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# Islamic Movements in Iran

During the last century, structural changes have taken place with the unique aim of establishing democracy in Iran. Three significant impulses need to be mentioned: The Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911), the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (1951–1953), and the Islamic Revolution (1979).

The Constitutional Revolution was the first revolution in Iran in the 20th century. Its main objective was to turn the absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy. However, the uprising was crushed by a military coup, followed by the reign of Reza Sha (1925–1941) and his son Mohammed Reza Shah (1941–1979). The nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in the 50s was accompanied by a period of democracy under Prime Minister Mossadegh's government. However, this period only lasted 27 months as the movement , again, was dissembled by a military coup conducted by the CIA.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 overthrew the Shah and Pahlavi dynasty and replaced the old monarchy with the Islamic republic. It was a republican and democratic movement dominated by the power of religious leaders, who defended a rather traditional view-point: the unity of politics and religion. In its final combination, this idea resulted in a single state: the Islamic Republic of Iran. This movement has been the most significant one in 20th century Iran due to its duration of more than two decades while the former two movements were crushed by despotic rulers with the help of foreign powers. The Islamic revolution crystallized in the charismatic figure of Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini (1902–1989). Despite the eight years of war imposed by Iraq, its economy under siege, and the uneasy situation on the social and political level, twenty five years after the revolution, it is impossible to deny that Iran, today, is one of the most advanced Islamic societies on the road to pluralism and democracy. The slogan often heard during the Iranian Revolution: „Independence, Freedom and Islamic Republic", meant freedom not only from the traditional despotic government of the Shah but freedom from the yoke of super-powers such as the United States and the former Soviet Union. Another *leitmotif* was: „Neither east nor west, Islamic Republic only!" Historically, it is impossible to separate the process of the Islamic Revolution and its consequences from the „intellectual and modernist movement"

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which has always been present in the arena of struggle for independence and freedom. And now, 25 years after the Iranian Revolution, we are witnessing a hot debate between two major groups: modernists and traditionalists.

## 1. The Intellectual and Modernist Movement

This movement has two dimensions: a religious and a secular one. The „religious intellectual movement" has a long history throughout the Islamic world. Chehabi argues that the religious modernists face potential hostility of both non-religious intellectuals as well as of the religious authorities themselves.

*Religious Modernism*

There are two main sections within the religious-modernist movement: religious modernism and reformism.

Religious modernism can be defined „as an attempt to re-establish harmony between the different religions and to create a flexible cultural and socio-political environment, in which the forces of change regard religion as dysfunctional in the process of development". It is essentially an intellectual endeavour to re-interpret religion in such a way that it no longer contradicts the Z*eitgeist* at work in the more successful societies and the accepted notion of individual rights (see: Chehabi, 1990: 27).

The task of religious intellectuals has been to initiate the reformative and modern elements into the rigid dogma of traditional religion. The process of popular mobilization through the Islamic Revolution has to be seen in a close relationship with the ideas disseminated through the intellectual discourses a decade before the revolution. In fact, what was called the ideology of revolution has been the product and perspective of people belonging to of the religious elite, such as Mehdi Bazargan and Dr. Shariati, belonging to the generation who transformed the traditional religion into an ideological one. It is obvious that the revolutionary concepts such as martyrdom, *Mostazafan* (oppressed people), *Mostakbran* (oppressors), or classless society have been the adaptation of some „Koranic" terms to modern ideas. The new generation, emerged in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s, became revolutionary: The version of Islam preached by Ali Shariati (d. 1977) promoted an ideology based on the unity of the community of believers according to class terminology.

Modernism may overlap with religious reformism and sometimes may be confounded with it. The main goal of the reformists is to return to the original meaning of the dominant norms and values while modernism is an arena for those people who are close to the religious establishment, but not part of it. Their motivating force comes from the outside whereas religious modernism tries to come to terms with modernity (Chehabi, 1990: 28). It is obvious that reformists

as well as religious modernists face too many obstacles and difficulties for accomplishing their task. Many of them may be threatened or even killed by their opponents, which could be secular intellectuals or fanatics.

The second attitude is called „fundamentalism". Although Islamic fundamentalist movements have existed in many Muslim countries for more than fifty years, there has been an intensified revival of such movements in the past decade. These groups put forward their own version of Islamic beliefs and tend to insist that they are the only authentic representative of their faith, arguing that Muslims who disagree with them are bad Muslims. This type of interpretation of Islam is a substantial ideological force. There has been a new wave of Islamic fervour in many Muslim cities, which sometimes even border on extremism. Islamic movements are rapidly gaining more and more followers among students. There are signs of Islamic revivalism in many Middle-Eastern Universities.

