6

Did Progressive Muslims Pave the Way for the Hegemony of 'Khomeinism'? Public Religion and the 1979 Revolution

Mojtaba Mahdavi

Introduction

Pre-revolutionary Iran never experienced a homogeneous Islamist culture. There were chunks of cultural and political discourses, representing particular histories, social bases and social cleavages in pre-revolutionary Iran. Other than several secular leftist and nationalist forces, and leaving aside a traditional clerical quietism, there were diverse interpretations of Islam within the grand alliance that led to the 1979 revolution. They include 'Khomeinism',[1] Mehdi Bāzargān's liberal-democratic Islam,[2] the Mojahedin-e Khalq's guerrilla group (MKO, also known as PMOI)[3] and Ali Shari'ati's Islamic-leftist discourse of liberation theology.[4]

But why and how did Khomeinism become the hegemonic voice of revolutionary Iran? What factors prevented other religious and/or secular discourses from being able to compete with Khomeinism? The conventional wisdom

---

[1] See Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[2] For an excellent account of Mehdi Bazargan's intellectual and political life, see H. E. Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism: The Liberation Movement of Iran under the Shah and Khomeini* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[3] See Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

[4] See Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998).

in the literature, I argue, suggests that the primary reason for the triumph of Khomeinism was the 'ideologisation/politicisation of Islam' by modern and progressive Muslims. Had the Iranian modern Muslim intellectuals not brought religion into the public sphere in the 1960s–70s, it is argued, Islam would have remained in the private sphere. Ali Shari'ati's discourse in particular has been identified as the backbone of Khomeini's theory of *velāyat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) and the main factor for Iran's 'failure' to pave a 'linear' path towards a modernised secular polity and society.[5]

Much of this line of reasoning is based on the late Bizhan Jazani's argument in 'Mārksism-e eslāmi yā eslām-e mārksisti?',[6] written in 1973 but published later, in which he contended that the unintended consequence of modernising Islam by modern Muslim intellectuals would ultimately benefit the clergy. With the failure of the Islamic Republic of Iran to deliver the emancipatory promises of the 1979 Iranian revolution and the catastrophic policies of the ruling corrupt and crony clerical oligarchy, this line of argument has gained more prominence among scholars and activists from left and right of the political spectrum. For some (mainly the populist right), the Muslim intellectuals' illusionary idea of an Islamic political alternative to Pahlavi modernisation/westernisation led to the 'Fetneh 57' (1979 revolution) – a catastrophic turning point in Iran's history. For others (mostly the left and some liberals), although the 1979 revolution was an emancipatory anti-despotic movement, the post-revolutionary polity under Khomeinism – Ayatollah Khomeini's perspectives, politics and personality – was a gigantic setback for Iran's path towards development and democracy. For both camps of the right and the left, however, this predicament was largely owed to the politicisation of Islam by modern Muslim intellectuals. The clerical

---

[5] There are several examples of this account; for example, see Mohammad Quchāni, 'Rowshanfekr-e mosallah: pazhuheshi dar nazariyeh-ye siyāsi-ye Ali Shari'ati; Cheguneh 'nazariyeh-ye ommat va emāmat beh 'nezām-e' ommat va emāmat tabdil Shod?' *Mehrnāmeh* (Tir 1396/ June 2017): 22–46, http://drshariati.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/139604_MEHRNAMEH_P21_P46.pdf (accessed 26 March 2023). Also, see Mohammad Mahmudi, 'Mohāfezehkārān-e enqelābi: Shari'ati nazariyeh pardāz-e velāyat-e faqih', in *Iran Liberal*, 23 September 2020, n.p., www.Iranliberal.com (accessed 26 March 2023).

