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BOOK REVIEW: SECULAR THOUGHT WITHIN ISLAMIC IRAN

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Introduction

Perhaps it is not surprising to find deep secularist ideals within the confinements of "Islamic Iran." Though purely Islamic orientations prevailed after the revolution, there have always been wranglings about the religious interpretations that the state should adopt. These wranglings are the outcome of religious groups adopting enlightenment and secularist orientations. Most of them exist within the Shiite religious community itself.

Against this backdrop, we are reviewing the book titled Secular Thought Within Islamic Iran, by Emad el-Hilali, recently published in Arabic by Muassat Alintishar Alarabi in Beirut. The book's introduction was written by Lebanese intellectual Haidar Hoballah. The book consists of an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter is titled "The Evolution of Religious Knowledge in Soroush's Thought," while the second chapter is titled "Shabestari From Hermeneutics to Humanism," and the last chapter is titled "Modernity and Spiritual Aspects of Religion According to Malekian." The book's key points and conclusions will be reviewed in the following sections.

Soroush's Renouncement of Ideology

Hilali sheds light on the development Abdol-Karim Soroush's thought, which was crystallized after his academic maturity and engagement in intellectual and knowledge-centered battles. Soroush was born in Tehran and studied at Kimiyaye Elementary School in Tehran. At Refah School, he then received his secondary education, which offered a hybrid of modern and religious education. At the University of Tehran, he graduated with a degree in pharmacy. After his compulsory military service, he was appointed as director of a government laboratory in Bushehr in southern Iran. In 1972, he traveled to the UK after he attained a scholarship to study analytical chemistry at the University of London. At the same time, he continued to study history and the philosophy of science. At this point, Soroush familiarized himself with Western schools of philosophy, heralding the start of his intellectual career.

Religious Reform and the Theory of Correction

Soroush is influenced by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and is particularly inspired by his book "The Revival of the Religious Sciences." He rejects the comparison between Ghazali and Moulawi, arguing that the former's epistemology was superior to the latter's. [1] He adds that Moulawi was "dull," while Ghazali was "vivid." At the same time, Soroush is deeply influenced by Mulla Sadra, and his imprint is clearly visible in his writings. Against this backdrop, we can attempt to understand Soroush's thinking and approach to religious reform. Soroush is a key figure in the new school of speculative theology, shouldering the responsibility for reviving speculative theology and other Islamic disciplines. However, in his quest, he has faced vociferous opposition from Iranian traditionalists and conservatives. He provoked controversy through his book "The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religion: The *Theory of Evolution of Religious Knowledge* and his book *Straight Paths*, in which he argues there are several straight paths rather than just a single straight path. He subsequently published his book *Expansion of the Prophetic Experience*, which lays the foundations of the history of the prophetic experience itself.

■ Religious pluralism: When examining Soroush's intellectual shift marked by his book *Straight Paths*, we find that he edges closer to John Harwood Hick through embracing religious pluralism. According to Soroush, religious pluralism has two principles. The first is that truth exists in all religions and sects and is not exclusively limited to a certain faith or sect; a position he firmly upholds. The second is that even if we assume that only one religion or sect represents the truth, if man did not arrive at this truth, he will be redeemed if he "sincerely strives in this cause — based on each person's physical and mental capacity."[2] However, Soroush argues that those who reject the truth will perish. According to Avicenna, such people are a minority.[3] Soroush's position is closely aligned with what some Mu'tazila and orthodox Sunnis upheld such as al-Jahiz, a prominent Mu'tazila imam and al-Anbari, a luminous Sunni traditionalist. In his book *Al-Mahsul Fi 'Ilm 'Usul al-Fiqh*, al-Razi

defended both theologians, suggesting that their argument about sound reason and the basic tenets of religion is restricted to those who reflect, strive and do their best to arrive at the truth, not those who act stubbornly and turn away from religious guidance.[4]

