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RELIGIOUS REFORM IN IRAN: A READING IN LIGHT OF THE ABSOLUTE GUARDIANSHIP OF THE JURIST

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Introduction

Since the death of Othman Ibn Affan, differences among Muslims over the position of political leadership and the caliphate contributed to the emergence of movements, denominations, and sects. Muslims were divided over the conflict between Ali Ibn Abu-Talib and Muawiyah Ibn Abi Sufian, which pitted the two factions against each other in the Battle of Siffin (37 AH). This battle marked the beginning of the division of Muslims into political parties competing for control of the caliphate. Shiites contended that political leadership should be assumed by members of the Prophet's Household, particularly the descendants of Imam Hussein while Sunnis argued that the caliph should be chosen from among the Quraysh. Kharijites, meanwhile, argued that the caliph could be anyone from among Muslims even if he is an "amputated servant"—on condition that he is pious and just. Shahrastani explained the disagreements on this matter, saying, "The sword in Islam has been raised over the imamate more than any other cause."⁽¹⁾ Hence, over time, the question of political leadership (imamate) was integrated into the pillars of the Shiite doctrine. Consequently, Sunnis and Ash'ari theologians responded to Shiites on the question of imamate, insisting that the issue is a secondary issue in Sunni textbooks in general and Ash'ari ones in particular.

The nature of the differences among Muslims was political at first, then religious, contributing to the formation of various Islamic schools of law (jurisprudence) such as Mutazilites, Shiites, Kharijites, Murji'ites, Ahl al-Hadith (People of Traditions), Māturīdites, and others. This study focuses on the nature of Twelver Shiism, how it developed over time, and how this school of jurisprudence contributed to the establishment of Safavid rule in Iran. So, what are the distinguishing characteristics of Shiism: how did contemporary attempts at religious reform in Iran emerge? How did these attempts address the vast challenges to open up the entrenched doctrine of Twelver Shiism? Have the efforts of reform by individuals such as Ali Shariati, Abdul Karim Soroush, Mohammad Mujtahid Shabestari and others succeeded in reforming the doctrine of Twelver Shiism? These are the questions that are addressed in this study.

Is the Doctrine of Twelver Shiism Dynamic or Fixed?

Though Shiism emerged during the early stages of Islam, textbooks related to some fundamentals of Shiism appeared later in the 4th Hijri century. Important Shiite jurisprudential collections emerged from that point until the present. These collections shaped the identity of Shiism and its characteristics that set it apart from other Islamic sects.

The question of imamate is a central issue in Shiite thought in general, and it is regarded as a matter of religious doctrine rather than a matter of politics. Imamate is a religious doctrine to Twelver Shiites, not a political or worldly issue subject to expediency. The imamate is assumed by imams who have been designated by the Prophet. Up until Jafar al-Sadiq, the Prophet had designated Ali, Hassan, and Hussein. At that point, the difference between Twelvers and Ismailis arose. The former claim that Mousa al-Kazim was the legitimate Shiite imam (whose successor should have been Ali al-Rida, succeeded by Mohammad al-Jawad, Ali al-Hadi, Hassan al-Askari (his son Mohammad, the Mahdi, is the 12th imam who supposedly went into occultation in the city of Samarra and his followers are waiting for his reappearance to this day)⁽²⁾ while the latter insist the successor should have been Ismail.

Twelver Shiites believe that the imamate is not among the issues over which the masses (the Muslim community) should have a say. According to them, the imamate is one of the rules and pillars of Islam. The Prophet did not overlook or devolve such an important issue to the Muslim Ummah, but instead an imam is divinely appointed. Hence, he is infallible; he does not commit major or minor sins. They also contend that Ali was designated as an imam by the Prophet, citing a plethora of texts that they pass on and adhere to. ⁽³⁾As a result, Twelver Shiites believe that an imam is appointed based on a

clear religious text rather than based on the Muslim community's choice, as is the case in the Sunni school of thought.

However, Twelver Shiites insist that an imam with the best criteria must be designated, and they refuse to appoint an imam whose traits are not the best. They believe that their imams inherited the Prophet's knowledge as well as of other prophets. During the caliphate of Imam Jafar al-Sadiq, this doctrine was clear. Twelver Shiites do not permit an imam whose criteria is less than another to lead as this would be against the Holy Quran. If an imam is to guide people on different religious and scientific issues, he must be the best in terms of religious knowledge and piety.⁽⁴⁾

Shiites' perception of knowledge's centrality in the chain of imams (the 12 imams) means that clerical knowledge is limited to these revered figures. Furthermore, following the Quran and the credible traditions (Sunnah) passed on through the Prophet's household, an imam is a source of law. Shiites will never accept a tradition unless it has been passed down through their chain of narrations. An imam, according to them, is an inheritor of prophetic knowledge, and he transcends mortals because of his constant connection with divine knowledge. An imam does not achieve his high status by seeking knowledge or following legal proofs, but rather wisdom is inherent within him, i.e., the imam's knowledge is an essential component, and his knowledge of the unseen is built into his nature and essence after being passed down through a long chain of transcendent beings such as angels and prophets. Knowledge was originally a luminous quality that passed down from one prophet to the next, eventually reaching Prophet Mohammed and passed on to Ali, Fatima, and then the luminous quality (knowledge) was manifested in the Fatimid imams.⁽⁵⁾