[6] Bizhan Jazani, 'Mārksism-e eslāmi yā eslām-e mārksisti beh masābeh-e yek ide'olozhi va beh masābeh-e yek esterātezhi va tāktik chist va cheh naqshi dar jonbesh-e enqelābi-ye mo'āser dārad?', in *Archive of Iranian Opposition Documents* (n.p.: n.d.), 30–3, https://www.iran-archive.com/sites/default/files/2021-08/bijan-jazani-marksisme-eslami.pdf (accessed 26 March 2023).

establishment, including Khomeini's discourse, it is argued, was incapable of mobilising the middle class against the Shah's regime and providing an alternative revolutionary discourse to the status quo. This task was accomplished by modern Muslim intellectuals and in particular Ali Shari'ati, known as the 'ideologue' of the revolution.

In this chapter, I will problematise, historicise and contextualise this claim. I will show how and why multiple structural and agential factors – not merely the 'ideologisation of Islam' – prevented other religious and/or secular discourses from competing with Khomeinism. I will then problematise the impact of the 'Islamic Protestantism' and/or reformation/renaissance, and the conventional wisdom about the role of public religion. Lastly, the chapter examines the contribution of the Muslim progressive left, Ali Shari'ati in particular, to Iran's quest for freedom and social justice. It briefly examines and problematise Shari'ati's thoughts and *unthoughts* in the context of Iran's quest for freedom and democracy.

The 'Tragedy of Islamic Protestantism'? The Problematic of Public Religion

The secular left and liberals have taken different positions on the role of religion in the 1979 revolution. However, most of the serious and sophisticated arguments – including those of distinguished historian Ervand Abrahamian – seem to reflect on Jazani's central arguments in his 'Mārksism-e eslāmi ya eslām-e mārksisti?'. In this work, Jazani's critique of modern Muslim intellectuals was directed towards the Mojahedin-e Khalq's reinterpretation of Islam in line with Marxism. Attempts to modernize Islam, Jazani argued, are doomed to fail; such attempts eventually empower clerical religious authorities who enjoy a 'veto power' to discredit modernised Islam.[7] Being based on divine truth, Islam and other religions are reactionary and contradict reason, progress, and modern science.[8] Islam, like other religions, represents a superstructure of an old society and must be peacefully 'eradicated' from a modern society.[9]

---

[7] Jazani, 'Mārksism-e eslāmi', 14, 30–1.
[8] Ibid., 8–14.
[9] Ibid., 24.

Although, Jazani was attentive to people's religiosity and never insulted their beliefs,[10] he seems to suggest that instead of reforming and/or modernising the religious discourse, intellectuals should educate the masses and emancipate them from the ill-effects and regressive essence of religion. More specifically, the core of his argument implies that the attempt to modernise Islamic discourse would ultimately benefit the clerical establishment and the reasons for that are twofold: the clergy has the monopoly over the interpretation of the divine text, and he holds a unique ability to mobilise the religious masses. Hence, for Jazani, the Muslim reformists' good intention is irrelevant; the historical reality of the socio-cultural hegemony of the clerical class in Iran (and the rest of the Muslim world) would determine a disastrous failure for Muslim reformists. In other words, his argument implies that when religion is brought into the public sphere, the twin pillars of the clergy's power – a monopoly on the interpretation of religion and the ability to mobilise the masses – would eventually turn the clergy into a free-rider, exploiting the public presence of religion to consolidate its oligarchy and to marginalise, if not to eliminate, all the rivals including the modern Muslim intellectuals.

Over the past few decades in post-revolutionary Iran, Ali Shari'ati's discourse has often been identified as the backbone of Khomeini's theory of *velāyat-e faqih*.[11] Shari'ati's revolutionary Islamic discourse, it is argued, is responsible for much of the post-revolutionary faults and failures. It was Shari'ati, the argument goes, who successfully brought Islam into the public sphere in the 1970s; his discourse mobilised the masses but also empowered the reactionary clergy. Without Shari'ati, Islam in Iran would have remained in the private sphere, the clerical oligarchy would not have been in power and today's Iran would have been ruled by a modern secular democracy.

