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How Is Religious Intellectualism Understood in Iran?

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Abstract

Religious intellectualism is a term used to refer to a group of influential thinkers in contemporary Iran. Given the diversity and dispersion of their thoughts, as well as the way they combine local and regional elements with certain global aspects, it is essential to present a general and relatively comprehensive picture of this approach. However, the eclectic nature of these thinkers makes this task challenging. This article, written primarily with the aim of introducing religious intellectualism to a non-Iranian audience, first provides a definition, general characteristics, and prominent figures in this field (Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, and Mostafa Malekian). It then outlines the most important issues they address and their specific approaches to those issues (such as capital punishment, human rights, abortion, and homosexuality). The challenges arising from the confrontation between these ideas and traditional ones are also briefly discussed.

Keywords

Religious intellectualism, Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, Mostafa Malekian, contemporary Iran.

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1. Introduction

The concept of "intellectualism" is a familiar notion in Western culture. Although there is no precise definition of the term, the historical role of intellectuals in the intellectual, social, and political transformations of the West has been significant. Over the past century, this form of intellectualism also took root in many non-Western countries, where a class known as "intellectuals" likewise emerged. In these contexts as well, intellectuals have played an important socio-political role.

The first intellectual thoughts were introduced to Iran around the time of the Constitutional Movement.[1] The intermediaries for the transmission of these ideas included some Qajar princes,[2] merchants, students who had studied abroad, and Western military advisors. Intellectualism had a secular nature, as its representatives often translated Western ideas into Persian, primarily acting as intermediaries. However, almost simultaneously with the emergence of secular intellectualism in Iran, a subcurrent also formed that took a relatively sympathetic approach to religion and made it the subject of intellectual reflection. Perhaps Talibov Tabrizi and Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Asadābādī (or al-Afghānī) (1838-1897) can be regarded as the

1. The Constitutional Movement, also known as the Constitutionalist Movement, Constitutional Revolution (*Mashrūṭa*), refers to a series of efforts and events that culminated in the signing of the Constitutional Decree by Mozaffar al-Din Shah Qajar on August 5, 1906, aiming to transform the autocratic monarchy into a constitutional government. The movement continued through the reign of Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar, ultimately leading to the establishment of the National Consultative Assembly (Majlis) and the ratification of Iran's first constitution. The movement persisted for several years after the decree, seeking to solidify the rule of law and resolve related challenges.
2. The Qajar dynasty ruled Iran from 1789 until 1925.

main representatives of this current during the Constitutional period. This movement continued at a slow pace. During the second Pahlavi period, Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati accelerated its development, though their attention to religion and their critical stance toward the West marked a significant departure from the previous generations. However, in the second and third decades following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, this movement reached its peak, becoming a major player in Iran's intellectual, social, and political arenas. In the past three decades, this current has been referred to as Religious Intellectualism or Religious Rethinking in Iran.

The first part of this article aims to clarify what is known in Iran as religious intellectualism: how it differs from pure or secular intellectualism, the path it has taken, the impacts it has had, and its current state. It seems possible, through this approach, to demonstrate that religious intellectualism is a category quite distinct from pure or secular intellectualism, and that it has played a more prominent role in Iran than its secular counterpart. This study will focus on religious intellectuals of the past three decades. The second part will concentrate on the engagement of religious intellectuals with the issue of human rights, examining how they deal with concrete and practical challenges in the real world and whether they have, in fact, succeeded in doing so.

2. The Debate over the Definition and Nature of Religious Intellectualism and Its Boundary with Secular Intellectualism

In Western texts, intellectualism is typically used without any qualifier, and adding the adjective "secular" to it is considered redundant or meaningless, since intellectualism is, by its very nature, secular. For those unfamiliar with the intellectual climate of Iran, the expression "secular intellectual" may sound unfamiliar or unnecessary.

The addition of the qualifier "secular" implies the existence of another type of intellectual—namely, the religious intellectual. The latter term is widely used in Iran's intellectual discourse. This group of thinkers tends to enjoy greater popularity among the general public than secular intellectuals, engages in extensive intellectual activity, and is active in publishing, giving lectures, and offering public courses.

Although the terms "religious intellectual" or "religious intellectualism" are frequently used in Iranian texts and intellectual discourse, like many broad labels and general terms, they have been coined more for the sake of convenience in discussion. It is difficult to arrive at a properly inclusive and exclusive definition of the term. Nevertheless, in order to refer to phenomena and to classify them, we inevitably rely on such general terms—religious intellectualism being one of them. Whatever definition is offered, some of those who fall under this label are likely to find it flawed or inadequate. On the other hand, since religious intellectualism largely emerged in response to socio-political necessities, the simplest way to grasp its nature is to look at its concrete instances. In simpler terms: religious intellectualism is what, in practice, is called religious intellectualism.[1] In this respect, religious intellectualism in Iran finds itself positioned between two rival camps: secular intellectualism and traditional clericalism. This in-between status further complicates its definition. Moreover, religious intellectualism encompasses a wide range of individuals with relatively diverse intellectual orientations—from seminary-trained scholars to university academics, from those who have studied in the West to those who have not, from specialists in the humanities to experts in technical and natural sciences. In fact, discussions around

1. This type of definition has a precedent in philosophy. For example, Nigel Warburton, in *Philosophy: The Basics*, proposes defining philosophy as whatever is actually called philosophy in practice.

this topic are among the key interests of Iran's reading public. One may arrive at a workable definition of religious intellectualism by identifying its main characteristics. The primary features of religious intellectualism in Iran are as follows:

Connection and attachment to religion. Religious intellectuals are often personally devout. Historically, most of them also originate from the religious class of society. Many were formerly traditional clerics. At the very least, they believe in the essence of religion. Of course, what exactly constitutes the essence of religion is itself a complex and contested issue among religious intellectuals.

