and second, against those scholars who want to prove the direct relationship between Islamic texts and democracy.[21]

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[19] Mujtahed -Shabestari, *Naqd-e Qaraat-e Rasmi az Din,* p.356.

[20] This relates to Al-Ghazzali's 'theory of neglect', which postulates that ignorance and evil are structurally important to the continuity of this world – without it this world could not function according to God's plan.

[21] Mujtahed –Shabestari, *Naqd-e Qaraat-e Rasmi az Din,* pp 33-34.

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Mujtahed-Shabestari, in contrast to the first group of scholars, says that liberal democracy is neither religious nor non-religious. It is a new method which is intended to establish a new socio-political order. In contrast to some Muslim thinkers, he also mentions that the democratic conception is a new socio-political phenomenon that never existed in Islamic civilization. It is a new phenomenon which has emerged in some places in the Western world. He maintains that 'Islamic democracy' is a paradoxical notion which is inconsistent with both Islamic tradition and modern democracy.[22]

Mujtahed-Shabestari emphasizes that modern democracy never existed in Moslem life. He asserts, however, that the traditions are interrelated. Islamic tradition throughout history was cross-pollinated by neighboring cultures. For instance, we can trace Aristotelian and Platonic philosophical currents, as well as Hindu and Buddhist thought in Muslim philosophers, theologians, and mystics such as Farabi, Ibn-Sina, the Moatazalites, Attar, Rumi, Hafiz and so on. Islamic culture has always been multicultural.[23]

For Mujtahed-Shabestari, democracy represents the attempt by groups and individuals with diverse beliefs and interests to solve their social problems. This communal attempt does not mean the fusion of distinct beliefs and interests. The duty of a democratic government, in his view, is to protect and respect the diverse values in a pluralistic society. The democratic rules, principles, and values can adjust to every kind of culture. Unlike authoritarianism, Mujtahed-Shabestari insists that democracy can accommodate all cultures.

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[22] *Ibid.*
[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

According to Mujtahed-Shabestari, democratic governance is based on two basic principles: liberty and equality for all people. Liberty means freedom of expression, ideas, and interests, and equality means that every person has an equal right to express his or her political and/or religious beliefs. A democratic government cannot, in his view, tolerate any official totalitarian interpretation of the world, humanity, religion, etc. The government should take a neutral position in dealing with groups, and there should be equality of opportunity. Democratic government should not prefer one group or idea over another group or idea. Government discrimination threatens civil peace and ultimately leads to dictatorship. In a democratic government, therefore, every religion and group has the same right to participate in socio-political life. [24]

Mujtahed-Shabestari suggests that, while democracy is opposed to dictatorship and authoritarianism, it has no position regarding God's laws. In a democratic society, the laws cannot go against the public consensus and public reason. If the public consensus is in favor of following God's laws, then a democratic government must respect it. However, a democratic government cannot coerce the people into following God's laws.[25]

Mujtahed-Shabestari therefore believes that a democratic government in a religious society can use religious beliefs to promote equality, liberty, peace and security. However, it should not use religious beliefs to threaten or distort the religious essence.

Mujtahed-Shabestari cites religion as the most significant constructive element in religious societies, and contrasts it with the role of religion in the so-called rational societies of the West. In religious societies such as Iran, we can use this religious culture

[24] *Ibid.*, 109-116.
[25] *Ibid.*

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to help maintain civil peace and to develop spiritual life. Also, in such societies, the religious discourse likely disturbs other discourses, including the scientific, philosophical and political. But when the parameters of the religious discourse are well established, the other discourses have room to develop.[26] According to Mujtahed-Shabestari, reform or reconstruction in religious thought must precede socio-political change in a religious society.