Inspired by Seyyed Javād Tabātabā'i, Iran's liberal thinker and the champion of the nationalist discourse of *Irānshahri*, Mohammad Quchāni, an Iranian journalist, argues that the idea of an 'Islamic Protestantism' is a 'tragedy' that has turned a 'religious reform' into a 'religious despotism'. The path to political freedom does not pass through religious reform, he argues; and the Christian Protestantism in the West – the dream version of Islamic

---

[10] Ibid., 32.
[11] See Quchāni, 'Rowshanfekr-e mosallah', 22–46, and Mahmudi, 'Mohāfezehkārān-e enqelābi'.

Protestantism – resulted in tyranny, religious dogma and violence. Hence, Islamic Protestantism would have the same 'tragic' outcome. For him, Shari'ati's intellectual legacy has already contributed to the materialisation of such tragedy in Iran.[12]

From a secular left perspective, Ervand Abrahamian offers his own radical critique of Islamic reformation. In *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin*, he acknowledges that Shari'ati's project of an Islamic Renaissance and Protestant reformation challenged the ulema's monopoly over the interpretation of religious texts. Inspired by Max Weber, Abrahamian maintains, Shari'ati argued that 'Islam, like Christianity, needed a new interpretation to transform old "negative" religion into a "positive" force that would help human development.'[13] However, for Abrahamian, Shari'ati, like the Mojahedin, built his ideological constructs on several basic flaws. They

> failed to realize that it was highly difficult, if not impossible, to have a revolution under the banner of religion and yet keep the leadership of that revolution out of the hands of the religious authorities. An Islamic revolution had the built-in danger of becoming a clerical revolution. This danger had been known to the intelligentsia of previous generations: from the nineteenth century, through the constitutional revolution, all the way to the Mosaddeq period. But the young generation, who got carried away by the 1963 Uprising, brushed aside history and rushed in headlong where others had feared to tread.[14]

Abrahamian then continues, 'precedent was clearly on the side of the ulama', so he raises an important question: 'who is better equipped to judge what is true Islam? The ulama who have spent a lifetime studying the Koran, the hadiths, the shari'a and the previous Muslim scholars? or intellectuals, from foreign universities, with degrees in engineering, modern sciences and, at best, Islamology?'[15]

---

[12] Mohammad Quchāni, 'Terāzhedi-ye protestāntizm-e eslāmi: cheguneh az eslāh-e dini, estebdād-e dini sar bar miyāvarad?' *Mehrnāmeh* 3 (Tir 1393 / July 2014): 22–33. For a critique of this argument, see Hasan Yusefi Eshkevari, 'Afsāneh-ye terāzhedi-ye protestāntizm-e eslāmi!' *Yousefi Eshkevari* [website], 14 Bahman 1393 / 3 February 2015, http://yousefieshkevari.com/?p=4710 (accessed 4 January 2023).
[13] Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, 120.
[14] Ibid., 123.
[15] Ibid.

The champions of Islamic reformation like Shari'ati and the Mojahedin, argues Abrahamian, 'could not admit even themselves that Luther, Calvin and Zwingli had succeeded both because they had been accomplished Biblical scholars capable of challenging the church on its own ground, and because they had enlisted the active support of monarchs and local states against Rome. The equivalent would have been to ally with the Shah against Qom.'[16] Furthermore, while they talked much about 'historical determinism',

> their method of analysis was in reality highly ahistorical. They glossed over the long period stretching from Karbala to the twentieth century. They failed to explain why a religion that was supposedly revolutionary succumbed so easily to the iron law of bureaucracy. This was a particularly troublesome question given their claim that the ideological superstructure could drastically transform the socio-economic infrastructure. If Shiism was above all a revolutionary ideology, and if revolutionary ideologies were capable of changing the infrastructure, why then had Shiism failed? And, if it had failed in the past how could one be sure that it would not fail again in the future?[17]

For Abrahamian, the flaws in this argument are much deeper, as the champions of Islamic reformation 'refused to grapple with the fact that thirteen centuries of history supported the conventional ulema in their traditional interpretation of Islam'. While Shari'ati and the Mojahedin 'claimed that Islam should be oppose feudalism and capitalism; should eradicate inhumane practices; should treat all as equal citizens; and should socialize the means of production', the ulama, in contrast, could show that

> for centuries Islam had sanctioned polygamy, sharecropping and private property; had recommended corporal punishments, including amputation of hands, stoning for adultery, and hanging of sodomists; and had advocated inequality, especially between Muslims and non-Muslims, between men and women, and between those with and without ejtehad (right to interpret the shari'a).[18]

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., 123–4.
[18] Ibid., 123.

