Iran

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# Towards an Islamic Discourse of Uncertainty and Doubt

**Contemporary Islam is witnessing the advent of new critical discourses from within its own modes of articulation. It confronts a new epistemic and interpretative situation, which is generally felt as something of an emergency. This emergency in epistemology and hermeneutics is largely the result of a radical shift of the categories of modern philosophy, science, culture and geography. Given the fact that the exploratory elaboration of law for centuries has been the dominant mode of self-expression in Islam, one of the key themes of contemporary Shiʿi thought is the search for a legal identity. The current debate on the *shariʿa* (divine law) in Iran underscores the continued significance of this exploration. In the debate, the radical post-modernist ʿAbd al-Karim Surush contests the epistemic certainty of eternal knowledge, so common among modernists.**

In the study of the dissemination of modern thought in Iran, one experiences special difficulties due to the fact that the existing constellations on the intellectual scene are characterized by institutional discontinuities, transmutation in the use of language and complex notions of loyalty in society and politics. This entanglement has produced a multiplicity in the various intellectual patterns, where components of one stance are even employed by other discourses in their experience of modernity. Among the pivotal figures who are considered in this respect are primarily ʿAbdullah Jawadi-Amuli, Muhammad Mujtahid-Shabistari and ʿAbd al-Karim Surush, but other individuals who belong to the Islamic intellectual élite of Iran are also included. In the main, the discourse of Surush is highlighted, since his post-1988 writings on the nature of Islamic law, legal epistemology and hermeneutics accommodate Islam to modernity to an extent unsurpassed in the Iranian context.

Since the 1979 revolution, the problem of the reform and renewal of the traditional Islamic law has acquired great urgency, as the new theocratic order confronts a political reality that is not addressed by definite formulations in the traditional *fiqh* corpus. Since there do not exist any clear unambiguous norms under the *shariʿa* in many areas of law, such as substantive laws, the Shiʿi *fuqaha* (jurists) are divided among themselves as to the best legal solutions to many problems facing contemporary society. This situation and the ensuing controversy have forced traditional as well as modern educated scholars into different intellectual camps. As some observers have noticed, the intellectual debates and paradoxes that are taking place in contemporary Iran defy any monolithic characterization of Shiʿi Islam. Partly due to the attempts to apply traditional Islamic jurisprudence in the political sphere of the modern state, Islam, being an a priori source of religious normativity, is increasingly 'crystallized' into a contested myriad or body of competing intellectual discourses, where the access to interpretation of the revealed legal texts has become more plural. At the present, a number of lay Islamic intellectuals participate in developing various discourses on religious epistemology and hermeneutics side by side with the ulama, and the key figures in the criticism against traditional jurisprudence are lay intellectuals.

Suggesting that the present overall situation in Islam is characterized by the dual phenomenon of tradition vis-à-vis modernity, which has generated the possibility of competing paradigms struggling for mastery, makes contemporary Islamic thought a paradigmatic phenomenon. From this perspective, Islamic intellectual production comprises a paradigmatic field, which epitomizes a discursive dialogue between revelation and reason, unity and diversity, idealism and realism and tradition and modernity. The exchange of European ideas has incited the development of a complex set of competing normative discourses to the extent that the use of terms like polycentrism seems appropriate to characterize modern Islam. A significant factor in the formation of a multiple paradigm phenomenon is the very existence of a paradigmatic field, in which different paradigms coexist and knowledge of different paradigms becomes possible and accessible to others. By highlighting the variety of stances found in the debate, it establishes a taxonomy that provides a scheme for the characterization of Islamic thought in terms of three distinct categories, namely traditionalism ('pre-critical'), modernism ('critical') and post-modernism ('post-critical').