III. Religious Discourse

For Mujtahed-Shabestari, we can derive God's eternal message for the present time by studying the Prophet and Imam's deeds. Mujtahed-Shabestari presents the Prophet's discourse as a model for religious discourse. He mentions that the first characteristic of this discourse is rationality. The most significant part of the Prophet's message was his invitation to monotheism and rejection of polytheism. In that time, the invitation to monotheism was a reasonable call and it was adjusted to common sense. This does not mean that the Prophet attempted to prove monotheistic principles by rational proof, but rather that his call was based on reasonable principles. Most rational people accepted it, because they did not feel any inconsistency between their reason and that call; in fact, his message was directed against the irrationality that predominated at the time. We can conclude, therefore, that our religious discourse cannot violate the

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[26] *Ibid.*, p.341.

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common sense of our time. In order to preserve the essence of the religious message, religious discourse must be consistent with rational discourse.[27]

The second characteristic of the Prophet's discourse is that religion must agree with justice. The Prophet clearly encouraged people to act according to justice. The Prophet never called people to follow incomprehensible rules. He always tried to clarify his deeds. He called on people to behave well, which was familiar and understandable for most rational people. The aim of the Prophet's message was to complete morality. The Prophet sought the same justice that was enjoyed previously, but added a call to perfect it. The religious message, therefore, should be in harmony with the perennial conception of justice.[28]

The third characteristic of the Prophet's message is realism. The Prophet was a human being with his own limits, and he did not act beyond the limits of his social and cultural context.

The fourth characteristic of this discourse is the call for mercy, compassion, and non-violence.

The fifth characteristic of the Prophet's discourse is that it is prophetic, which prepares the way for faith. Prophetic discourse is based on revelation. The Prophet said that he received revelation from God. As such, his message was not the inspiration of a philosopher or politician, but the word of God. It cannot be reduced to philosophical, political, or scientific statements. [29]

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[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 340-343.
[28] *Ibid*, p. 346.
[29] *Ibid*, pp. 346-352.

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Finally, Mujtahed-Shabestari agrees with Rumi's words that God's message is wholly other; it is not a philosophical, scientific, or political message. God's message alone is true and complete, and no human interpretation can claim finality and truthfulness. So, in order to understand God's message the way for interpretation must always remain open.

In accordance with these characteristics, Mujtahed-Shabestari maintains that religious discourse must be realistic, just, non-violent, merciful and prophetic rather than philosophical and political. Since the Prophet's message is universal and appropriate for all times, its adaptation over time in order to accommodate contemporary concepts of reason and justice is inevitable.

IV. Faith and politics

In contrast to the dominant reading of Islam, Mujtahed-Shabestari promotes the diversity of religious interpretations. As Islamic tradition demonstrates, accepting diversity in interpretation does not mean deviating from the path of Islam, but rather preserves its essence.

Mujtahed-Shabestari and the other scholars that we have considered generally believe that the establishment of a government is not part of the prophetic mission. The Prophet's society (*Medina*) was not a model of government for all times and all places. In Shiite traditions, *fiqh* was never intended to establish a State. Mujtahed-Shabestari maintains that politics has no right and no power to interfere with the faith, and faith has no right and no power to interfere with politics. There is, therefore, no conflict between

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the nature of faith and the nature of politics. Religion and politics have completely separate spheres; each has its own legitimate domain of authority, and they do not overlap.

Finally, Mujtahed-Shabestari is against the attempted implementation of an Islamic political ideal. There is no form of Islamic government, he argues, and the Qur'an is intended to guide human life rather than give explicit philosophical or political lessons. For him, the adherents of political Islam assume that they have the 'proper' form of Islamic government, and therefore attempt to coerce fellow Muslims into compliance with extremely irrelevant and rigid political arrangements. This understanding of Islam harshly impedes, and even destroys any movement towards freedom, pluralism and democracy in Muslim society. Just as true religion is ethical, pietistic and apolitical, so, Mujtahed-Shabestari argues, politics should be divorced from any religious affiliation at all. The mix of religion and politics causes the corruption of spirituality and religious experience.

Mujtahed-Shabasteri understands Islam as personal piety and the worship of God in a framework of revealed, universal ethical principles that are to be realized in human life. For him, the essence of religion is religious experience. In religious experience, the human being ignores himself and becomes conscious of God's presence. Accordingly, religious beliefs, rituals, ethics and laws which are based on religious experience, serve God's presence.