*Reformist Movement*

Throughout history, there have been several movements in the Islamic tradition which were quite revolutionary, for example under Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyeh of Damascus (1263–1328). Reform movements occurred usually at a period of cultural change or in the aftermath of a great political disaster. At such times, old answers no longer sufficed and reformers therefore used the rational powers of the *Ijtihad* to challenge the status quo. Ibn Taymiyyah wanted to update the Shariah (Islamic jurisprudence) so that it could meet the real needs of Muslims in these drastically altered circumstances. In this respect, he was revolutionary but his program took on an essentially conservative form (Lawrence, 1998: 40, 41).

Ibn Tamiyyah believed that to survive the crisis Muslims must return to the sources, to the Koran and *Sunnat* (tradition) of the prophet. He wanted to remove later theological accretions and get back to the basics. He overturned much of the medieval jurisprudence (*Figh*) and philosophy that had come to be considered sacred, in a desire to return to the original Muslim archetype. This iconoclasm enraged the establishment and Ibn Taymiyyah ended his days in prison. It is said that he died of a broken heart because his jailers would not allow him pen and paper. However, the ordinary people loved him. His legal forms had been liberal and radical and they could see that he had their interests at heart. His funeral became a demonstration of popular acclaim (Lawrence, 1998: 41).

There have been several such reformist movements in Islamic history. We may also mention Al-Ghazali the leading figure of Islamic thought in the Old Age, Seyyed Jamel al-Din Assadabadi (al-Afghani) in the ninetieth century, and Iqbal in the twentieth century as further examples.

In recent decades, some reformers turned both against „westernization" and traditionalist clerical bodies. Shariati promoted the notion of Islamic ideology in his search for a reinvigorated collective conscience through the reform of Islam,

which became the epistemic foundations of the dominant mentality of the first decade of the Islamic Revolution. The clerics, however, would not leave the ideological field to a layman for long (Arjomand, 2002: 2–3).Throughout the past as well as the present century in general and since the Islamic Revolution in particular, the reform movement has taken place inside of the revolutionary system, itself. The war imposed by Saddam Hussein on the new regime in September 1980 as well as Imam Khomeini's theory of the *Velayat-e-Faghih* (leading supreme jurisprudence) or Shiite Jurisprudence activated the revolutionary sentiments and religious emotions, and emotionally charged the atmosphere of the popular milieu. The rational approach of the reformist thinkers for the last decades in Iran is reflected by their ideas of modernization, challenge, dialectic reasoning, democracy, citizenship, and above all development and progress on a political, social, cultural and economic level. Modernization had earlier been contrasted to „backwardness" and „decline". In Iran, religious intellectuals are the architects of a theoretical framework for understanding the dialectic of tradition and modernity. The focal point of this critical perspective is the tension between modernity and religion.

## 2. The Traditionalist Movement and the Opposition

*Traditionalists*

For the traditionalists, what is called *Feghahati Islam*, i.e. the methodology for discovering the primary laws and rules, is to be found in the traditional jurisprudence of Figh-e-Sunnati, through which divine law could be deduced as a source of knowledge and a means for administrating society. According to this perspective, *Faghih*, or jurisprudence, provides directions regarding all human affairs in society, be they individual, social, political, educational, familial, economical, or cultural in nature. *Faghih* is a general normative value system on the basis of which all forms of social-humans relationships can be organized.

While reason (*Aql*) and rational decision making are important in solving problems and dealing with human affairs and social phenomena, pertaining to the secular society, in normative matters obedience to the Islamic leader and dependence on his knowledge of the „Islamic Sharia" is a necessity. Social issues are to be solved only in reference to these directives. It is obvious that such a perspective, especially in a historical and traditional context gave rise, during the last ten years, to long and interminable pamphlets and articles, which question or even deny the efficiency of such an approach for organized Islamic life and Islamic government. Besides, we know that the *Faghih* or jurisprudence has a high rank in the Sunnat and the religious hierarchy. Dissidents claim that a traditional jurisprudence (*Fighh-e-Sunnati*) has a limited view and needs a review of all its principles. They believe that the Islamic way of thinking must become

more ideological, dynamic, and free from traditional *Fighh*. The constituents of traditional Islamic jurisprudence, which are „revelation", tradition (*Sunnat*), *Hadith* (directive words of the prophet and Imams), and deductive method (*Quyias*), are not to be used as independent sources of judgment. The rational approaches could be used in conjunction with the science of principle (*Elm-e-Usul*) and *Ijtihad*. In matters of collective relationships and social organization, all members of society should rely on the guidance of the Velayat-e-Faghih because it occupies the highest political, religious, and legal office in the state. These directives are necessary for the coordination of various aspects of society and the delegation of authority to different branches of the government. This theory, which justifies the cleric authority over the country, has been interpreted in many different ways as well as challenged by philosophical and religious arguments.