■ Drawing a separating line between the subjective and the incidental: In his last book *Expansion of the Prophetic Experience*, which he wrote in Iran, Soroush draws a separating line between the subjective and the incidental in religion. He argues that human and historical factors have played a role in shaping religion. Regarding this point he says, "The case wasn't that the prophet had fabricated a book, asked the people to turn to, ordering them to read it and implement its teachings. The Quran was revealed in a gradual manner and to fit the people's behaviors and acts. It provides answers to real-life incidents and questions aimed essentially to preserve the core essence of the heavenly discourse, in its content. The incidents and real-life issues played a role in shaping Islam."[5]

■ Rebelling against reform: In his earlier phases, Soroush attempted to enact reform from within, but he stumbled into *taqlid* (emulation) and the conservatives who rejected any form of religious or social reform. As a result, he declared his theory that the "Quran is the word of Mohammad," which had a great impact on him and his standing among Iran's scholastic and reform community, however, both the reformists and conservatives raged against him. In declaring this theory, Soroush cut ties with the reformist and conservative community in Iran and even with the entire hawza community. In fact, this cutting of ties happened with Soroush embracing the thoughts of theologians such as Ghazali, Moulawi, Mulla Sadra, Fayz Kashani and others; hence he established a purely secular school of thought.

■ Political reform and a democratic system of government: Soroush argues that when we say that Islam is a political religion, it means that Islam faced political issues. Had it not faced political issues, it would have been detached from politics like Christianity. Those seeking pragmatic aims and wanting to exploit the situation emerged on the stage, in response Prophet Mohammad was prompted to counter them; back then he did not withdraw from the scene. At this time, Islam interacted with politics, which played a role in gradually reshaping it.[6]

Soroush argues that the government has no divine mandate. It should be questioned, held accountable and monitored by the people and state institutions.[7] He is also critical of addressing the state from a jurisprudential perspective since this would make the issues of the state appear as "differences among jurists." Hence, issues would be designated as lawful or unlawful, with no heed paid to overall governance purposes and general ideals.

According to Soroush, the state has no right to compel people to observe religious practices or comply with specific religious or sectarian readings. "If you force people (to adhere to religion) and they become apparently pious, this belief is not a true belief since belief is of a nature that has nothing to do with compulsion. Belief cannot be instilled in people's hearts by force."[8] Forcing people to adhere to religion

runs counter to the theory of correction and the "multiplicity of true religions" that Soroush embraces. It also goes against democratic and constitutional principles.

Soroush also attempts to find practical solutions to the process of reforming governance in Iran. He lays out what he calls the theory of "controlling power." This theory means, according to Soroush, the inner restraints to limit a ruler's excesses (such as a ruler embodying the traits of justice, reliability, piety and so forth). He also believes in the necessity to create "external restraints" such as regulatory apparatuses and institutions that hold rulers to account, monitor their work and regulate their acts, especially given the fact that they wield extensive influence and have far-reaching capabilities, making them liable to commit grave errors. "The temptations of power and wealth — when combined — are hard to resist. They could cause anybody in power to slide into committing errors — excepting those who are infallible, as God upholds their integrity and restrains their excesses. And this issue could be judged differently," he argues.[9]

Shabestari from Hermeneutics to Humanism

Iranian philosopher and cleric Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari (1936-present) is one of the most important enlightenment philosophers in Iran. He was born in the Iranian city of Shabestar, which is in the Province of Azerbaijan, northwest of Iran. He moved along with his father to Tabriz, the province's capital, at the age of 14. In 1951, he traveled to Qom to study religious disciplines, both intellectual and textual, at the hawza. He has authored books and translated others.