For Mujtahed-Shabestari, religious experiences are not containable, and cannot be manufactured through pressure and control. Because of the wild character of religious experience, attempting to control it leads to undermining its essence and making it weak.

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It is only in free societies and under liberal conditions that their can be a flourishing of religious experiences. This is demonstrated by the cultural renaissance of Muslim civilization during the liberalization of the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries.[30]

According to Mujtahed-Shabestari, authoritarianism contradicts the free nature of religious experiences. It is precisely the positive dialogue between free religious thinkers that leads to the possibility of a proper interpretation of religion. As the history of modern religious studies shows, the challenges posed by critics and even atheists leads to a better understanding of religion.[31]

Thus, authoritarianism in religion destroys religion itself. For this reason Mujtahed-Shabestari emphasizes that attempts to reconcile democracy with conceptions of *figh* are impossible.[32]

Mujtahed-Shabestari maintains we do not have an Islamic form of government. He tries to find an answer to the question of which form of government best preserves faith – which is for him the essence of religion. For Mujtahed-Shabestari, faith without freedom is unachievable. Faith is free from tradition and religious dogma. Faith is 'wholly other', based upon free will and free consciousness. Faith, therefore, cannot prosper in every kind of political and social situation. Faith is similar to liberty; liberty will die in some political and social environments and it will flourish in others.[33]

Mujtahed-Shabestari also emphasizes that faith must have free dialogue with other faiths in order to flourish, much like the processes of development in philosophy

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[30] *Ibid.*, p.335. See also, Mujtahed-Shabestari, *Iman wa Azadi*, pp. 80-82.
[31] Mujtahed-Shabestari, *Naqd-e Qaraat-e Rasmi az Din*, p.338.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 337.
[33] Mujtahed-Shabestari, *Iman wa Azadi*, pp. 80-83.

and science. Faith is not an ideology that one can inject into the mind through propaganda or control though censorship.

For believers, therefore, it is important to live in a free society which respects their freely-chosen faith. Certainly this kind of society can not be totalitarian. Just as science and philosophy lose their power in a totalitarian society, so does faith lose its dynamism?

Faith should always renew itself. This is possible only with constant inner and outer criticism. The ideal society for believers is not a totalitarian society. In such society faith will lose its pure content. In a totalitarian religious society, human interests and power are disguised as faith, and people fight for their own self-interest thinking that they fight for the sake of God.[34]

To summarize, Mojtahed-Shabestari's reformism is based on the revival of religious experience. For him, the essence of religion is religious experience. Faith is based on freedom; accordingly, religious freedom, in the sense of freedom of consciousness is the first freedom as well as the precondition for modern democracy.

4. Abdulkarim Soroush

Abdolkarim Soroush was born in Tehran in 1945. During his time at high school, Soroush became familiar with the modern sciences as well as with Islamic matters. After completing a degree in pharmacy in Tehran university, he went to the University of London in England, where he first studied analytical chemistry and then the history and philosophy of science. During the years 1977-79, he delivered a series of

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[34] *Ibid.*

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lectures for Iranian students on the subject of dialectical antagonism *(Tazad-e Dialektiki)*,

during which he criticized leftist influences. Soroush wrote a book on metaphysics called

The Restless nature of the World (nahad-e na-aram-e jahan) in which he tried to derive

the foundations of Islamic philosophy- *tauhid* (monotheism) and *ma'ad* (resurrection) -

from the heart of *harkat-e johari* (quintessential motion), and to present Molla Sadra's

thought as a firm philosophical basis for these objects of belief. When the Revolution

began, Soroush returned to Iran and there he published his significant book *Knowledge*

and Value (Danesh wa Arzesh).[35]

After the revolution, Soroush began teaching certain university subjects,

principally the philosophy of science and history, as well as the philosophy of religion -

also known as *kalam-e jadid* (modern theology). He also taught the mysticism of

Maulawi, comparative philosophy *(Falsafeh Tatbighi)*, and the philosophy of empirical

sciences. By virtue of his interest in *Maulawi (Jalaluddin Rumi)*, he began a series of

lectures on *Masnawi*, as well as lectures conerning the analysis of the subjects in the

Nahjulbalaghah.[36]

I. Critique of ideologization of religion

Soroush also began his project of criticizing the ideologization of religion.