Reformism. Religious intellectuals consider the traditional understanding of religion to be flawed for two reasons. First, it is, in some respects, incompatible with modern rationality and can hinder development and modernization. Second, contemporary individuals can only be kept religiously committed if a new, modern interpretation of religion is offered. Some religious intellectuals have even used the expression "Islamic Protestantism."

Preventing alienation from religion. Many people, when they see religion as conflicting with modern rationality and development, naturally prefer to abandon religion rather than give up development and modernization. Therefore, in order to prevent people from turning away from religion, changes must be introduced within religion itself.

The experience of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Islamic Republic of Iran represents the most prominent example and realization of a religious government in the contemporary era. The dominant views of contemporary Iranian religious intellectuals are largely a critical reaction to this experience. As a result, one of the points of consensus among religious intellectuals is doubt regarding the possibility and effectiveness of religious governance. This is why religious intellectual

discourse in Iran has gained momentum especially in the second and third decades following the Islamic Revolution. Since religious intellectualism critiques traditional religiosity and, consequently, religious government, it faces opposition from the state, and thus most religious intellectuals find themselves among the government's critics.

Humanities. Religious intellectualism takes a serious interest in contemporary Western humanities, particularly philosophy and subjects such as hermeneutics. In fact, much of its theoretical content is derived from this field. From this perspective, religious intellectualism after the revolution is deeper and more enriched than the religious intellectualism before the revolution.

Innovation. Religious intellectualism is not merely an imitative and descriptive movement that confines itself to reproducing the ideas of Western philosophers and thinkers. Often, they have presented local versions that are adapted to the cultural context of contemporary Iran. Therefore, religious intellectuals, unlike some prevalent movements in the Islamic world that proclaim the so-called "return to oneself and to one's own civilization," do not simply limit themselves to citing the virtues and values of the past and their own culture. Instead, they have produced original writing and introduced new theories. Religious intellectuals combine both critique and reconstruction, meaning they critique the present state and also offer alternatives. They critique both the Western tradition and the indigenous Islamic tradition. The intensity of the critique of both tradition and the West varies among Iranian religious intellectuals. However, in general, critique of both tradition and the West, followed by the reinterpretation of religion in light of the present age, is a common thread among them.

Fluidity and intellectual transformation. Iranian religious intellectuals are the most prominent examples of continuous intellectual transformation. Almost all of them have undergone multiple phases of

thought. Most have emerged from a traditional religiosity or clerical background and gradually moved closer to humanistic and secular approaches. Some have strayed so far from religion in its conventional sense that they can neither be considered religious nor their thought regarded as an example of religious intellectualism.

Based on this, religious intellectualism can be defined as follows: It is an influential movement in contemporary Iran that, on the one hand, seeks to preserve the foundations and essence of religion in the modern world, while on the other hand, does not view Western culture and civilization as free from flaws and shortcomings. Thus, it takes a reformist perspective on both, a perspective whose theoretical content is largely derived from Western humanities and leads to a new interpretation of religion.

If we consider the measure of success for a movement to be its level of effectiveness, then religious intellectualism has been a successful movement so far. The reason for the success of religious intellectualism in Iran is that Iranian society is still a religious society. As a result, the religious language is more appealing to its audience. However, the traditional clergy also uses religious language, so why has religious intellectualism been more successful than the traditional clergy in Iran? The answer is that the religious language of religious intellectuals is not traditional; rather, it is more in tune with the spirit of the age (not in the Hegelian sense, but more in terms of common sense) and the worldview of contemporary Iranians, especially the middle class (Malekian, 2007 b, p. 286). However, this success has been in decline in recent years. On one hand, religious intellectualism has stagnated, and on the other hand, Iranian intellectual society has lost the enthusiasm it once had for religious intellectualism.

However, there are many debates and disagreements on this matter. For example, some of these figures are reluctant to accept the

label "religious intellectual." For instance, Malekian, at certain times, implicitly preferred that his work be referred to as religious rethinking rather than religious intellectualism. In his view, religious intellectualism seems to be a contradictory and paradoxical concept, whereas religious rethinking is not paradoxical or contradictory (Malekian, 2002, p. 10). However, he has now moved beyond this stage of thought, and it would be difficult to call him a religious rethinker today. Furthermore, many religious intellectuals do not accept the paradoxical nature of the concept of religious intellectualism. Some scholars argue that intellectualism in Iran was religious from the very beginning (Aghajari, 2000). However, this judgment seems rather imprecise. On the other hand, some go even further, asserting that neither rethinking nor intellectualism can be possible within the religious domain. Therefore, there are numerous disputes regarding the nature, legitimacy, meaning, and compatibility of religious intellectualism.

Religious intellectualism must be understood within a broader context—one that spans more than a century. Due to its rational theological aspects, which closely align with the Mu'tazilite school of thought, Shia Islam has cultivated a wide and profound range of theoretical discourse. These discussions, transmitted through religious scholars, gradually permeated segments of the traditional and religious society. The advent of modernity in Iran brought with it serious theoretical challenges. Unlike many traditions, such as the Japanese tradition, where the foundational principles of modernity did not clash significantly with tradition, the situation in Iran was markedly different. In many contexts, Western civilization entered without provoking major theoretical debates, focusing primarily on modernization—meaning the tangible manifestations of modern Western civilization, such as bureaucratic institutions and technological tools. In contrast, in Iran, the theoretical foundations of modernity—issues such as the relationship

between religion and state, individualism, freedom, legal systems, and so on—became topics of intense debate from the very beginning. Consequently, the idea gradually took shape that an indigenous model of development and governance could be formulated based on local traditions, as an alternative to the version prescribed by modernity. Efforts then concentrated on articulating this indigenous model. The Islamic Revolution of Iran was the practical, localized embodiment of this idea. However, nearly a decade after the revolution, critiques emerged from within—voiced by individuals who had themselves played a role in shaping this indigenous model. With a critical and revisionist perspective, they began to reassess it. It was at this juncture that religious intellectualism was born.