Given that the imams' knowledge is one of the sources of law, Twelver Shiites, unlike Sunnis, reject unanimity of the learned (scholars with knowledge), analogy, or *ijtihad* except from the designated imams. According to Twelver Shiism, an imam is a source of rulings and he holds exclusive authority to oversee Muslim affairs and decide on all matters within the framework of lawful and unlawful. Twelver Shiites disagreed with Sunnis about the unanimity of scholarly opinions, displaying strong opposition to analogy [*qiyas*].⁽⁶⁾ When analogy was distorted, they resorted to the direct legal opinions issued by imams, which they transmitted immediately or after the process of *ijtihad*. The latter, *ijtihad*, should be flawless, without unanimity of scholarly opinions or analogy, but with a Quranic text, transmitted narration from one of the imams.⁽⁷⁾

Twelver Shiites believe that religion cannot be fully established without the guardianship of an imam. They regard it as one of the fundamental pillars of religion, and one's belief cannot be valid unless it is accepted. No emulation

of forefathers, family members, or mentors is deemed valid and acceptable, regardless of their experience and knowledge base. Guardianship of the imams is equivalent to the Oneness of God and Prophethood.⁽⁸⁾ The imamate is the cornerstone of Twelver Shiism since it alone has the right to interpret monotheism, prophethood and knowledge can emerge only through it. It has the authority to guide people on matters of doctrine as well as issue jurisprudential opinions.

Twelver Shiites also reiterate the imams' infallibility, claiming that they never err or slip up. They are the continuation of the prophet's chain. According to Mohammed al-Fayoumi, "An Imam, like the Prophet, should be infallible, free of all sins, inner and outer, from infancy to death, deliberate and unintentional. He should be immune from errors and blunders, like the Prophet, and he is the guardian of Islamic law and a vigilant observer of religion. They claim that the evidence that has led them to conclude that prophets are infallible is the same evidence leading them to conclude that imams are also inerrant."⁽⁹⁾

As a result of this infallibility, Twelver Shiites believe it is impossible for an imam to make a mistake. Therefore, because the imam's appointment is a God-ordained function, committing a sin by him is impossible. If he sins, all of the jurisprudential rulings he ordered are flawed, which would cause enormous havoc.⁽¹⁰⁾

As a result of the Twelver Shiite perception of imams as flawless figures, we find that they exalt the imams to the exclusion of the Prophet's image. They argue that Ali's descendants have been the most influential and effective throughout Islamic history. They claim that during their lifetimes, the imams were the most effective. Imams, according to them, are "exalted individuals upon whom God has bestowed His grace and entrusted His guardianship. They were at the pinnacle of human perfection in terms of knowledge, piety, courage, generosity, chastity, and having sublime morals and good traits. No human being can be endowed with what they were exclusively endowed with. As such, after the Prophet's death, they deserved to be imams and sources of guidance on all religious and worldly matters that concern people, as well as sources of clarification and deduction of legal opinions."⁽¹¹⁾

As such, Shiites restrict divine knowledge to imams and bestow infallibility and perfection on them. Therefore, knowledge is esoteric for Twelver Shiites, provided solely by imams and chosen jurists after them.

It is clear that Shiites have conferred holiness on the teachings of their imams. Twelvers believe that the commands of imams are equivalent to that of God; their prohibition (of a certain matter) is equivalent to that of God; disobeying them is like disobeying God; the imams' friend is God's friend; opposing them is like opposing the Prophet and opposing the Prophet is

opposing God. Therefore, a man should submit to the imams and their orders and execute whatever they order. Shiites believe that God-ordained Islamic legal rulings can only be derived from their sources of knowledge and such rulings would be invalid if taken from any other sources. A responsible mortal cannot perform the obligations designated to the imams. They will not know whether they have fulfilled their obligations unless they follow the path of the imams. The imams are like Noah's Arc: those who get on board will survive, while those who do not will drown in the dark and salty sea, and be consumed by waves of ambiguous issues, aberrations, false allegations, and disputes.⁽¹²⁾ Thus, the imams are presented to have supernatural powers over the universe, allowing them to control people, their past, present, and future. In light of the foregoing, many stories have been related about Shiite imams, particularly about their miraculous acts to entrench their presence in the Shiite mindset. Some of the fundamentals of the Shiite doctrine can be traced back to ancient Persia. The Persians always viewed their rulers as divine figures chosen by God to adjudicate between the people and had vested sovereignty in them. In addition, God had breathed His spirit into them, which is one of the fundamentals of ancient Persian doctrines passed down to Shiites.⁽¹³⁾

During the occultation of the hidden imam until his reappearance, Shiites moved from the imam's guardianship to the jurist's guardianship. According to Twelver Shiism, a jurist can take over guardianship of the public. They reported that Imam Askari passed down a narration from his grandfather, Imam Sadiq, that a jurist is one who "who guards his soul (against misdeeds), observes his religious obligations, defies worldly whims, and obeys the orders of the Twelve Imams. Then people can emulate him. He is known as *āyatu llāh* (sign of God), and he like the imams should be treated with the same degree of holiness, submission, and obedience in *ijtihad*. No one has the authority to challenge his *ijtihad* and rulings (doctrinal and jurisprudential)." In this regard, Twelver Shiites insist that God has vested the jurist with similar divine powers as the imams in terms of superiority over all mankind and authority over all peoples. He also oversees the affairs of the *ummah* and leads in deducing jurisprudential rulings from religious sources as well as those related to worldly matters.⁽¹⁴⁾

Thus, Twelver Shiites transferred the quality of infallibility from the imam to the guardian jurist. Jurists were granted vast authority over all the affairs of this sect's adherents. After the age of Major Occultation, *khoms* (the religious obligation that Shiite Muslims must pay; one-fifth of their wealth to the hidden imam) was included in Twelver Shiism. Given that the hidden imam has not reappeared, but his representatives exist, *khoms* should be paid to them instead.⁽¹⁵⁾ As a result, the issue of the guardian jurist and the allocation of *khoms* to him were included in the Shiite doctrine after the Major Occultation.