According to Soroush, ideology is a theory of the revolutionary time; it is a weapon for

struggle. Whereas religion is appropriate for all times and contexts, ideology is only

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[35] http://www.seraj.org/biog.htm
[36] *Ibid.*

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appropriate during periods of struggle. In contrast to religion, ideology is not concerned with matters of truth and falsehood. [37]

The "ideologization of religion", according to Soroush, is liable to destroy the celestial spirit of religion. Ideology, he insists, is nothing more than a garment for a particular society and a particular period, while religion is beyond place and time.[38]

For Soroush, religion is silence. We should make it talk. If we ask philosophical questions, we get philosophical answers. Religion is like a rope. It has no direction. It depends on the one who applies it and gives it direction. Religion is also like a path. The person who follows it can choose the direction. There are a lot of verses in the Qur'an that indicate it is right only for believers; " Through which God will lead those who follow His pleasure to the path of peace, and guide them out of darkness into light by His will, and to the path that is straight. (5/16) Or "...these are the verses of the Qur'an, and collection of explicit laws, a guidance and good tidings for the believers" (27/ 1-2). So only believers who want to rescue themselves from the well can use it in the right direction; but the one who wants to go down can use it in the opposite direction.[39]

Soroush maintains that religion is a light, a rope, a ladder that one can use from both sides; it is up to the person to decide how to benefit from it. God says: " This is The book free of doubt and involution, a guidance for those who preserve themselves from evil and follow the straight path (2/2) and; " what we have sent down of the Qur'an is a

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[37] Abdulkarim Soroush, *Farbehter az Ideology* (Tehran: Serat, 1994), pp 106-108.
[38] *Ibid.*
[39] Abdulkarim Sorosh, *Modara wa Modiriyat,* (Tehran: Serat, 1994) pp.100-105.

healing and a grace for the faithful, and adds only loss for the sinners". (17/ 82) [40]That is

to say, religion may have both positive and negative roles in human life. Nobody can

deny the importance of religious convictions, both in improving the life of religious

citizens, and in provoking religious conflicts.

Soroush therefore criticizes both Shariati's Islamic revolutionary ideology

(which uses religion as a powerful weapon for struggle and led to the Islamic revolution

in 1978) and the idealization of religion in the concept of *wilāyat al- faqih*. Soroush says

that religion in Iran has been reduced to *fiqh*. When religion takes an ideological form

and is reduced to *fiqh* it overlooks the mystical essence of Islam. According to Soroush,

fiqh is in fact only a small part of religion; but it seems, unfortunately, to occupy a large

place in the religious thought of the most Muslim scholars in our time.[41]

According to Soroush, *fiqh* in its most complete form can include only religious

commandments. *Fiqh* is concerned with what is legitimate and illegitimate according to

shariah, and talks about duty and responsibility rather than rights. [42]

II. Our expectations of religion

With the advent of the scientific worldview, modern humankind has gradually

changed their attitudes toward the world. Rather than accepting the world as it is, their

aim is to objectify, change and recreate the world in their own image. Modern and pre-

modern humans therefore differ significantly in terms of their ideas, their expectations,

as well as in their actions. Pre-modern man could neither change his world, nor did he

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[40] *Ibid.*
[41] *Ibid.,* p. 369.
[42] Ibid.