3. Prominent Religious Intellectuals in Today's Iran

The group of religious intellectuals who have shaped a significant part of the intellectual landscape in contemporary Iran emerged in the post-Islamic Revolution period. Their thought differs in many ways from that of earlier intellectuals. In this section, we focus on this group of religious intellectuals. A few years after the Islamic Revolution of Iran, a new generation of religious intellectuals came to the fore—one that differs from the pre-revolutionary generation in two significant ways. First, they are familiar with concepts from the humanities as well as modern and contemporary philosophy. Second, they have witnessed the experience of a religious government firsthand and, based on their observation and analysis of its performance and outcomes, approach religion from an intellectualist perspective. The most prominent post-revolutionary religious intellectuals—whose ideas have profoundly influenced Iran's intellectual, social, and political space over the past two to three decades—are as follows:

3.1. Abdolkarim Soroush

After Ali Shariati, the most influential religious intellectual in contemporary Iran is Abdolkarim Soroush (born 1945). Among post-revolutionary religious intellectuals, his influence and renown are unparalleled. One of the traits he shares with Shariati is a fluent and eloquent command of language, delivering impactful speeches. However, unlike Shariati's emotionally charged oratory, Soroush speaks in a calm tone, with steady rhythm, well-structured sentences, and poetic flourishes that captivate his audience. His ideas played a significant role in shaping part of the contemporary political landscape of Iran. Soroush was also the leading figure behind *Kiyan* magazine, the most important intellectual and philosophical publication in the history of religious intellectualism in Iran. Nearly all individuals who are now considered key figures in Iran's religious intellectual movement began as relatively unknown writers contributing articles to this magazine. *Kiyan*'s peak period of activity was from 1991 to 1999.

Given the vast number of lectures, articles, and books produced by Soroush, it is difficult to offer a brief and comprehensive picture of his thought, especially considering the significant evolution it has undergone over time. Nonetheless, we attempt here to outline the general framework of his intellectual approach. Soroush's thinking is not purely philosophical; rather, he embodies a blend of theologian, philosopher, and poet. His main non-Iranian intellectual influences include: Empiricist and analytic philosophy, particularly the work of Karl Popper; Gadamerian hermeneutics; and Arab religious intellectuals, especially Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. Despite these influences, Soroush regards his primary field as modern theology. Drawing from the Islamic tradition, he aligns himself with the Mu'tazilite school, frequently speaking in praise of its virtues (Soroush, 2002). In general, religious intellectualism falls within the broader category of rational

theology, a description that largely applies even to Western religious intellectuals.

Two major theories form the core of Soroush's intellectual framework. The first is the Theory of the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Law, which he introduced in the 1990s, and the second is a more recent work published in 2014, presented in a two-part article titled "Mohammad (PBUH), the Narrator of the Prophetic Dream." The Theory of the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Law contains within it several subsidiary ideas and sub-theories. In fact, it might be more accurate to describe it as a project rather than a single theory. Soroush initially published this theory as a series of essays in *Kiyan* magazine. These essays were later compiled into a book of the same name, with the subtitle *The Evolution of Religious Knowledge*. Today, this book is considered one of the most influential works published in Iran over the past few decades. In total, Soroush has authored around 200 articles, books, and essays. Among his other important works is the book *Straight Paths* (*Ṣirāṭ-hāyi mustaqīm*).

Alongside the many positive reactions to it, few theories have been subject to such extensive criticism. Interestingly, Mustafa Malkiyan, another prominent religious intellectual, has presented a critical analysis of this theory, questioning its logical coherence and philosophical rigor. Key figures from the clergy and traditional religious circles have also responded by writing books and articles that argue against it. These reactions have greatly contributed to the dynamism of Iran's intellectual and philosophical landscape.

This theory, as a standard theory, has three main components: description, explanation, and recommendation. In the description stage, it presents the evolution and transformation of religious knowledge as a reality that has existed throughout history, providing numerous pieces of evidence for it. In the explanation stage, it outlines the

causes of this transformation and, based on his knowledge in the field of philosophy of science and the relationship between science and religion, explains the reasons and causes for this change. Finally, in the third stage, it recommends that we accept this truth and, by using natural sciences and empirical knowledge, further refine and transform our religious knowledge (Nasri, 2002, pp. 229-230). He considers the foundation of his theory to be based on these three propositions:

> The (correct or flawed) understanding of Sharia is entirely dependent on and interconnected with human knowledge, and there is a continuous exchange and dialogue between religious and non-religious knowledge (the principle of nourishment and alignment).
>
> If human knowledge undergoes contraction and expansion, our understanding of Sharia will also experience contraction and expansion (the conditional principle).
>
> Human knowledge (human understanding of nature and existence: science and philosophy) undergoes transformation, contraction, and expansion (the principle of transformation). (Soroush, 1991, p. 347).

In a clearer expression: While religion is fixed, religious knowledge is always changing and evolving. All human knowledge is in a state of transformation, such that a change in one scientific domain influences other domains as well. Religious knowledge is a consumer of human sciences. That is, any significant change in human sciences affects religious knowledge. Therefore, since religious knowledge is contingent upon human knowledge, it is a human, contemporary, and, at the same time, evolving phenomenon. Sharia, like nature, is silent. It is a phenomenon that is open to multiple interpretations. The meanings of phrases are preceded by theories, and since scientific theories are subject to change, the meanings are also open to interpretation.