A devout Shiite lives a spiritual life and is characterized by *taqiya* (denial) as an essential and primary approach in dealing with others until the reappearance of the hidden imam. *Taqiya* is a Shiite practice of remaining silent and concealing one's identity to avoid persecution. Haidar Amoli claims that "all God's secrets, all illuminating secrets, and God's wisdom are trusts that are preserved in the hearts of *awliya* (God's friends). They shall be entrusted only to those who have the right to bear them," adding that these secrets entail Sharia rules and may, if violated, invoke God's wrath. This is why the imams themselves instructed their followers to follow *taqiya*.⁽¹⁶⁾

In fact, Twelver Shiism bestows infallibility and holiness on imams, granting them the authority to legislate beyond the Quran and Sunnah. Since the Major Occultation, Twelver Shiism has also transitioned guardianship from imams to jurists, resulting in the establishment of the guardian jurist theory. Jurists can continue ruling until the reappearance of Muhammad al-Mahdi. When Imam Mahdi returns, Shiites will stop following *taqiya*. In Twelver Shiism, this represents a static perception of the dynamic arc of history. Twelver Shiism became the official doctrine of the state from the Safavid era (1501-1736) to the present day. According to French Iranologist Henry Corbin, Twelver Shiism has been the official doctrine of the Iranian nation for the past five centuries. Several favorable factors contributed to Iranians choosing this version of Islam since its advent in Iran.⁽¹⁷⁾

Fayoumi supports this argument; the Shiite doctrine is linked to ancient Persian doctrines. "Among the things that Muslims have copied from ancient Persian doctrines was that the latter used to view their kings as divine figures that God chose to adjudicate between people and infused His spirit into them," Fayoumi says.⁽¹⁸⁾ As a result, Safavid Shiism differs from Alawite Shiism in terms of the gnostic Persian spirit that dominated it, as well as regarding religion as a path for the hereafter and a means of avoiding the entrapments of worldly life.

In light of the aforementioned, we understand that the Twelver Shiite doctrine dominates Iran. It places the ayatollah, the guardian jurist, at the top of the power structure of clerics. His spiritual authority exceeds the political authority of the president of the republic. He also has guardianship over the president himself. As a result, religious authority has become inextricably linked to political authority. The unquestionable nature of the ruling system of the guardian jurist is derived from ancient Persian culture. Several questions arise here about the role of the religious reform movement in Iran, the goals it sought to achieve, its position on the official state version of religion, whether it succeeded in its goals, or whether Shiism succeeded in thwarting all external reform efforts due to its dogmatic teachings, personalities, and centralized structure. These questions seek to examine the roles of prominent leaders of

religious reform who confronted the guardian jurist system. In particular, the study identifies the points on which religious reform figures focused on when questioning this unalterable ruling system.

Religious Reform and Criticizing the Clerical Government

Iran's religious reform movement has focused on criticizing clerics' authority in Twelver Shiism, with them having far-reaching authority over people and societal movements in general. Ali Shariati (1933-1979) said, "After the period of great prophets who clearly and truthfully conveyed God's message of religion, the fate of religion was controlled by hostile, inhumane colonial powers known as the spiritual class, transcendent figures, sufis, monks, and priests. They used religion to deceive the people, both individually and collectively, because religion, particularly upright Islam, is designed to care for both the individual and society."⁽¹⁹⁾

Ali Shariati revealed the extent to which the clerical and religious authority are closely intertwined. He believed that "the clerics wielding authority sought to take over the political authority to control the destinies of the people, enslave mankind and act tyrannically toward them."⁽²⁰⁾

Abdolkarim Soroush (1945-present) criticizes the clerics within the Iranian religious establishment for earning a living from religion, thus losing credibility. "If the clergy want to have a more influential say over the realities of people's lives and the matters that concern them, they should stop making religion the source of their breadwinning," he said.⁽²¹⁾

Because of the hawza's dominance, and the people's dominance over clerics to the extent that they can influence their direction, the religious reformists tried to craft a notion of clerical independence to accord them a sense of "dignity." The Shiite clerics are dependent on the public because they receive their money from the *khoms* they collect from people; i.e., people pay the clerics in accordance with Shiite religious principles. Barjourdi says, "I thought, when I become a marja, that I need to infer rules/laws and people need to follow these rules. People shall follow any fatwa I issue. But when I issued some fatwas, I discovered it is not this way."⁽²²⁾

No alternative can be practically implemented to achieve independence of clerics from the public. The political system will not allow the independence of clerics. Therefore, the problem between the state and the hawza will remain.