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want to do so. Modern man, in contrast, is looking to change the world. In accordance with these differing outlooks, our expectations for religion have changed as well.[43]

According to Soroush, our understanding of religion depends on the expectations we place on it. We cannot take our expectations from religion itself. Soroush proposes that our expectations for religion are dependent on the development of human knowledge in general. Any changes in human knowledge influence our expectations for religion. So modern expectations for religion are quite different from those in the ancient world.[44]

Soroush argues that we need religion because it is eternal and immortal. We should not expect religion to be science or philosophy or revolutionary ideology. For Soroush, it is not the main purpose of religion to perfect this world. Finally, for Soroush, the most important aim of religion is to invite people to worship God and to remember the Day of Judgment. [45]

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[43] *Ibid.*, pp. 419-422.
[44] *Ibid.*, p.422.
[45] *Ibid.*, pp.180-189.

III. Humanization of Religion

Soroush considers religion, like humans, as comprised of both body and spirit. Just as we cannot imagine a spirit without a body and vice versa, we cannot consider religion as entirely spirit or entirely body.[46]

Soroush maintains that the Eastern religious literature emphasizes the celestial dimension of religion more than the terrestrial one. Soroush refers to Mohammad Iqbal Lahori's poetry in which it is stated that, in the East, people have seen only the spirit and ignored the body of religion, whereas in the West, people have seen only the body and have forgot the spirit.

Soroush stresses that the prophets were human beings, and their human characteristics therefore had an influence on religion. Soroush refers to Qur'anic verses that stress Prophet is a human. For instance, the Qur'an says that people expected that God would send an angel as a prophet; however "You are only man like us..." (36/15), but God sent a man and said to him to tell people that "I am a human like you". For example, the Qur'an describes Abraham as a prophet who wanted to reach certainty, Abraham tells God that I have faith but need to have certainty. So Abraham like every human being had doubt and needed to see God's power to get certainty: " Remember, when Abraham said: "O Lord, show me how you raise the dead," He said: "What! Do you not believe?" " I do," Abraham answered. " I only ask for my heart's assurance." (2/260) Or Moses, when God sent him on a mission as a prophet, he was afraid! God said, "O, Moses, be not fearful. Surely those sent as messengers do not fear in My presence" (27/10), Moses said I am freighted of Pharaoh, and asked if his brother could

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[46] *Ibid.*, pp.171-172.

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accompany him. "O, Lord, I fear that they will deny me. My heart is constrained, my tongue falters, so delegate Aaron" (26/12-13)

Soroush emphasizes that the Qur'an describes Mohammad as wholly human since he was born, grew up, married, grew old and died. Like all humans, he had temptations, anger and passions. For some of his deed, the Prophet was commanded to ask for God's forgiveness. Thus, the Prophet's life and events were, in many ways, the same as those of other human beings.[47]

Soroush maintains that every prophet is influenced by his environment and his culture, and this is reflected in scripture. The first element is the language. For example, Jesus' language was Aramaic. Moses spoke Hebrew and Mohammad spoke Arabic. The Qur'an therefore reflects Arabic culture. For example, angels in the Qur'an are described as black eyed women, and not blue eyed ones! (55/ 72)

This cultural aspect of religion means that religion is consistent with and adjustable to human capabilities. "...O God, not upon us a burden, we cannot carry." (2/286). So, if we had other abilities, our duties regarding religion would be different as well. Soroush believes that religion talks about the ordinary people in history, and not about ideal individuals.

For Soroush, everything that enters into human society, including religion and revelation, takes on human characteristic. Therefore, not only the religion itself, but also our understanding of religion, becomes humanized.

Soroush was asked an important question: "Perhaps you opt for a science of Islam, rather than for the Islamicization of knowledge?"

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[47] See Abdulkarim Soroush, *Bast-e Tajreb-e Nabawi* (Tehran: Serat, 1998).

He replied as follows:

> Neither. I opt for the humanization of religion...Revelation may be divine, but all the interpretation of it is human. This is not to secularize the religion; it is the simple and at the same times the subtle instance of naturalization of the supernatural, or in other words, the manifestation of the supernatural as and in the natural.[48]

IV. Theory of Expansion and Contraction of Religion

In his book entitled *Qabz wa Bast-e Theorik Shariat* (*The Expansion and Contraction of Religion: A theory of Evolution of Religious Knowledge,*) Soroush established an important epistemological framework for his project of the recovery of Islamic thought.