According to Soroush, the transformation of religious knowledge occurs in the shell of religion, not its core. He repeatedly distinguishes between different kinds of religion and religiosity. In one of his famous articles titled Essential and Accidental in Religion, he compares religion to a phenomenon with a core and a shell. The core of religion is religious experience, and its shell is Sharia. The shell of religion is historical and influenced by the lived experiences of the Prophet, followers of religions, and scholars of jurisprudence (Soroush, 1998). Additionally, drawing from a hadith by Ali ibn Abi Talib, he differentiates between three types of religiosity: pragmatic or goal-oriented religiosity, knowledge-based religiosity, and experience-based religiosity. For him, the third type is the most desirable form of religious practice, which can be found in mystics such as Rumi, Ghazali, and Ali ibn Abi Talib (Soroush, 1999). The first type of religiosity, namely pragmatic religiosity, often leads to a swollen, fat, and maximalist form of religion, where jurisprudence dominates ethics and religious experience, squeezing out the latter two, restricting individual freedoms, opposing modernity, fueling religious conflicts, and being incompatible with tolerance. In contrast, minimal religion focuses solely on the core shared by all religions, i.e., religious experience, fostering tolerance, dialogue between religions, and peaceful coexistence (Soroush, 1998). The minimal religion emphasizes what is essential to religion, i.e., its core, while the majority religion focuses on the accidental aspects of religion, i.e., its shell.

The main goal of Soroush in these theoretical discussions, which seemingly have no direct relation to politics and society, is to create space for tolerance. He arrives at the necessity of religious pluralism through his theory of contraction and expansion, and refers to it with the metaphorical term “the straight paths.” He attempts to demonstrate that the juridical interpretation of Islam, which exemplifies

majority or pragmatic religion, is incompatible with pluralism and the demands of the modern world: "A pluralistic society, which is a non-ideological society, meaning one without official interpretations and interpreters, based on the reason of multiplicity, not the emotion of unity, and characterized by civility, tolerance, and the free flow of information and the competition of ideas, i.e., full of actors, and nature-like, i.e., full of spring, autumn, snow, and rain, begins at the point where rulers and subjects alike acknowledge that the essence of nature and society is multiplicity, not unity; diversity, not similarity; and the determination to impose a single model for life, religion, language, culture, ethics, habits, and customs of humans is an impossible task and a burden to bear" (Soroush, 1997, p. 16).

However, in 2014, Soroush published a two-part article titled Muhammad: The Narrator of Prophetic Dreams, which was met with even sharper reactions from traditional religious people and even some conservative religious intellectuals. The article begins unexpectedly, with Soroush's claim being stated with relative clarity:

> Jalal al-Din Muhammad Balkhi [Rumi] said: "The Quran contains the states of the prophets," and I would like, with permission from the spirit of that dear one, to say: "The Quran contains the dreams of Mustafa." And of course, those dreams are the ones where: "I dream, but in my dream, I am neither a claimant nor a liar." My claim in this writing is that we have overlooked a simple and important point in our understanding of the divine revelation. Until now, we have insisted on the correct meaning that the language of the Quran is human and earthly, and that the Quran is directly and immediately the composition, experience, and the spiritual growth of Muhammad's soul, his language, and his expression—Muhammad, who is historical and in the process of evolution, who, step by step with time, becomes more prophetic, whose soul

> blossoms and whose eyes become sharper, and who becomes more adept at grasping meanings and knowledge. He understands and describes God better, his understanding of the resurrection and the higher and lower realms deepens, and to resolve the problems of his society, he suggests new paths. And had he lived longer, if he had learned the art of deep diving and had a wider patience and stronger digestion, it is likely that from the sea of truths, he would have caught more precious pearls, making the Quran richer and the world wealthier. We have said that those grand achievements were presented in the Arabic language, an ordinary, human language understandable to people, and that they arose from the inner consciousness of the Prophet. The sacredness of the experience has not sanctified or divinized the language of the experience. Even in the process of its formation, the personal states, mental images, environmental events, geographical conditions, and the tribal life of the Prophet were the shaping factors of his experiences, and they clothed them in the garments of history and geography. That is, God did not speak, nor did He write a book, but a historical human spoke on His behalf and wrote the book, and his speech was indeed His speech. It was as if divinity entered the skin of humanity and became human, as if the supernatural reality clothed itself in the garment of nature and became natural, and the transcendent beyond history entered the domain of history and became historical. Despite all this, the windows opened to the understanding of revelation still leave one large window unopened, and this article aims to open that unopened window. (Soroush, 2014).

However, the content of the article is not as unexpected and radical as its opening section. Soroush attempts to soften the tone of his words with explanations and clarifications: "The reader may replace the word "dream" with terms like revelation, event, parable,

imagination (both detached and connected), the eighth realm, Jablqa, Jabsah, and the celestial earth, as has been done... Furthermore, in choosing the word 'dream,' there has been no departure from the circle of tradition. Mystics who speak of the 'complete Muhammadan revelation' refer to an intuitive, super-conscious, supra-sensory, and dream-like perception" (Soroush, 2014) Since then, Soroush has not done any notable work in the field of religious intellectualism, focusing instead on explaining Masnavi (Rumi's Mathnawi) and delivering lectures in Western countries.

3.2. Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari

Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari has focused on a relatively narrower scope of work compared to Soroush, publishing fewer works, and has almost exclusively borrowed from Gadamerian hermeneutics among Western philosophical thoughts. Having spent many years in the clergy, he became acquainted with Gadamerian hermeneutics during his time in Germany. He then sought to view Islam and its sacred texts from this perspective. His book *Hermeneutics of the Quran and Sunnah* is his most influential work, which had a significant impact in Iran during the 1990s. The next most important and influential book is *A Critique of the Orthodox Interpretation of Religion.* His latest book, *A Critique of the Foundations of Jurisprudence and Theology*, was published electronically in 2018 through his personal website.