No doubt the criticisms leveled by reformists against the clerics in Iran are vast. For example, Soroush is severely critical of Iranian clerics. He said, "After the victory of the revolution, running the affairs of the state rested with clerics. The country is governed on the basis of Wilayat al-Faqih which places the jurist at the top of the government and political power, having the final say over all affairs. Of course, such a jurist must be a mujtahid and have

completed his religious instruction in the hawza, a madrasa from which jurists and clerics graduate.”⁽²³⁾

Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, a reformist, believes that Wilayat al-Faqih demolished the legitimacy and foundation of public opinion — elections — in appointing the political, economic and social systems upon which the political legitimacy of the ruling system is established.⁽²⁴⁾

Soroush explains the enormity of Iran’s clerical quandary, which is caused by the religious oligarchy’s control over the state, “As a result, the situation in our society after the revolution was shaped by the fact that the minority had triumphed and taken power. Those who were vulnerable had their grievances resolved, and clerics who studied jurisprudence and *usul* in general gained intellectual and political standing within society. They regard the rest of the world’s intellectual and political systems as null and void. They see themselves as the bearers of truth.”⁽²⁵⁾

Soroush reiterates that the clerics’ control over the public sphere is based on their use of jurisprudential authority as it is considered as one of Islam’s most important pillars. Jurisprudence is important for clerics. He claims that clerics raised the theme of “jurisprudential Islam” in the Iranian republic and worked to strengthen and highlight its foundations.⁽²⁶⁾

It is true that Soroush criticized Iran’s clerics, but he also condemned the hawzas (religious seminaries) because of their control over the social and political spheres in Iran. As the government is led by clerics, hawzas have the final say over political and governance issues. Clerics would not have such power and authority if the government was not based on religious rule. Power is delegated to religious elites in a clerical government. Religious institutions bestow power and authority on those who meet the requirements. Today, a cleric is a judge, heads the court and derives his authority from the guardian jurist. He is viewed with more importance, holiness, and reverence than anyone else.⁽²⁷⁾

Soroush also mentioned that the conflation of clerical knowledge with power has had a negative impact on religious knowledge in the hawzas. “The hawza began to speak the language of politics, not common sense,” he said. The evidence indicates that the hawza is weak and incapable of providing logical and orderly evidence in every case. Instead of guiding and admonishing those in power, it facilitates the ambitions of the ruling elite by providing religious legitimacy. The hawzas issue legal opinions and fatwas that are only consistent with the desires and ambitions of those in power .⁽²⁸⁾ All of this reflects the symbiotic relationship between the Iranian political system and the hawza.

Soroush emphasized that the hawzas have imposed a religious elite on Iran that dominates all spheres. Clerics who graduate from the hawzas control all aspects of Iranian life. He said, “Before the revolution, the hawzas

had never achieved such prominence. Today, however, the situation is completely different. We do not say that university graduates are not given job opportunities or appointed to government positions, but their circumstances are not the same as clerics. Clerics hold the strings and can effectively intervene in all matters, details, and minor issues. They control the major state levers. And the religious establishment has been and continues to be a unified front — a cohesive body. This party has seized power and has worked to keep the other parties at bay.”⁽²⁹⁾

The most dangerous criticism directed at the hawzas is that they use their religious role to control all aspects of Iranian life. Soroush says, “The hawzas address and communicate with the masses. The teachings of the hawza are incompatible with the elites’ ambitions. Their teachings should not be limited to enlightening people about jurisprudence and answering muqalids’ questions. Instead, they interact with the public on the one hand while leading efforts to guide them (to the right path) on the other.”⁽³⁰⁾

When it comes to discussing religious matters, hawzas define the parameters of religious knowledge and who is excluded. Soroush mentions, “The spirit of holiness that the hawza enjoys enables it to shut out opinions and jurisprudential matters and keep them concealed, which prevents breaking down, analyzing, and delving deeply into their details.” He added, “No one has the courage to criticize and filter them, allowing old and inherited opinions and theories to dominate the intellectual sphere, gaining holiness over time, with scholars protecting and guarding these old theories and opinions. This is the essence of intellectual decline and loss.”⁽³¹⁾

Mostafa Malekian, a prominent Iranian philosopher, attempted to demolish this “illusionary” sanctity, urging to look for the origin of the texts’ sacredness which the clerics use against their rivals. The clerics, according to Malekian, sanctified the narrators of texts, so they evade any criticism or discussion. “Is our perspective toward those who are beyond criticism and discussion correct?” Malekian asked.⁽³²⁾

The hawza seeks to exclude all opposing opinions and thoughts. Clerics continue to call for the elimination of all opposing beliefs, which destroys intellectual wealth. Soroush said, “Those people say that they have eliminated opponents in the spheres of jurisprudence and creed.” He stated that some argue that eliminating opposing doctrines is for the public interest, yet it is not even in the interest of the elites because this will ultimately cause harm to everybody. Verified knowledge cannot be achieved but through debates between different schools of thought.⁽³³⁾ Thus, Soroush calls on Shiite clerics to be open to opposing schools of thought as well as to modern cultures based on international ideas.

Soroush also criticizes the nature of hawzas' jurisprudential knowledge because it is based on absolute obedience between student and teacher. Hence, it is traditional, static, and changeless. He said, "Knowledge is where there are never-ending questions." He argued that a knowledge that lacks questions will not evolve. Any jurisprudential establishment that opposes raising questions and attacks those who ask questions will witness a decline in knowledge and cause confusion in the minds of its followers."⁽³⁴⁾

Soroush points out that the sciences of the hawza are based on belief and submission. These sciences are not subject to criticism and opposition. Thus, those in charge of the hawza are in dispute with the scholars of modern sciences. Soroush believes that both parties hurl accusations at each other. The scholars of modern sciences accuse hawza clerics of being static and regressive while the latter accuse the former of "relativeness, Occidentalism and disbelief."⁽³⁵⁾

Moreover, Soroush criticizes the exclusionary orientations of the hawzas in Iran. He said, "We live under the Islamic Republic, and we speak daily of disbelieving Eastern and Western ideals, and we believe that intellectual breakthroughs are null and void, and we see ourselves exclusively on the right side of things." He added, "And these perceptions and allegations make us oblivious to the need for more rigorous analysis and in-depth study of these sciences. We shouldn't just say that our scientists concluded that these ideas are false, abandoning analysis and critical thinking."⁽³⁶⁾