## Transitional paradigms

The traditionalist position (represented by Jawadi-Amuli) in general terms adheres to the paradigm of pre-modern Islamic tradition by identifying legal epistemology (woven into methodology) with Aristotelian syllogism. In philosophical terms, it is pre-critical and considers cognitive matters in the light of a basic sacred cosmology. In contrast, the genuine effort of Islamic modernism (represented by Mujtahid-Shabistari), in the sense of representing the appearance of an autonomous critical consciousness, is to break with the entrenched pre-modern paradigm in the realm of epistemology. It signifies a genuine effort to accommodate religion to the scientific (albeit not always ethical) structures of modernity, emancipated from the traditional theological and legal philosophy. While the result of the reflection of the critical consciousness is the secularization of the world, the recent hermeneutical turn of certain modernists' discourses does not accept the full implications of a retreat before critical thinking and instead rework interpretative methods in the light of the methods of modern science. Islamic post-modernism (represented by Surush) constitutes a further paradigm shift in Shiʿi speculation on revealed law, in the sense that it contests the modernists' belief in epistemic certainty by considering all human knowledge, religious as well as 'secular', as hypothetical and conjectural at best. In contrast to the typical modernists' submission for rational criticism in the name of truth, post-modernism accepts no unshakable foundations on which to adjudicate claims of justified true knowledge and hence also of meaning. Representing the most innovative 'avant-garde' thought in contemporary Shiʿi Islam, it argues that the temporality of understanding that merges with its contextuality points out both the finitude and reflexivity of human understanding.

## Modernity

Due to the relationship between global modernity and the religion of Islam, the question of *shariʿa* has indisputably come to occupy a wider perspective than its traditional formulations and this raises the question as to whether modernity is categorically conceptualized as an external phenomenon among Iranian religious intellectuals, or if there is instead an effort on their part to develop indigenous forms and expressions of modernity. While the dilemma of modernity is more momentous considering the fact that the universal reason of European Enlightenment denies the equality of all cultural traditions, it is important to take into account the existence of different and plural varieties of modernity, where the term modernity itself refers to those features that allow us to speak of a modern age in the first place. In philosophical terms, modernity has as central to its reality the category of experience itself and might justifiably be thought of as the sovereignty of experience. In so far as there is no higher authority for the modern world than experience, the universality of reason and the autonomy of the subject (notions rooted in the Enlightenment thought) equally serve as constitutive components of the philosophical but also social vision of modernity. In the realm of epistemology, the growth of epistemological 'subjectivism' is considered to be the underlying ontological foundation of modernity, which gives paramountcy to a moment of self-awareness in the adjunction of knowledge. The turning away from things, the object of thinking, to the subject, having thoughts, is considered to be the mark of modern Western philosophy.

## Islamic post-modernism

As far as the primary cognitive and interpretative questions for many contemporary Islamic intellectuals are essentially similar to those of contemporary Western philosophy, their understanding of Islamic epistemology, hermeneutics and conflicting interpretations is engendered by the cognitive structures of modernity. By considering Islamic tradition not as a closed entity but as a paradigmatic epistemic field, and by focusing on processes of reception and communication between cultures, it is possible to speak of internal Shiʿi expressions of modernity. One of the unique results of the in-depth encounter between Islam and modernity is the ability of Iranian Islamic intellectuals to examine the very foundations of modernity and thereby give internal synthetic answers within their own religious and cultural context. Surush's affinities with post-modern thought are, for instance, closest in the sphere of hermeneutics, where he initiates a systematic critique of meaning. By turning to the hermeneutics of suspicion, Surush considers religious knowledge as, overall, tentative and conjectural: it is ultimately bold guesswork. Since human understanding, in his view, always is blocked and empowered by the concrete and changing context of a specific hermeneutical situation, the scientific endeavour constantly preys on other interpretations in an endless process. A moment of philosophical doubt clings to all human knowledge claims.

It is tempting to think of Surush as a constructive or revisionary post-modernist who seeks to overcome the modern worldview by means of constructing a new worldview through a revision of modern premises and traditional concepts. Unlike deconstructionism, which overcomes modernism through an anti-worldview, he has not abandoned modern philosophy's goal of formulating rationality and universality, and he does not altogether reject or eliminate the ingredients necessary for a worldview (God, self, purpose, meaning, real world, truth as correspondence, etc.). By considering the contribution of post-modernism to pluralism, tolerance and its criticism of the superiority of reason as beneficial, he is essentially involved with the question of what to do next, given that in central ways modern philosophy has reached a state of exhaustion. By adopting deconstruction at the level of methodology in his lectures on *ijtihad*, it is evident that his ideas comprise a revision of the epistemic premises of Enlightenment modernism. Surush's thought constitutes the flowering of the deepest impulse in the modern project and represents in many respects a loss of faith in Enlightenment modernism, a spirit of subjectivism, a pluralism, a scepticism and a relativist rejection of final answers. His religious discourse is hence situated in opposition to the 'settled hegemony' and 'objective certitude' of the metanarrative of Islamic tradition.