He critiques the Islamic religious tradition on the grounds that its scholars have not approached the sacred texts with the intention of understanding them, but rather have simply sought to explain the religion. Accordingly, he believes that "the issue of faith in the ontological Islam is, in fact, the same as the philosophical ontological knowledge of the system of existence" (Shabestari, 1999, p. 367). For

Shabestari, the desired method is the method of interpretation, but not in the common sense used in Islamic sciences; rather, he means it in the hermeneutic sense. Understanding meaning occurs through interpretation (or, more precisely, taʾwīl). After emphasizing the distinction between correct and incorrect interpretations, he, inspired by Gadamerian hermeneutic principles, states that the understanding and interpretation of any religious text is limited to five conditions: the pre-understandings or pre-readings of the interpreter, the interests and expectations of the interpreter, the questions posed by the interpreter from history, the identification of the central meaning of the text, and the translation of the text within the historical horizon of the interpreter (Shabestari, 1996, p. 15). Accordingly, there is no single understanding but multiple understandings of a religious text. He uses the term "different readings of religion" to refer to these multiple understandings of religious texts, a term that remains one of the most significant in religious intellectualism. The multiple pre-understandings and assumptions make it possible for multiple readings of religion to emerge, and no reading can be considered final or definitive. Since Shabestari himself is a jurist, he shows, through historical examples, how the differing pre-understandings and expectations of jurists have led to differing rulings. In his view, the symbolic nature of the language of Islam further enhances the multiplicity of readings and their potential variability. However, he is not a relativist, and does not believe that all the existing readings are correct or legitimate. The validity of each interpreter's assumptions and foundations must be evaluated. Of course, all proponents of hermeneutics, while denying relativism, have always faced this accusation and challenge. Nevertheless, he goes on to show that if we approach the Islamic texts by adhering to hermeneutic criteria, aimed at understanding, we will realize that what is currently available as Islam or the body of Islamic teachings is, in fact, a reading of symbolic and allegorical religious

texts. He believes that another valid understanding of these texts is possible, one whose core and foundation is “a new transformation, a new birth, and a profound change in the depths of the human soul, discovering a new ultimate attachment” (Shabestari, 1999, p. 379). This is what Shabestari refers to as faith. Faith in Shabestari’s language is somewhat close to the concept of religious experience in Soroush’s terminology.

He introduces the term "reconstructing religious thought." The purpose of this reconstruction is religious reform. What he means by religious reform is the same as what was stated at the beginning of the article and is the common goal of most religious intellectuals: "a return to the raw material of Islam, that is, the Quran and Sunnah, in order to construct a new religious intellectual and doctrinal framework that aligns with the contemporary human experience and understanding of the world and humanity" (Shabestari, 1996, p. 160). As a prelude to this reconstruction, we should engage in criticizing the prevailing and traditional religious thought. He believes that religious thought is not equivalent to eternal truths that cannot be critiqued, but is rather a product of the contemporary and historical understanding of the individuals who shaped it. Not only should religious thought be critiqued, but this critique is of even greater importance than critiquing philosophical or scientific thoughts, as religious thought has a profound psychological impact and influences the entire being of a person (Shabestari, 1996, p. 194). He outlines the conditions and principles for a valid and acceptable critique of religious thought and continually emphasizes that not all critiques are necessarily valid and constructive.

3.3. Mostafa Malekian

Currently, Mostafa Malekian is the most active religious intellectual in contemporary Iran. There is hardly a week in which he

does not give a lecture somewhere. His written works are mostly available in the form of articles, pamphlets, lectures, and translations. His works are widely dispersed and overlapping, and unlike Soroush and Shabestari, he has not presented a standardized, complete, and detailed version of his theory. His thoughts have evolved more than those of the two religious intellectuals mentioned above and, in practice, have moved beyond the realm of religious intellectualism. However, according to the common categorization and labeling in Iran, he is still somewhat placed within this category. He considers himself a thinker with an existentialist attitude and an analytical approach, meaning that he strives to examine the human issues addressed by analytic philosophers using the methods of analytical philosophy. He believes that the issue of human suffering and finding a way to alleviate it is the most important issue in the humanities. "I am not concerned with tradition, nor with modernity, nor with civilization, nor with culture, nor with any abstract matters of this kind. I am concerned with human beings, flesh and blood, who come, suffer, and leave" (Malekian, b2010). He pursues this goal by translating and introducing the works and thoughts of contemporary humanities to Iranian audiences.

He has named his most important intellectual work the "Project of Rationality and Spirituality." He has expanded this project through a number of articles and lectures, but he has yet to fulfill his promise of presenting it in the form of an independent and comprehensive book. Additionally, he is one of the religious intellectuals who has always maintained a critical view of religious intellectualism itself, and one of the recurring themes in his reflections has been the nature of religious intellectualism. The goal of this unfinished project is the reconciliation of rationality and spirituality. In his view, a spiritual person is one who has a good life. A person

with a good life is someone in whom moral values, psychological well-being, and meaningful life are realized. His claim is that "not only do rationality and spirituality (in the sense I have mentioned) not contradict each other, but to be spiritual, we need nothing beyond a comprehensive and profound rationality. And contrary to the opinion of many throughout history, the matter is not about choosing between having rationality and abandoning spirituality, or having spirituality and forsaking rationality" (Malekian, a 2010, pp. 277-278). This project does not have direct social and political implications, but Malekian believes that it "came out of the core of religious intellectualism. When I first expressed this project in 2000 in a speech and mentioned it in an interview with the magazine *Rah-e-No*, at that time I was considered a religious intellectual by observers, although a humble, modest, and unpretentious one. But I was still considered a religious intellectual. Therefore, whether or not this project is now included within religious intellectualism, it was initially a project of a religious intellectual. However, it was very different from what religious intellectuals before and after the revolution had said" (Malekian, b 2010). This difference primarily stems from the individualistic and psychological aspects of the project and its lack of direct connection to social reformism. For Malekian, rationality and spirituality are not ends in themselves, but rather means to achieve an ideal and desirable life.