*Silent Sharia*

One radically different theory, developed by some intellectuals in recent years, is the theory of the „contraction and expansion of silent Sharia" or religious knowledge:

According to this theory, religious knowledge which interprets the new issues is by and large a secular knowledge. The substance of religion is one thing, its interpretation another. There exists an interrelation between different branches of human knowledge, religious knowledge is human knowledge, as well. Any change or progress in any branch of human knowledge affects the other branches of knowledge, as well. Thus, religious knowledge is also not an invariable essence, independent from the other branches. This is the theory of evaluation of religion (Soroush, A. Kayhan Farhangi, 1987). But the person who first presented this idea in a cultural review (ibid.) and wrote many articles on that subject was strongly criticized by a number of clerics from theological schools. These attacks and critiques, which were accompanied by menace, also included many treatises and more than fifty papers and articles which challenged his ideas. It was even addressed by eminent clerics on radio and television (Kepel and Richard, 1992: 62).

Nevertheless, these intellectuals share the same religious faith as the clerics. In fact, many Iranian intellectuals with religious faith refer in their discussions to innate consciousness, to humanism, human reason, technical progress, and other secular values that the Islamic traditional clerics do not acknowledge.

## 3. Current Debates or: Coming to Terms with Tradition

In 1988, Javad Tabatabai wrote about the irreversible decline of political thought in pre-modern Iran arguing its epistemic incommensurateness with modernity

(Tabatabai, 1994). In the current debate, however, tradition and modernity are often contrasted dichotomously, and even Tabatabai, the non-religious modernist who insists on the irrelevance of post-modern thinking to the predicament of contemporary Iran in contrast to the centrality of modernity, admits the crucial importance of coming to terms with tradition (Tabatabai, 1998).

After the Second World War, the second step of the Shiite revival was due to a combination of modernist and progressive ideas with religious views; this included rationalization and intellectualization of religious principles. In fact, several modern Islamic thinkers tried to find scientific justification for their religious belief; these thinkers and scholars with a background in Western philosophy and science chose a rationalistic approach towards religion, tried to modernize the Islamic historical view as a school of thought for dealing with western challenges; while rejecting western intellectual imperialism. These individuals are engaged in what we should call „ideologization of religion“, in other words, they are considering religion as a system of ideas and beliefs, which can organize our life in this world. Supporters of this approach are, for example, Mehdi Bazargan, professor of thermo-dynamics at the University of Tehran, Ayatollah Taleghani, an intellectual clergy and colleague of Bazargan's, and Dr. Ali Shariati, an Iranian sociologist, who argued that „Muslim people should not be intimidated by the superiority of Western sciences and technology, because Islam is a rich source of knowledge and enlightenment which can provide the most practical and ideal responses to the problems faced by Muslim societies“ (Akbar and Lahsaizadeh, 1992: 83).

More recently, some leading thinkers such as Abdolkarim Soroush in the early 1990s vehemently opposed the revolutionary characterization of Islam as ideology as it is represented by Ali Shariati. Soroush, by contrast to Ali Shariati's view, sees objective knowledge as the basis of modernism and as a universal ethos, which breaks „the wall civilization allowing all contemporary cultures to put their politics, government, the economy and morality … into a new order“. Soroush breaks radically with the twentieth century apologetic Islamic modernism and advocates religious pluralism (see: Soroush,1998). Another leading figure is Mojtahed-Shabestari who, with the publication of *„Hermeneutics, the Book of Tradition, ketabe, sunnat, 1996“* in a similar way, vigorously opposed the apologetic modernism of the earlier generation and the more rigorous critique of the foundations of theocratic government in legalistic Islam. He argues that „the constitution of 1979 was the product of rational law making rather than traditional jurisprudence and included values that were „the fruits of modernity“. He added: „The Islamic revolution was accompanied by a rational-humanistic reading of Islam“ (Mojtahed-Shabestari, 2000: ch. 2). However, the official reading of religion originated in a phenomenon called „jurisprudential Islam“ (*Islam-e-Feghahati*) which justified the theocratic government's total control over culture and gradually gained the upper hand after the revolution. The official reading of