Soroush also believes that Iranians must study opposing intellectual systems and that they must be open to others in order to study thought and philosophy. He said, "This will broaden horizons and put an end to the static nature of religious thought, allowing the intellect to play a larger role in *ijtihad* and thinking." He added, "The clergy, particularly in the last century, did not receive adequate philosophical and theological instruction. *Fiqh* and *usul* dominate hawza studies, and the majority of clerics spend the bulk of their lives studying *fiqh* and *usul*, with the exception of a few clerics who had a desire to study philosophy, theology, and exegesis. Philosophy, theology and exegesis are not officially taught in the hawza."⁽³⁷⁾ As a result, one of the characteristics of Iranian Shiite reformers was their criticism of clerical authority. According to them, one of the reasons for political and religious dictatorship is this political authority, which controls society through clerics appointed in state institutions who wield excessive power.

Closed-Off Guardianship and Openness to Religion

Shiite religious reformers in Iran have criticized the closed-off nature of the (absolute) guardianship of the jurist. They see the need to end the guardian jurist's monopoly over religion, a guardianship that mandates a unilateral

and narrow vision and interpretation of revealed texts. This vision and interpretation are imposed by the political authority that dominates the public sphere in Iran. Soroush emphasizes the importance of multiple interpretations of religion and the need to accommodate pluralistic religious views. According to Soroush, "Our understanding of religious meanings and texts is necessarily diverse and multifaceted, and these diverse and multiple versions of understanding religion cannot be reduced to a single dominant vision." He added, "Religion is not only diverse and multifaceted, but it is also ever-changing. The secret is that the religious text is silent, and we continuously seek to understand and interpret religious texts, whether in jurisprudence, hadith narrations, or the Quran, by drawing on our intellectual conclusions."⁽³⁸⁾

Soroush criticizes Iran's clerics for adopting a unilateral interpretation of religion, claiming that the "adherents of each sect believe they are solely on the true path. As a result, each sect believes it has a sacred standing in the eyes of God. But, if each sect believes it that holds a monopoly on the truth, does not this imply that the world is descending into chaos?"⁽³⁹⁾ Furthermore, each sect believe others are not doing enough to understand faith properly because "they are intellectually poor and cannot be rebuked or reproached. But we have reached the true understanding of religion and have become the survivors, as they allege."⁽⁴⁰⁾

Malekian classifies religious pluralism into two types: plurality in the righteousness of religions (believing that all/many religions are right) and plurality in the destiny of human beings in the hereafter; i.e., despite having diverse religions people may have plural destinies. The two types are ultimately different. Yet Malekian by this argument prompts clerics to think out of the box; out of believing in one singular religion and to believe in religious pluralism.⁽⁴¹⁾

Soroush also offers numerous justifications and pretexts for the importance of belief and the various paths that lead to it. He says, "When God created mankind and imbued him with the aura of intellect, He created multiple languages and dialects, provided diverse reasons for and proofs of existence, established many intellectual stops and stations, sent many messages, and issued calls across a diverse spectrum, divided people into various communities and tribes to act, not out of arrogance, but out of a desire to know each other."⁽⁴²⁾

Soroush defends the diversity of religious interpretations as the essence of everything. He claims that "the multiple interpretations are actually multiple facets of the truth." God, in a well-known religious sense, has over a thousand names. Truth is not confined to a single facet solely because it has multiple facets, but also because the perspectives of those who look at this truth have different angles that contribute to the diversification of interpretations.⁽⁴³⁾

Soroush believes that those with intimate knowledge of God justify multiple interpretations because of differing viewpoints. He said, "When interpreting the phenomenon of multiple facets of divine revelation, we see ascetics and Muslims say that when the views of those who went through the experience and revelation become diverse, the total of all these experiences become varying and diverse."⁽⁴⁴⁾

Soroush also reveals that religious pluralism is a result of the diverse manifestations of God's existence. He said, "The secret behind the diverse religions does not lie in the different social circumstances which led to the distortion of religions — which necessitated the emergence of a new religion — but instead of the diverse manifestations of God Almighty in the universe. As the realm of the universe is diverse, the realm of legislation is diverse, too."⁽⁴⁵⁾

According to Soroush, religious knowledge is relative, thus it can be true or false, and relativity is the path to belief in many aspects of religious understanding. This is due to the fact that when religion enters human history, it is subject to the acts, understandings, and behaviors of human beings. Further, clerics superficially tackle the philosophical complexities generated from modernism. They believe that Islamic jurisprudence can address all problems. If they cannot find solutions to specific problems, they claim that these problems are enemies' plots and should be eliminated to protect society from such problems.⁽⁴⁶⁾

According to the prominent leaders of religious reform, the vividness of religion stems from the multiple meanings that can be drawn from the revealed texts, which contributes to multiple readings when interpreting the texts. To Soroush, "The multiple readings result from the existence of varying interpretations of a certain single text. Therefore, we see multiple versions in the realm of explication. We accepted multiple readings and views in this area and no interpreter or expositor had alleged that he is the seal of interpreters or explainers. This reflects the vividness of religion and our scientific awareness of it."⁽⁴⁷⁾