In fact, Malekian has only focused on social and political concerns for a period of time, and for the most part, his attention has been on individual issues. He even considers the path to societal reform as individual reform. In his view, a reformed person is a spiritual one, and spirituality is the essence of all religions (Malekian, a 2007, p. 279). However, the topic of intellectualism, especially religious intellectualism, is also one that he has addressed. His argument in sympathy with religious intellectualism is straightforward: "Today, in

my opinion, the spirit of the age is the spirit of modernity, and the spirit of modernity is much more aligned with what religious intellectuals are saying than with the clergy" (Malekian, b 2007, p. 286). As mentioned at the beginning of the article, Malekian offers subtle reflections on the nature of religious intellectualism, its characteristics, its relationship with religious rethinking, religious reformism, and secular intellectualism. In this regard, he is unique among religious intellectuals. Furthermore, he has a deep knowledge of Western philosophy and the humanities, which distinguishes him from other religious intellectuals.

However, in recent years, the issue of religious intellectualism has moved out of the realm of his focus. In recent years, he has increasingly turned towards psychology and has spoken about the neglect of the importance of psychology. Once holding a reformist view of religion, he gradually became disillusioned with this belief and shifted towards transcending religion, replacing it with spirituality.

Function and Impacts of Religious Intellectualism in Contemporary Iran

A significant part of Iran's intellectual landscape after Shariati is the product of religious intellectualism. Much has been said about Shariati's decisive role in laying the groundwork for the Islamic Revolution of Iran (Yazdekhasti & Mirzaei, 2012). Many individuals from the Iranian middle class and educated sectors were once supporters of Shariati. Although Shariati was not in favor of a religious government, he was among those who nurtured and ingrained the idea of political Shiism (which he referred to as "Ali's Shiism" in contrast to "Safavid Shiism"). After the Islamic Revolution, thinkers such as Soroush, Shabestari, and Malekian also had a significant impact on the intellectual space in different ways. During this period, a religious

government had been established, and the religious intellectuals who had previously supported it became its critics. As a result, the primary goal of many of the ideas they presented became focused on critiquing the one-sidedness of the system, defending tolerance, highlighting the flaws of the religious government, reconciling democracy with Islam, reconciling human rights with Islam, and addressing similar issues.

Religious intellectuals provided the best intellectual nourishment for a large number of Iranians who wanted to become modern while preserving their religious beliefs. Additionally, religious intellectualism greatly contributed to the translation and introduction of many contemporary Western human sciences and philosophical theories. In response to this movement, a large number of clerics, in a coordinated and organized manner, turned towards studying the new Western humanities and acquiring the tools necessary to critique and reject the views of religious intellectuals.

If we were to draw a parallel between the religious reform movement in Iran and the religious reform movements in the West, as many Iranian religious intellectuals do, we would say that just as religious reform in the West served as a bridge from religious and traditional society to modern and secular society, in Iran, it seems that religious intellectuals, at best, have attempted to play a similar role. However, it now appears that either this role has lost its appeal to society, or religious intellectuals can no longer propose new ideas. Religious intellectuals have distanced themselves from this role, meaning that they are largely engaged in other matters, though they occasionally reference their earlier ideas and revisit their concepts. Gradually, most religious intellectuals are shifting towards more radical interpretations of religion, in a way that the intellectual and rational aspects of their views grow stronger, while the religious and

traditional elements diminish. In simpler terms, their thinking is becoming more aligned with modernity.

Religious intellectualism is a domain that, due to its many facets and subtle complexities, generally does not lend itself to clear-cut and definitive judgments. This difficulty is further compounded by its connection to the social and political realms. However, regardless of whether this characteristic of religious intellectualism is acknowledged by its critics, the volume of critiques directed at the various interpretations and approaches within this domain, and even critiques directed at the attitudes and practices of the religious intellectuals themselves, is noteworthy. On one hand, religious intellectualism encompasses a diverse range of perspectives, and on the other, the criticisms leveled against this diverse domain are themselves numerous and varied. Additionally, religious intellectualism is largely a critical approach to the traditional understanding of religion. Therefore, most of the critiques directed at the diverse formulations and theories within religious intellectualism can be seen as critiques of critiques. For this reason, one of the prominent functions of religious intellectualism has been the creation of a critical space within Iran's intellectual landscape.

In the past decade, religious intellectualism has gradually become less vibrant. If we set aside Soroush's theory of prophetic dreams, almost no significant or challenging theories or ideas have emerged within this domain. The publication of *Religion on the Scales of Ethics* by Abolghasem Fanaei generated some brief excitement, but it quickly faded. In this book, Fanaei argues for the precedence of ethics over jurisprudence and Sharia, stating that when ethics and Sharia are in conflict, ethical considerations should be prioritized (Fanaei, 2005). Other figures, though less influential, within Iran's religious intellectual movement include Mohsen Kadivar, Habibollah

Peyman, Ahmad Ghabel, Abolghasem Fanaei, and Arash Naraghi.

After leaving Iran, Soroush lost much of his influence, as religious intellectuals tend to impact the intellectual space and public sphere more through lectures and speeches than through books and articles. Shabestari, too, has primarily focused on commenting on contemporary issues and delivering extensive lectures in fields such as hermeneutics and the meaning of life. Malekian, meanwhile, continuously lectures on a variety of subjects, with the common thread of his talks not being the idea of religious intellectualism, but rather alleviating human suffering.