Shabestari and Politics: From a Supporter of the Revolution to a Critic

Shabestari supported the Iranian revolution and was influenced by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. At the same time, he felt some sort of intellectual proximity to Jalal Al-e-Ahmad (d.1969), Ali Shariati (d. 1977), Mehdi Bazargan (d.1994), Sayyid Mahmoud Taleghani (d.1979) and Mortaza Motahari (d.1979). Though it appears that he was influenced by Khomeini and supported the revolution, he was open to reformist and enlightened thoughts. He did not limit himself to traditionalist scholarship, especially as he had learnt the German language, which opened the door to access Western theology and European philosophy. Though he quit politics at an early stage of his career in the 1980s, dedicating all of his time to university teaching and academia, he was forced to retire in 2005 because of his political positions and enlightened opinions. Abbas-Ali Amid Zanjani, the head of Tehran University, once said that the university is in no need of the likes of Shabestari.[10] Despite not leveling explicit criticism against the political system, he has always expressed opinions that are not satisfactory to the ruling establishment and dealt blows to its philosophies and foundational tenets, including his calls for democracy, sovereignty of the people and other liberal principles that are evident in his works.

Jurisprudence and Criticism of the State's Official Reading of Religion

According to Shabestari, there are several reasons behind the crisis related to the official reading of religion. According to his viewpoint, the first reason is the notion that Islam is all-encompassing. The second reason is that the government's function is to implement Islam's ordinances in society. He believes that these two reasons are inconsistent with the true aspects of Islam or the realities that Muslims faced, nor did they take into consideration the changes and developments experienced by Muslims. The latter arose in the Muslim community nearly 150 years ago because of modernity. He also concludes that "modern societies cannot be governed by jurisprudential rulings that determine what is lawful or unlawful since they can only address limited aspects of social life. Jurisprudential rulings cannot analyze social realities, nor can they put forward programs to change such realities and steer them toward achieving specific ends."[11]

The concept of an official reading of religion refers to a state-sanctioned reading of religion that gradually arose with the emergence of "jurisprudential Islam;" it expresses the official jurisprudential interpretation of the government. The danger of this reading lies in the fact that it restricts the Constitution, the government's structure, functions and responsibilities as well as the individual's and society's basic rights through religious rulings issued by jurists. This camp — the proponents of jurisprudential Islam — reached the point where they made jurisprudential custodianship a theory that was above criticism. They deemed political legitimacy based on popular consent unnecessary for the sake of governance. Despite the weaknesses and shortcomings of political jurisprudence, this camp made it the chief wellspring for lawmaking and governing society.[12] Among the major manifestations and results of this prioritization of political jurisprudence is the negation of legitimacy based on popular consent. Hence, this means nullifying the significant role of popular opinion in legitimizing the state's social, economic and political laws and conferring an aura of sacredness on state officials. In other words, the sanctity of officials and rulers has been equated to and connected with the sanctity of religion. Thus, any criticism of the rulers is a criticism of religion. Moreover, there is the politicization of culture, which means that the government should be the entity charged with determining and overlooking cultural affairs, which results in the employment of violence and repression to enforce specific orientations and outlooks.

In conclusion, it can be said that Shabestari has identified religious criticism as the first step toward reforming religious and political thought. He deems it necessary to criticize religion since it is a free and conscious choice that cannot be believed in through indoctrination or media outlets. Furthermore, it cannot be believed in through the suppression of freedoms and banning criticism of religious thoughts and theories existing on the religious landscape. [13]

Is There Such a Thing as Islamic Democracy?

Shabestari criticizes the critics of democracy, arguing that there is no contradiction between it and religion since it is a system that aims to regulate this world rather

than the afterlife. Under the auspices of democracy, adherents of all faiths, religions and philosophies can have the right to life, sound governance and advancement while adhering to their own respective values, doctrines and laws.

He poses an important question frequently raised by those who reject democracy: what if public opinion runs counter to God's commandments? Will you accept public opinion or God's heavenly decree? He answered that a Muslim, from a doctrinal and speculative theological perspective, is obliged to comply with God's definitive ordinances, giving them precedence over his own opinion. Even if we assume that the majority of society consists of Muslims who wanted — when it comes to lawmaking — to seriously abandon the definitive heavenly ordinances, then in this case, "we would unfortunately have to say that they have apostatized. In such a situation, no one could do anything and the talk about (the necessity to enforce) God's heavenly laws becomes meaningless. But I am assured that this day will never come."[14]