On the other hand, the multiple readings of religion spring from the movement of society, influence and their evolution. Soroush believes that social experiences in turn give religion an integrated and comprehensive dimension. Muslims, through their conquests and acquaintance with new cultures, contributed to spreading and expanding philosophy, theology, and morals. In fact, they contributed to the expansion of Islam, moving it from the realm of totality to the sphere of detailed explanation. Thus, it could be said that as long as the door for such experiences is open, religion will continue to integrate and expand.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Social Function of Religion

Indeed, the reality of piety in Iranian society was a strong motivator for the religious reformation movement, which saw it as imperative to criticize this reality as it dominated everyday life. Iranian societal piety was because of the merging of Iran's political and clerical authorities, as well as clerics controlling the social sphere through a static and closed-off version of religion that excludes others, focusing on eschatological rather than societal issues, and rejecting all modern achievements. This prompted Ali Shariati to criticize this version of religion, claiming that the clerics have created *estehmar* (stupefaction); i.e., to deceive the laity which follows a two-pronged dynamic. The first is based on making people ignorant as well as directing minds toward aspects related to ignorance and disregard for critical issues. The second is distraction, which diverts a man's attention away from demanding his rights by preoccupying him with partial rights. This is under the guise of jurisprudential priorities; to make people focus on marginal issues rather than significant issues.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Shariati emphasizes that religion becomes a source of stupefaction when clerics speak solely on eschatological and unseen issues, causing them to turn a blind eye to the injustices overwhelming society. Clerics urge people to abandon this life and focus on the next life. Shariati highlights that clerics say, "Abandon this worldly life because the final end is always death. Save all of your needs, desires, and feelings for fulfillment in the afterlife and posthumously. The time you'll be waiting for isn't all that long. They are worthless after 30, 40, or 50 years. When this period is over, everything will be at your disposal, and you will be among those who will live forever (in the Gardens of Aden). They are the years of your brief life. They have no value. So, abandon the worldly life and leave it for those seeking it."⁽⁵⁰⁾

Old cultural heritage is employed to fool people, focusing mainly on morals, mysticism, glorifying the past, intercession and admission to heaven to justify and legitimize the static version of religion that is propagated. This version of religion prevents people from properly addressing their reality.

According to Shariati, the religion of polytheism and fooling the laity (stupefaction) perpetuate the backward status quo in Iran. Shariati invokes quotes of Karl Marx about this pattern of religion. He said, "Religion indeed is the opium of the people and it was invented to make people accept deprivation and misery in this world under the guise of belief and afterlife. Any attempt to change this situation is a defiance of God's will and desire and obedience to His command. Such a conclusion is true per se and cannot be denied."⁽⁵¹⁾

Shariati focused on the idea that religious discourse for the people should be revolutionary in nature, and religion should be transformed into an ideology for change rather than a tool for perpetuating the static and unchanging version of religion. The religion of stupefaction and polytheism "is a regressive

form of religiosity. It attempts to justify unjust conditions by disseminating metaphysical beliefs. It also seeks to defame creedal and religious principles, such as the distortion of belief in the Day of Judgment, sacred places, and supernatural forces, in order to persuade people that their situation is the best situation and that they should be content with it because it reflects God Almighty's will. It is their God-given ultimate destiny," Shariati says.⁽⁵²⁾

Shariati contends that the religion of "stupefaction" controls people by terrorizing and intimidating them rather than showing mercy, viewing God from one angle — that of fear and intimidation and looking at God's attributes such as awe and might, which are interpreted in a dictatorial sense by the polytheistic religions. God's attributes in the Abrahamic religions which date back 2,000 or 3,000 years stem from two paths. First is God's love, which includes worshiping God's attributes of absolute *jalal* and *jamal* (mercy and beauty). Second, God's care, sovereignty, generosity, and protection.⁽⁵³⁾

Through his Marxist reading of religion, Shariati reiterated that capitalism helps polytheistic religions that fool the laity to remain dominant and sovereign. He said, "The essential element which polytheistic religions have focused on over the course of history is the economy; a small elite possesses nearly everything while the vast majority remains disenfranchised. This element itself needs religion to preserve itself and sustain its presence and justify its survival and perpetuation. This is because religion is the force that is capable of making man submit, convincing him of accepting submission and humiliation."⁽⁵⁴⁾

Shariati's rejection of Iranian religious patterns that perpetuated the static situation and the unchanging nature of society does not mean he rejected the role of religion in man's life. He based his thought on the Iranian Islamic self. He reiterated the importance of religion in the spiritual and social life of man and that man should return to the authentic self, given that Islam is a religion for monotheism and liberation. According to Shariati, the monotheistic religion is the one that nourishes its followers and adherents with a critical view of all that is surrounding them in the material and moral settings and grants them a sense of responsibility to address the status quo, prompting them to consider changing it.⁽⁵⁵⁾

Shariati emphasized the importance of developing one's revolutionary self, the self that is capable of breaking free from constraints and dominating unchanging versions of religiosity. A man should be free of changelessness, decline, and deterioration in himself and society. He believes that this self should focus on the social function of religion, with rituals referring to the ongoing communication between God and man rather than the display of formal ritual aspects and oral supplications. Thus, rituals from Shariati's perspective would become "a tool for rebelling against traditions and narrow

social frameworks, carving out a true human presence, reviving man's quest for the true meaning of his existence, unearthing the precious spiritual treasures, and reaching a higher stage than mystics in our heritage. This state represents the consciousness of the heart, a deeper, and more sincere and sublime form of devotion. This is the true sense of devotion or, as the Quran puts it 'the Covenant of Intuition.'"⁽⁵⁶⁾

Additionally, Shariati focused on the importance of striving and its role in change. Striving, in the broader sense, is not confined to acts of worship but includes efforts in the intellectual, economic, political and health domains as well as helping people. It even includes a Muslim's sleep and efforts to earn a living.⁽⁵⁷⁾

As a result, Shariati concluded that it is critical to cultivate a social struggle project based on seeking to liberate man by refining the deeper aspects of his soul, reestablishing a new relationship between God and man for the benefit of both man and society. Thus, Shariati sought to liberate religion from the constraints imposed by static and backward Shiite orientations of religion. In addition, he sought to establish a new theology through which he aimed to liberate man and develop and revitalize the reality of society in mullah-ruled Iran, where clerics have the final say.