With this theory, Soroush attempted to address such questions as; Are all religious issues and principles unchangeable? Or are some of them are constant, while others are changeable? Furthermore, how do changes in the human understanding of man, nature and society affect our understanding of religion?

Soroush presented his theory of the expansion and contraction of religion both in order to explain the growth of religious knowledge, and to answer the questions just outlined.

At the beginning of his work, Soroush separates religion from religious knowledge. He believes that each has distinct characteristics. The following are the main phenomenological and epistemological characteristics of religion:[49]

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[48] Charles Kurzman, ed., *Liberal Islam: a sourcebook,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 243.

[49] Abdulkarim Soroush, *Qabz wa Bast-e Theorik Shariat* (Tehran: Serat, 1988), p. 278. Also, in *Text in context*; A lecture first presented at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, April 1995 and published in *Liberal Islam, a sourcebook* ed., Charles Kurzman, pp 244-251.

First, there is no contradiction in religion, while religious knowledge (which is a product of the rational efforts of religious scholars studying religious scriptures) contains many contradictions and conflicts.

Second, the statements of religion are true, while religious knowledge is a series of false and true statements.

Third, religion is a complete phenomenon, meaning that God has revealed the words of the Qur'an through his angel to his Prophet, and the Qur'an includes all the necessary things for the proper guidance of the people. On the other hand, religious knowledge is incomplete, and Soroush believes that there can be no interpretation of religion that can be called final and absolute.

Fourth and finally, the religion that is created by God is constant, while religious knowledge, which is made by humans, is changeable. One can formulate these principals as follows:

1. Religion is known to be revealed, sacred, beyond history, while religious knowledge is human, profane, and historical (i.e. religious knowledge continues to interact with human knowledge).

2. Human knowledge (our perceptions of the external world that include both science and philosophy) is evolvable and changeable.

3. Religious knowledge is evolvable and changeable process.

In the other words, Soroush concludes that science is a human attempt to understand nature, while religious knowledge is a human attempt to understand religion.

As our understanding of nature changes and evolves, so does our understanding of religion. The science of religion is therefore time/context-bound; it is relative.

V. Religion and democracy

According to Soroush, in the modern world not only science but also ethics and politics are human creations. He insists that secularism is causing everything to be subjected to criticism and rational questioning. There is nothing that is accepted as preordained. There is no authority in either the modern sciences or modern politics. Secularism excludes religious authority from the realm of politics and places the right of legislation and governance exclusively in the hands of the people.

Soroush claims that secularism has been understood as a purposeful attempt to exclude religion from worldly affairs. But the secular governments are not opposed to religion; they accept it, but not as a basis for their legitimacy or as a foundation for their actions.

For Soroush, it is natural to separate mundane politics from sacred religion, since blending the two together would be meaningless.[50]

Drawing upon the epistemological framework in his *The Expansion and Contraction of Religion*, Soroush offers a theory for reconciling religion and democracy. His arguments are as follows:[51]

1. The compatibility between religion and democracy is the instance of compatibility between religion and science. It means any judgment that is made, can be applied to both of them.

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[50] Soroush, *Modiriyat wa Modara* , pp. 419-443.
[51] *Ibid.*, pp.301-333.

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2. Debate on religion and democracy is an epistemological issue that is the product of a perspective that is external to religion. Therefore, by borrowing internal knowledge from religion (such as religious jurisprudence) we can neither reject nor confirm this issue.

3. In each religious society, the religion itself does not rule and judge the society; it is religious knowledge that always rules and judges. Religious knowledge is the product of a rational effort that always adjusts to contemporary knowledge and demands. For Soroush, only such a rational reading of religion is consistent with democracy.

4. Accordingly, harmony between religion and democracy is indeed possible. Religious society can be democratic.

Souroush believes a real religious government must provide an environment for freely developing faith. He refers to the Qur'anic verse that says, "there is no compulsion in faith" (2/ 256); no one force faith! Faith without freedom does not make sense. So the government that is truly concerned with the faith of the people should provide an opportunity for faith to be freely chosen. This faith can develop in a democratic society more than in any other society.