He also responds to those who thwart the establishment of a democratic model as they want an "Islamic" one. According to him, there is no such thing as Islamic democracy, but rather there is a democratic system for Muslims. Those who support the concept of Islamic democracy are heedless of an important fact: "democracy is a system for governance that is based on predetermined anthropological and humanistic ideals such as man's ability to freely think and choose, freedom and equality.[15] In addition, this restriction [there is only Islamic democracy] aims to prevent opposing ideas from spreading and spilling over into the intellectual arena. Perhaps repressive apparatuses and force could be employed against opponents to prevent them from expressing opinions and bar them from holding government posts." [16]

Malekian: Modernity and the Moral Aspect of Religion

Mostafa Malekian (1955-present) is one of the most prominent renewal philosophers in present-day Iran. He is one of the students of Mortaza Motahari (d. 1979), Amir Hossein Yazd Kurdi (d.1986), Gholam Hossein Sadighi (d.1991) and Mehrdad Bahar (d.199). The striking aspect is that Malekian graduated in mechanical engineering from the university of Tabriz in 1973. Later, he joined the hawza in Qom after he graduated with an engineering degree. From the Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies at the University of Tehran, he obtained a master's degree in philosophy in 1986.

Between Religion and Modernity

Malekian has attempted to reconcile the ensuing dispute between religion and modernity. He divided modernity's elements into two categories: avoidable and unavoidable elements. He argues that this categorization is based on realities rather than criteria. Both, what can be avoided involves good and evil and what cannot be avoided also involves good and evil. The division is not based on what is good and evil according to the intellect or divine law but rather according to reality. Thus, what can be avoided does not conflict with or contradict religion.

However, what cannot be avoided should be accommodated and accepted even if it goes against some aspects of religion since it is a reality that is unavoidable. It could be treated as a necessity.[17]

Reforming Religious Thought

According to Malekian, religion has multiple forms. At times, he means the sacred texts while at others he means explanations, exegesis and hermeneutics of the sacred texts. He could also mean the praxis of religious followers over the ages. The second and third forms undoubtedly manifest as social phenomena.

He poses a fundamental question: does man have the freedom to choose his religion? He responds to this question by arguing that man does not choose his faith, but rather shapes it. Humanity has inherited religion throughout history, and individuals who voluntarily choose their own religion and deviate from its path are rare. Here, he brings up an essential point: most religious matters are of the type whose truth or falsity cannot be determined definitively. How might a definitive statement be reached on these matters? If one religion claims that spirits transmigrate after death and another religion claims the opposite, how can we be confident that one of them conforms to the truth while the other contradicts it as long as we are here in this worldly life?[18] Malekian deconstructs the claims of definite truths made by various religions in specific theological areas, allowing for different points of view to arise. Perhaps Malekian did this to advance his notion of "religious multiplicity."

Political Reform

Malekian argues that religion and democracy are wholly compatible. He explains this by saying, "Society could be religious and democratic at the same time. It is not impossible neither theoretically nor practically. It is possible to run a genetic society through a democratic political system."[19] However, at the same time, he rejects the establishment of a clerical government within a democratic system of government. He argues this is impossible, stating that if a government in reality wants to be clerical in nature, then it cannot be democratic.[20]

According to Malekian, rationality (the logical approach) is the characteristic of "rationalized religion."[21] Its key characteristics can be summed up as follows:

■ An elitist characteristic: This means that the elites do not seek to spread rationality among the people but rather limit it among themselves. Spreading rationality among the people is considered to be harmful and counterproductive.

■ A skeptical notion that has varying degrees: As much as religiosity has degrees, modernity too has degrees — in terms of strength and weakness. Hence, no one can be stripped of their religiosity. Therefore, rationality is described as a logical approach rather than in reference to a religious sect.

■ A necessity rather than a choice: The religious cannot avoid modernity when it comes to necessities as they risk deeming their project unsuccessful. Thus, there is a need for those who are religious to reshape the relationship between religion and modernity.