In his focus on the importance of the social function of religion, Shariati concluded that scholars and thinkers must restore religion's revolutionary outlook. And they should resurrect the revolutionary version of true religion, instilling it in the hearts of the people. The role of scholars and thinkers is to cultivate a vivid and conscious religious affection so that the people can understand the true sense of monotheism and realize the extent of contradictions between the religion of monotheism and the religion based on worshipping the *taghut* (tyrant) other than God, to be able to precisely identify the polytheistic religion disguised in monotheism and to put an end to all kinds of showy piety all over the world — to practice true religion, not one that is an outcome of ignorance or fear.⁽⁵⁸⁾

Soroush believed that this vision is important and has an important role in influencing the youth in Iran. Shariati paid special attention to the social function of religion and its role in liberating man and society. Soroush believes "Shariati mentioned that the form of religion that does not benefit people in this life will not benefit them in the hereafter. Before the revolution, many young men were moved by this rhetoric. It inspired them to rise up and use religious impulses to change the backward reality and revolt against the status quo to establish the rule of true religion."⁽⁵⁹⁾

Soroush followed in the footsteps of others in emphasizing the importance of religion's social function and the importance of religiosity in improving people's conditions and lives. True religion should play an important role in

people's lives around the world. It was revealed with the intention of building and spreading prosperity on the planet. People should take advantage of this opportunity. According to Soroush, the version of religion that focuses on everyday matters reflects the fact that man wants to embrace religion to benefit him in his daily life and to serve his life within the ever-changing reality. In other words, in this version of religiosity, the most important thing is how man can best benefit his life, live a good life, and in an environment conducive to doing good deeds. A religious man who wishes to embrace religion while seeking to improve his life will realize that life with religion is far superior to life without religion, as facing life's challenges and difficulties will be much easier.⁽⁶⁰⁾

From this perspective, Soroush advocated for connecting religion and society through "the sort of religiosity that focused on the matters of worldly daily life." Soroush believes that this type of religiosity is known as "worldly religiosity," as opposed to eschatological religiosity, which is best suited to secularism. *Secularism* does not clash with *religion* and does not represent its polar opposite. Many Islamist thinkers and reformers worked to achieve the mentioned pattern of religiosity in social reality. They worked their entire lives to demonstrate that religion does not contradict everyday life. Both secularism and religion are life's keys and safes, each complementing the other.⁽⁶¹⁾

True, Soroush emphasized the significance of religion in social life. However, he also stressed the significance of religion in people's lives. He reiterated that the morals enjoined by religion help man to be disciplined, curb worldly lusts, and ensure adherence to piety in individual and social life. This is the most important thing we need to understand and apply in real life.⁽⁶²⁾

As a result of Soroush's interest in the importance of religion in the functioning of society, he has called for the pursuance of secular religion, a kind of religiosity which pays attention to worldly matters. He said, "The secularist version of religion — the religion pursued to attain worldly gains — is the sort of religion that serves worldly purposes and becomes subordinate to it. The criterion of whether a religion represents the truth is how far it serves man's worldly life. This explains the meaning of 'the ideological religion' term, since ideology has a religious (clerical) purpose,⁽⁶³⁾ which is the eschatological aspect of religion." In light of the importance of connecting religion with society, Soroush has reiterated the importance of correcting our understanding of religion and how to make the best use of it in regard to worldly matters, where religion and civil society reconcile with one another.

Conclusion

Iranian reformists, including Shariati, Soroush, Shabestari and others, have used their writings to intellectually influence a large segment of the

Iranian youth. Some of their writings, such as Shariati's, were inspiring and paved the way for the Iranian revolution. Hashemi Rafsanjani argued that Shariati's reading of religion shaped the awareness of many Iranian youths because he was aware of their spiritual conditions. Mohammad Reza Hakimi believes that Shariati recognized the importance of having a religion that is compatible with the needs of our time. As a result, he was able to bring an entire generation of young people to the front of Islam. Despite some Iranians' praise for Shariati's efforts, Khomeini, who was familiar with everything Shariati was writing in exile in Paris, reacted to Shariati's books with silence, refusing to express any opinion on them. I believe that Khomeini was largely dissatisfied with Shariati's approach, though it contributed to the opposition of the shah's government. The situation in Iran under Khomeini reflected what Shariati wrote against, the establishment of a radical and backward theocratic government.

The story ended with Shariati being assassinated. Musa al-Sadr explained that the shah's government as well as the clerics who considered themselves to be the exclusive guardians over religion, believed that interpreting religion was their exclusive right, and that they alone are the ones who best understand religion and none has the right to express their different understanding of it in Iran. These actors stood against Shariati. Mostafa Qamaran stressed that fanatical clerics crushed Shariati and they did not hesitate in attacking or levelling accusations against him. This ended up with the conservative movement in Iran being victorious. All the efforts of Shariati were reversed when Khomeini took over as the imam of Shiites, with the guardianship of the jurist and the clerics wresting control over social and political life in Iran.