According to Soroush, democratic States are those which allow public reason to judge controversies. In religious societies, public reason will be equivalent to the judgment of religious people. In democratic societies in which the most of people are religious, religion can serve as a source for resolving their conflicts and problems.

Soroush insists that discovering and eliminating the errors in our understanding of religion is only possible through the freedom that exists in a free society. He maintains

that in order to better our understanding of religion, we need to be exposed to a diversity of religious interpretations and experiences.

Finally, for Soroush, democracy represents a set of methods and takes a neutral position towards religious and non-religious people. Democracy has no essence that is in contradiction with religion's essence. Both democracy and religion can be re-interpreted and re-understood. Logically, there is no inherent inconsistency between religion and democracy.

VI. A look back and a look forward

Soroush's theory of the expansion and contraction of religion is not an attempt to secularize religion; it is rather an attempt to preserve the rationality of religion. He has said that his project of uncovering religious rationality contains potential gains and losses.[52]

Soroush is looking at the Motazeleh (an important Islamic theological school) tradition as an invitation to uncover rationality in religious belief systems. Soroush asserts that Motazeleh rationalism is independent from religion. Therefore, they strongly argue for the autonomy of ethics and laws. According to Soroush, Shiite theology is close to the Motazeleh tradition. Soroush claims that Motazeleh rationalism is among the most valuable sources for Islamic revivalism; by looking back to this traditional basis, many modern issues such as rationality in religious belief, free consciousness, and the autonomy of the self, can be accepted into the Muslim community.

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[52] Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Iran*, p.155.

For Soroush, freedom and justice presuppose an understanding and an acceptance of religion. According to him, we can have serious doubts about the truth of any religion that does not care about justice, or which encourages people to accept tyranny. It is religion, he says, that should adjust itself to these kinds of public values (i.e. justice and liberty) and not vice versa. He emphasizes that religion without freedom can no longer be religion.

In contrast to the idea that Islam is a total ideology, Soroush defends the de-ideologization of religion. Soroush offers a reading of religion that is compatible with our contemporary expectations and knowledge; that is, a theory of the evolution of religious knowledge. His theory aims to distinguish between religion and religious knowledge in order to explain the mechanism of change and evolution in religious thought. It undertakes to explain the relationship between religion and science. Thus, by distinguishing between religion and religious understanding, Soroush seeks to preserve faith and effect reconciliation between religion and democracy.

Conclusion

In the first part of this research, I examined Rawlsian political liberalism. Political liberalism should be neutral regarding secular and religious arguments, but it cannot be neutral towards all non-liberal, non-democratic principles and groups. For instance, fundamentalists, integralists, and other groups who threaten the very foundations of liberal democracy cannot be regarded neutrally. One of the aims of liberal

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democracy is to protect State, individual and association. So liberal democracy does not oppose religion. In order to flourish, all free and equal, and rational citizens should support democracy and some version the of separation of religion and State. Such support not only protects the State from religion, but also protects religion from the State.

Thus, instead of trying to keep all comprehensive religious doctrines out, liberal democracy should welcome all reasonable doctrines in public language. In a liberal society the religious or philosophical doctrines of citizens should never be censored as long as they are reasonable. But the secular separation of religion and State is still a common view between those who are religious and those who are not, and between the followers of different religions.

During the second part, I explored three discourses on the relationship between religion and politics, namely; traditional, ideological and democratic, in contemporary Iran. Traditional and ideological discourses define humans as duty-bound beings. Maybe duty alone can serve as the principal motivation for morality and an efficient means of organizing society and maintaining good order, but there is a dangerous consequence. When this definition is used for political aims, duty replaces human morality, and when duty is left unchecked, it can easily degenerate into coercion and become an institution of tyranny. For example, among others, the Nazi and Soviet Communist regimes exploited their citizens' duty. So that kind of society will establish laws which can direct citizens' behavior.