■ Rationality harboring of a degree of secularization: This chiefly means immediacy and worldly aspects. The rational aspect is primarily concerned with this world and immediate results, with scant focus put on the afterlife. All the means of resolving the issues confronting us in this world should be considered in order to ascertain whether they are correct instead of unjustifiably banning or rejecting them.

■ Easing human suffering: This means that religion was sent down for humanity, not the other way around. Religion was sent down so that it can serve humanity.

Malekian has attempted to strip religion of its sacred nature, making it subject to rationality and trying to reconcile it with modernity. However, there remains a problem, which is that he did not clarify the slight variation that distinguishes rationality from the other approaches and its implications on the ground, given the fact that the aim is not to disseminate rationality among the laity but to confine it to a specific stratum of intellectuals and followers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that there are intellectual commonalities among the discussed philosophers. All of them have studied modern and religious sciences, combining both university and hawza studies. They also are well-informed regarding Western philosophy and civilization. They started their careers as supporters of the revolution but shifted their positions and political ideas, criticizing Wilayat al-Faqih and the theory of governance in Iran. As a result, pressures have been exerted against all of them by the system or those close to it. They have led the enlightenment movement in Iran and have become the major theorists of secularism in Iran during the current time. This secularism that is advocated is enlightened, philosophically inspired and opposed to the prevailing system, unlike Iranian secularism or its prevalent strand during the shah's era. These philosophers have not overlooked the importance of reform and renewal of religious thought, given its essential position in the process of comprehensive political, social and seminarian reform. Perhaps their relative seclusion from the political landscape and political criticism (in which they have been involved) has allowed them to pursue religious reform. The religious elite, on the other hand, knows that this path of religious reform will eventually lead to well-established political norms being challenged, because their principles are derived from sectarian readings (of religion) such as Wilayat al-Faqih and other beliefs. Therefore, the religious elite has frequently questioned and, at times, defamed such philosophers. They have influenced their followers against their ideas, while sometimes taking legal measures against them.

The book is written in Arabic under the title الفكر العلماني في إيران الإسلامية

Endnotes

(1) Emad el-Hilali, *Secularist Thought in Islamic Iran* (Beirut: Muassat Alintishar Alarabi, 2017), 38

(2) Abdolkarim Soroush, *Straight Paths* [siratha-yi mustaqim] (Beirut: Muassat Alintishar Alarabi, 2009),134. [Arabic]

(3) Ibid, 136.

(4) See: Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *al-Mahsul, al-Mahsul fi usul al-fiqh* (Riyadh: Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1981) 6 et seq. (part two-section three) and see also al-Shawkani, *Irshad al-Fuhul* (Cairo: Dar al-Salam, 2006) 2\742. [Arabic].

(5) Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience* (Beirut, Muassat Alintishar Alarabi) 2009), 39. [Arabic].

(6) Ibid. 43.

(7) Soroush, *Vaster than Ideology* (Beirut, Muassat Alintishar Alarabi, 2014), 91.

(8) Haidar Hoballah, *Propositions in the Islamic Political Thought* (Beirut, Muassat Alintishar Alarabi, 2015), 258. [Arabic].

(9) Ibid., 262

(10) El-Hilali, *Secularist Thought in Islamic Iran,* 113.

(11) Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, *A Critique of the Official Reading of Religion* (Beirut: Muassat Alintishar Alarabi, 2013), 24. [Arabic].

(12) Ibid., 42.

(13) Shabestari, *Belief and Freedom* (Beirut: Muassat Alintishar Alarabi, 2013), 117. [Arabic].

(14) Shabestari, *A Critique of the Official Reading of Religion*, 144.

(15) Ibid.,152.

(16) Shabestari, *A Human Reading of Religion: Belief and Freedom* (Beirut: Muassat Alintishar Alarabi, 2009), 221. [Arabic].

(17) El-Hilali, 174.

(18) Ibid., 176.

(19) Melikian, *Longing and Desertion*, trans. Ahmad al-Qabanji (Beirut: A Muassat Alintishar Alarabi, 2009), 334. [Arabic].

(20) Ibid., 334.

(21) El-Hilali, 206.