Both Shariati and Soroush started their reform efforts by criticizing religious education. Their international travel and academic studies in humanities such as philosophy and sociology had a significant impact on their reformist views. Thus, modernity had a significant impact on the religious reform movement in Iran and the advancement of reformist views that aimed to break the shackles imposed by the closed-off version of Twelver Shiite religiosity and the absolute tyranny of the guardian jurist.

Shariati was eventually assassinated in London by the shah's intelligence agents, with the blessing of the clerics. After rejecting his epistemological/hermeneutical theory, "The Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge," and calling his religion and doctrine into question, Soroush ended up living in the West. However, Shabestari's works were crucial in criticizing and exposing how far the Safavid version of Twelver Shiism in Iran was static.

The Iranian religious reform movement influenced large and diverse segments of Iranian society, particularly the youth and women. It influenced the

Shiite public. However, this did not result in a viable alternative that counters the clergy-controlled social and political spheres in Iran. This is because of the inextricable link between religious authority and political power, with authorities using repressive and violent tools against any dissenting voice. This is evident in the protests the Iranian people launch against the obligatory hijab, poverty, and tyranny. These protests actually oppose the Wilayat al-Faqih ruling system and its religious interpretation. The Iranian people believe this ruling system is marked with setbacks and political failure. Are the protests further proof of the failure of religious and political reform in Iran, so the only way out of the current Iranian crisis is a revolution?

Endnotes

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- (2) Sohair Mokhtar, *Shiite Jihad* (Beirut: Dar al-Jeel, 1978), 202. [Arabic].
- (3) *Ibid.*, 200.
- (4) *Ibid.*, 203.
- (5) Ali Sami al-Nashar, *The Origin of Philosophical Thought in Islam* (Cairo: Dara al-Maarif, vol. 2), 113.
- (6) "Analogy in Islamic fiqh denotes the connection of something without a text to its judgment by another textual matter with a judgement by virtue of a shared cause between the two." See "The Sixth Source: Analogy (Qiyas)," IIUM, accessed October 2022, 31, <https://bit.ly/3ztWrcW>.
- (7) *Ibid.*, 26.
- (8) Muhammad Ibrahim al-Fyouni, *Shi'ites, Populism and Twelverism* (Cairo: Dar al-Fakr al-Arabi, 2002), 2: 405.
- (9) *Ibid.*, 206, also see Henry Corbin: *Twelver Shiites*, trans. Thoqan Qarqoot (Cairo: Madbouly Bookshop, 1992), 1: 403. [Arabic].
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- (11) *Ibid.*, 407.
- (12) *Ibid.*, 406-407.
- (13) *Ibid.*, 400.
- (14) Mohammed Fayyad, *Shiite Factions* (Cairo: General Organization For Culture Palaces, 2012), 258. [Arabic].
- (15) *Ibid.*, 258-259.
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- (17) *Ibid.*, 23.
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- (19) Ali Shariati, *Al-nabaha wal Istihmar (Intellect and Stupidification)* trans. Hadi Al-Sayyid Yassi, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar Al-Amir, Edition, 2007), 109. [Arabic].
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- (21) Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason and Freedom*, trans. Ahmad al-Qabbanji (Beirut: Al Intishar Al Arabi Foundation, 2010), 71.
- (22) Haidar Hobballah, *Islamization of Sciences* (Beirut: Al Intishar Al Arabi Foundation, 2017), 365. [Arabic].
- (23) Abdolkarim Soroush, *Wider Than Ideology*, trans. Ahmad al-Qabbanji (Beirut: Al Intishar Al Arabi Foundation, 2010), 58. [Arabic].
- (24) Muhammad Mujtahid Shabastari, *A Critique of the Official Reading of Religion* (Beirut: Al Intishar Al Arabi Foundation, 2017), 44. [Arabic].
- (25) *Ibid.*, 44-45.
- (26) *Ibid.*, 24.
- (27) *Ibid.*, 58.
- (28) *Ibid.*, 71.
- (29) *Ibid.*, 60.
- (30) *Ibid.*, 61.
- (31) *Ibid.*, 61.
- (32) Mostafa Malekian, *Articles and Sayings on Philosophy, Religion and Life* (Beirut: Al Intishar Al Arabi Foundation, 2013), 272. [Arabic].
- (33) *Ibid.*, 42.
- (34) *Ibid.*, 70.
- (35) *Ibid.*, 57.
- (36) *Ibid.*, 43.
- (37) *Ibid.*, 38.
- (38) Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Straight Paths, a New Reading of the Theory of Religious Pluralism*, trans. Ahmed al-Qabbanji (Beirut: Al Jamal Publications, 2009), 12-13. [Arabic]. See Fatima Samadi, *Political Currents in Iran: The Conflict Between Clerics and Politics* (Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2019) 188 and 198. [Arabic].
- (39) *Ibid.*, 47.

- (40) Ibid., 15-16.
- (41) Malekian, *Articles and Sayings on Philosophy, Religion and Life*, 152.
- (42) Soroush, *The Straight Paths*, 58.
- (43) Ibid., 27.
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- (46) Imad Hilal, *Secular Thought in Iran* (Beirut: Al Intishar Al Arabi Foundation, 2012), 87. [Arabic]. See Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason and Freedom*, trans. Ahmed al-Gabanji (Beirut: Al Intishar Al Arabi Foundation, 2010), 199. [Arabic].
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- (61) Ibid., 48-49.
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