4. Human Rights and Religious Intellectuals

The term "human rights" is often used by social activists. When these individuals use this term, they typically have the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in mind. Clearly, from this perspective, human rights cannot only not be the central or primary subject of discussion for religious intellectuals, but it would also be difficult for it to become a philosophical topic of discussion. On the other hand, if the philosophical foundations of human rights are considered, the situation changes, and it becomes possible to discuss the relationship between human rights and religious intellectualism. In other words, human rights can be understood in both a broad and narrow sense. In the narrow sense, human rights may refer to what is outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and social activists often emphasize certain aspects of it, aiming to realize it in societies. However, in the broader sense, human rights refers to a new understanding of humanity's place in existence and the relationships between individuals, society, and the state. In this sense, human rights can be seen as stemming from the humanistic aspect of modernity.

4.1. Humanism and Religious Intellectualism

The humanistic aspect of modernity is extremely important for religious intellectuals in Iran. Each of them, whether reluctantly or willingly, has stated that if religion is to have a place in the present age and not completely disappear, it must acknowledge the centrality of humanity in contemporary thought. The modern world and its philosophical outlook are centered around human beings. Everything is for the benefit of humanity; thus, religion, too, if it is not for humanity, will not survive and will not be embraced. Iranian religious intellectuals have addressed the question of what interpretation of Islam can be most compatible with humanism. According to them, in the traditional interpretation of Islam, individual rights, as demanded by humanism and modernity, are not adequately secured. Mostafa Malekian states, "One of the most important elements of modernism is its humanistic and anthropocentric character. This element is clearly evident in the thought of religious intellectuals... Religious intellectuals are, in the true sense of the word, humanists. Unlike the clergy, religious intellectuals are humanists both in terms of the issues they address and in their approach to finding solutions" (Malekian, 2007b, p. 286). Some religious intellectuals have even spoken of "Islamic humanism," attempting to defend and formulate its possibilities. In contrast, some traditional religious figures have strongly attacked this notion, for instance, Beheshti (2003). The term "humanism" is one that traditional religious figures in Iran strongly oppose.

In any case, the idea that "religion must be for humanity" has been most clearly explained and articulated by Mustafa Malekian. Under the title "The Expectation of Humanity from Religion," he introduces the idea that "religion gives meaning to our pain and suffering, and more generally to our lives. By giving meaning to our pain and suffering, it delivers us from them and leads us to a better

condition. Therefore, it is reasonable to claim that the expectation of human beings from religion is that it will take them from their current undesirable state to a more desirable one by giving meaning to their lives and removing the undesirable aspects" (Malekian, 2002, p. 285). He then builds upon this premise and asserts that "the modern human says, I need five things to live. Religion should give me these things in this world. If it does not, no matter what claims it makes, my ears are deaf to those claims, and in the end, I am indifferent and unresponsive. I can only live when I have psychological peace, happiness, hope, inner satisfaction, and when my life is meaningful. I cannot seek these five things from politics, economics, empirical sciences, or philosophy" (Malekian, 2015, p. 18). This perspective shows that Malekian emphasizes the individual's right to choose religion and religiosity, rather than the duty to adhere to religious practices and obedience. A similar idea is expressed by Abdolkarim Soroush, who says, "If we say that religiosity is our right, we have endorsed one of the main pillars of civil society. If someone says that religiosity is our right, they must also say that irreligiosity is our right. This means that we have the right to use this right, and we have the right not to. If we use it, no one should reward us, and if we don't, no one has the right to blame us… The ancient society was largely built on the idea that religiosity is an obligation for human beings, while modern society is built on the idea that religiosity is a right of humanity… Now, when we talk about the right or duty of religion, the question arises, 'If religion is an obligation, where does this obligation come from, and who has the right to reprimand us for irreligiosity?'" (Soroush, 1999b, p. 6). This discussion by Soroush sparked many heated debates about the relationship between right and obligation in Islam. In fact, one of Soroush's most significant impacts on the intellectual landscape of Iran was that whenever he raised an issue, a flood of critiques and sometimes endorsements followed, which contributed to the dynamism

of Iran's intellectual environment. This influence and power was unmatched by any other religious intellectual. However, it has been nearly a decade since he has had such influence.

4.2. Religious Intellectualism and Islamic Jurisprudence (*Fiqh*)

Religious intellectuals, however, have taken a general stance or approach to this issue that can largely clarify the position on human rights matters. Those laws that are in opposition to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its provisions have a jurisprudential ground. Consequently, jurisprudence is one of the most important areas that religious intellectuals critique. They believe that jurisprudence is not the core or essence of religion and that, therefore, depending on the circumstances of the time, it is subject to change. Soroush and most religious intellectuals argue that since jurisprudential rulings do not constitute the core of religion, they can be altered or even suspended. One of Soroush's main ideas, in fact, is that jurisprudence has become too inflated, meaning it has occupied a place that is beyond what it deserves. Of course, the position of an individual like Mohsen Kadivar, who has stronger attachments to jurisprudence, differs from the stance of Soroush or Malekian.

Overall, when there is a conflict between jurisprudential rulings and prominent human rights issues, religious intellectuals often prefer to modify or negate the jurisprudential ruling. However, this tendency should not be interpreted superficially, as though religious intellectuals are entirely surrendering to human rights. While for an intellectual like Malekian, jurisprudence has entirely lost its significance, for Soroush, it still holds some appeal. For Mohsen Kadivar, the appeal of jurisprudence is even stronger. Among religious intellectuals, Kadivar holds the most conservative positions and generally avoids making

explicit statements. His clearest statement on this matter is as follows: "By employing ijtihad in the principles and foundations, the result is human rights, not by measuring human rights as a criterion to achieve these results. In this regard, I have not made any slogans; rather, in every jurisprudential issue where I have had the opportunity, I have applied these principles and derived a new jurisprudential result. A specific case should be examined and worked on. When several dozen jurisprudential issues are resolved in this way, then a general rule can be extracted. Therefore, it is not possible to determine the solution to all issues at once; it requires time and the effort of research and deduction" (Heidari, 2016). Mojtahed Shabestari, in his latest book, *Critique of the Foundations of Jurisprudence and Theology*, which is a collection of his recent lectures and articles, unlike Kadivar, does not attempt to reconcile jurisprudence with human rights. Instead, he asserts that since human rights did not arise from religion, it is a non-religious matter and not an anti-religious one. Therefore, trying to reconcile it with religion is neither possible nor desirable. Rather, Muslims should accept it as one of the realities of the contemporary world (Mojtahed Shabestari, 2017, pp. 7-660). It seems that there are also tendencies toward this idea in the views of Malekian and Soroush.