Islam is now undermined by a crisis of legitimacy for three reasons: It is a reading that advocates non-participation, theorizes violence and lacks scientific re-affirmation by the official reading of religion (Mojtahed-Shabestari, 2000: 37–46). As a result, the more tolerant, inclusive and compassionate teachings were neglected, instead, theologies of rage, resentment and revenge were cultivated. On occasion, this has even seduced a small minority to pervert religion by using it to sanction murder. Even the vast majorities, who are against such notions of terror tend to be exclusive and are enimical towards those who do not share their view (ibid: 47). Nevertheless, the progress of secularization through the diffe-rent institutions, such as government, law, education, economy, and social life, has been very important, particularly during the Pahlavi rule, whose actions were obviously anti-religious and followed the dissipation of religious manners and traditions.

Mehdi Bazargan (1907–1995), a French trained engineer, a lay Islamic scholar and a long-time pro-activist for democracy, was condemned and imprisoned several times during the 1960s and 1970s for his non violent protest against the shah of Iran. He co-founded groups, such as the Freedom Movement of Iran, (with Ayatullah Taleghani and Dr. Sahabi) in 1961, and the Iranian Human Rights Association, in 1977. He was appointed provisional Prime Minister by Ayatollah Khomeini just before he triumphed in the Revolution in 1979, but he resigned within a year, complaining that radical clerics were undermining his government. He is still regarded as a symbol of legal opposition to the radical Islamic govern-ment. He was a real liberal and democrat within Islamic ideology. And in one of his basic arguments for liberal Islam he says: „You most wonder why God has given us permission to sin, and whether an Islamic government would give us such permission! You would be even more astonished when you consider that God himself created Satan: When Lucifer refused to follow God's will and was expelled from heaven, God gave him until judgment Day to try to entice human beings to indulge in rebellion, destruction and injustice. The presence and influ-ence of Satan in the human mind constitute an opposing force or a counter-pole to the power of creation, reason and prudence. It exposes us to temptation and confusion, that is, it forces us to pose questions and to make a choice. Liberty is a gift that God has endowed upon humanity."

And he adds: „The ultimate reason and effect of this freedom is the realization of mankind's status as 'God's steward' on earth. Freedom is essential for our creativity and spiritual evolution" (translated in: Chehabi, 1990).

## 4. Conclusion

From an internal point of view, the Islamic Republic of Iran has to face two kinds of problems interconnected with each other. From the theoretical point of view, how is the conservation of an authentic and pure Islamic order and „real Islamic

government" with all its implications possible, and from a practical point of view, how does such a government correspond to the demands of a modern world? In fact, what is called *Islam Feghahati*, or orthodox Islam, is limited to the Shariath (jurisprudence) with its historical background and long-life tradition (*Sunnat*). How could it respond to the necessities of a modern state and economic development? In Iran, this question of V*elayat-e-faghi* or leadership and rule of high clerics in its theocratic form and its conformity with a modern democratic state, has not yet been solved. Thus, during the last 20 years, we have been witnessing a large debate on how a believer is permitted to think and which reforms are necessary to adapt religion with the modern world. Also, from the clerical point of view, while the explicit references are the religious laws and principles of law alone, in their practical discussions clergymen use humanist arguments and values. That is, the political necessity to keep the machine of state running urges them to take into account the economic or international issues, which have been ignored by the traditions (Kepel and Richard, 1992: 63).

In conclusion, we must accept that today the world of the nineteenth century, which was dominated by Western enlightenment philosophy, is ultimately gone. We are witnessing a new world in which the western domination is in retreat and modern Islam is more conscious of its importance and its existence. As president Khatami affirmed in his campaign's speech in 2001, the future of Iran lays with the „new religious thinking". He then added that „If we try to impose on a changing society issues which do not belong to our time, we will end up harming religion" (cited in New York Times , May 26, 2001).

I agree with Ashuri, a non-religious observer: „The future of Iran primarily depends on this movement of religious enlightenment (*Rawshanfkr-e-di*ni), which is capable of bringing about a synthesis between tradition, traditional thought and the heritage of the modern world (Ashuri, 1998).

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