The democratic discourse considers humans as free and equal beings. I examined the most important representatives of this discourse in contemporary Iran, namely; Mujtahed-Shabestari, and Soroush.

For Mujtahed-Shabestari, religious faith is outside the scope of possible scientific or philosophical attack. There is no conflict between the nature of faith and the nature of politics. Religion has separate spheres; therefore, there is no real conflict between them because each has its own legitimate domain of authority and these domains do not overlap. According to him, faith without freedom is unachievable. Faith is not an ideology that one can inject in the mind. Faith should always renew itself. Thus, for him, religious faith cannot develop under any kind of direct State sponsorship; it needs to a free environment for developing.

Mujtahed-Shabestari emphasizes that liberal democracy neither is religious nor non-religious. He suggests that as a method, democracy is against dictatorship and authoritarianism, but has no position regarding God's laws. For him, although modern democracy never existed in Muslim life, the traditions are interrelated. Thus, we can assimilate democracy and benefit from it.

In a different philosophical context, Soroush attempts to find a reconciliation between religion and democracy. According to him the development of scientific methods at the beginning of the modern period had dramatic effects on the method and understanding of religion. Soroush epistemologically argues that all sciences are artificial, made by man. Religious knowledge is the same as other types of knowledge; that is, time-bound and completely created by human.

Soroush draws his political theory from his religious epistemology, i.e. from his theory of the expansion and contraction of religion, which is based in turn on Kant's central claim that our understanding of religion should be limited to the realm of reason. I think the implications of this theory can be summarized as follows: religious people should ensure that their political decisions are in agreement with public reason.

Thus, the advocates of democratic discourse, like Quinn, declare that combining religion and politics is a dangerous mixture. Like Rawls, they emphasize that religious doctrines should accept public reason. Also, like Audi, they believe in libertarian and egalitarian as well as neutrality principles as the foundation of democratic government. Finally, they assert that the commitment of rational religious people is to both reason and religion.

I demonstrated in this paper that Rawlsian political liberalism has no conflict with religious ideas, but provides an ideal environment to fulfill religious values in a pluralistic society. Also, I showed that Iranian Islamic reformists, in contrast to their portrayal by some researchers as opposing Western liberal democracy[53], endorse Rawlsian political liberalism and support it with an Islamic interpretation of life.

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[53] For example Michael E. Salla said that Islamic revivalism is a " regional variation of a global religious revivalism that promulgates a normative perspective that critiques liberal democratic norms." See Micheal E. Salla, "Political Islam and the West: A New Cold War or Convergence?", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.18, No.4 (1997), p.740.

Glossary

faqih: a religious scholar

farrih-I izadi: Divine Grace

fiq`h: jurisprudence or religious law

fuqaha: jurists or experts

imam: means in general "leader or master" as a technical term in Islamic law and theology, it refers to legimate supreme leader of the Muslim community. (Mircea Elidea, ed., The Encyclopedia of Religion, V.7, p.114)

imamate: the constitutive element of Shii is its doctrine of the imamate. It was based on the belief that humanity is at all times in need of a divinely appointed and guided leader and authoritative teacher in allreligious matters, without such a leader, the world could never exited for a moment. In order to fulfil his divine mission, this leader must be endowed with full immunity from sin and error. Following the age of the prophets, which came to a close with Muhammad, the imams continue their prophetic mission. (Mircea Elidea, ed., The Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol.13, p.243).

ijtehad: Imples not drawing conclusions from and on the basis of the Quran, hadith, ijma, and qiyas, but seeking answers to problems facing to community or the individuals from the Qu'ran and Hadith alone. (Mircea Elidea, ed., The Encyclopedia of Religion, V.13, p.267).

Madinah: the city in which the Prophet established Islamic government

sharia: Islamic teachings

shariat: the system of Islamic law and the rules of order

ummah: Moslems community

wiláyah, guardianship

wiláyat al-faqíh: theocracy or guardianship of the jurist

walee al-faqih: religious leader

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