4.3. Religious Intellectualism and Controversial Issues

Therefore, religion and religiosity are only justified and defensible to the extent that a place can be found for them within the framework of fundamental human rights. However, the matter is not limited to this. The religion that religious intellectuals find acceptable and desirable is one that does not contradict or conflict with other aspects of fundamental human rights, which are derived from modernity. This is why religious intellectuals have moved beyond generalizations and mere claims; they have sought to practically and

concretely present an interpretation of Islam that aligns with certain key principles of human rights. Areas of concern for religious intellectuals include the scope of governmental authority, rights versus duties, tolerance, pluralism, social freedom, women's rights, the rights of minorities, the issue of capital punishment, and more. However, none of them have consistently and systematically theorized on these issues; instead, they have addressed some of these topics in a scattered, case-by-case, and subjective manner.

Religious intellectuals have not addressed all topics with the same degree of attention and focus. For example, the issue of women's rights is less emphasized among religious intellectuals, whereas discussions on social freedom and pluralism are much more prevalent. The issue of the right to life or capital punishment has also been discussed to some extent, but not as extensively as social freedom and pluralism. The reason for this is that religious intellectuals are more concerned with the political realm, and they tend to focus on issues that are directly related to political governance. Therefore, while social activists prioritize issues like women's rights or the death penalty, religious intellectuals give greater importance to the theoretical foundations of the political sphere, which determine the broader trajectory of governance in securing the rights of citizens.

As an example, let us consider the views of religious intellectuals on the issue of capital punishment. In his most recent statement on the death penalty, Kadivar has said: "The 'logical possibility' of eliminating the death penalty from Islamic teachings is not out of the question," adding, "However, its 'practical possibility' within the framework of 'traditional ijtihad' seems highly unlikely, and within this framework, at best, we can only significantly reduce the application of capital punishment" (Kalaei, 2018). Therefore, as is typical of him, he refrains from making a direct statement. Soroush, too,

largely avoids making a clear statement and asserts that "the annulment of religious laws requires a rational justification, and if such justification is found, of course, a ruling can be changed" (Kalaei, 2018). Malekian's position on capital punishment is crystal clear: he is strongly opposed. His opposition is not surprising, as his considerations on human suffering, which were mentioned earlier, constitute the core of his thought. Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, using his hermeneutical principles, attempts to demonstrate that the death penalty was specific to the tribal life of the Prophet Muhammad's time, and that in the modern world, not only is it unnecessary, but it must also be abolished due to its conflict with contemporary demands (Shabestari, 2014).

4.4. Challenging Issues: Abortion, Euthanasia, and Homosexuality

In the past two decades, among social activists, the issues of capital punishment, women's rights, and social-political freedoms have been the most significant and hotly debated. As briefly illustrated above, on these matters, religious intellectuals have cautiously aligned themselves, to a large extent (though not entirely), with social activists. However, when it comes to emerging issues that even in Western countries are considered challenges, the views of religious intellectuals vary greatly. For instance, Arash Naraghi, with caution, has worked on the compatibility of a form of homosexuality with Islam, or at least suggested the possibility of such a thing (Naraghi, 2014). Similarly, Soroush, not long ago, in the midst of one of his lectures—though the topic was not homosexuality—made a cautious remark about it, stating that since the modern human is a rights-oriented individual, for today's rights- oriented human, homosexuality is considered an accepted right. However, he avoided either endorsing or

rejecting it based on his own views and said, "The rights claim of homosexuals is a new issue, and I have not yet been able to provide a definitive stance on it..." (Soroush, 2012).

However, such efforts are rare and cannot be considered part of the mainstream religious intellectual movement. The reason for this is that religious intellectuals, due to their religious attachments, adopt a conservative stance on certain human rights issues that are widely debated in the West today, such as homosexuality, euthanasia, and abortion. Essentially, if this were not the case, they would not be referred to as religious intellectuals. On the issue of women's rights as well, their statements tend to carry a more or less conservative tone.

4.5. Religious Intellectuals and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Religious intellectuals have also made some statements regarding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but they have never made it the subject of their theoretical reflections. Instead, they have preferred to focus on the theoretical foundations from which the Declaration of Human Rights is derived and attempt to reconcile these with their own interpretation of Islam. For example, Soroush has said, "In truth, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the most beautiful and fragrant flower that has bloomed in this garden [i.e., Enlightenment thought]; a declaration that serves as the scale for the political behavior of rulers worldwide and a criterion for lawmaking and constitutional drafting in all countries and among all nations" (Soroush, 2006b). Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari also shares a similar, explicit stance on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "I believe that we Muslims must fully engage with the issue of human rights, precisely in the manner outlined in the Declaration. This is because we Muslims are currently part of the global community. We

cannot separate ourselves from it. Certainly, we are part of that global community which one day deemed these obligations essential for itself. In other words, the three issues of ‘freedom,’ ‘justice,’ and ‘global peace’ are of utmost importance for us Muslims as well. In other words, the observance of freedom rights, civil rights, and social rights is an obligation for us Muslims, wherever we live, and it is a vital necessity. We must inevitably have answers to these issues. The historical experience of the past fifty years in most Muslim countries clearly shows that there are serious demands regarding freedom, civil rights, and social rights" (Mojtahed Shabestari, 2016).

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