The current predicaments of post-revolutionary Iran four decades after the 1979 revolution have reinforced the above line of arguments. On the surface, it seems one has no option but to fully admire Jazani's smart predictions and echo Abrahamian's critiques. However, while we can appreciate Jazani's intellectual sharpness, there are some fundamental flaws in this line of argument. This will be discussed in the following three sections.

Dialectics of Structure and Agency: Contextualisation of the Role of Ideas in the 1979 Revolution

The hegemony of Khomeinism and the clerical oligarchy in post-revolutionary Iran is a result of multiple socio-political, economic and cultural factors. It cannot be reduced to a simple and single factor of religious ideas and undermining the dialectics and interactions of structures and agencies during and after the 1979 revolution. Neither were the structures on holiday nor were the agencies dead in 1978–9. As I have shown elsewhere, the dialectics and interplay of three structural factors – the state structure (political level), uneven development (socio-economic structure) and the Cold War (global structure) – as well as three agential factors – Khomeini's charisma (individual level), mosques and a nationwide network of religious centres (institutional level) and a populist revolutionary discourse (intellectual level) – led to the hegemony of Khomeinism.[19]

In addition to the crisis of legitimacy in post-1953 coup regime, the petrolic neo-sultanistic nature of the Shah regime made the state relatively independent of society, and society had a limited impact on the state. The more the Shah fused his power with the state and the more he relied upon the state's dependent-coercive apparatus, the oil revenues and the United States, the more he removed himself from society.

The manifestation of uneven socio-economic development was threefold. First, it lent itself to discrepancies between economic and political progress. As a result, the political structure lagged far behind the economic modernisation of the country. The middle class was politically, culturally and, in the later

---

[19] This section of the chapter draws significantly from my earlier work: Mojtaba Mahdavi, 'The Rise of Khomeinism: Problematizing the Politics of Resistance in Pre-revolutionary Iran', in *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, ed. Arshin Adib Moghadam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 43–68.

years, economically dissatisfied with the regime: 'In an age of republicanism, radicalism and nationalism, the Pahlavi regime appeared in the eyes of the intelligentsia to favor monarchism, conservatism, and Western imperialism.'[20] Second, uneven development polarised the economic structure and shaped a dual society with conflicting traditional and semi-industrial economies. The Shah's White Revolution polarised the socio-economic system, frustrating both traditional and modern classes and, creating a new dissatisfied social class of the urban poor who played a major role in the 1979 revolution. Third, Iran's socio-economic structure under the Shah was also unevenly influenced by the world economic system and a 'dependent development'. The traditional bazaar economy and the guild artisans were squeezed out of the market by cheap imports and suffered from arbitrary measures implemented by the state.[21]

The global structure of power during the Cold War was conducive to revolutionary conditions and favourable to the making of Khomeinism in different ways: under the shadow of the Cold War, progressive (secular or Muslim) liberal and leftist individuals, ideas and institutions were considered to be the regime's major threats. The anti-communist sentiments of the clerical establishment provided a temporary and relatively safe institutional haven for the clergy. Furthermore, under the presidency of Jimmy Carter, US foreign policy shifted from the Nixon years. Carter's policy of human rights and limited liberalisation pushed the Shah to release some political prisoners without implementing major reforms. But President Carter remained unsure whether the United States should continue supporting the Shah. Since Carter did not have strong feelings towards the Shah, nor a policy to deal with the revolution, the Shah was left uncertain about his response to the revolutionary conditions. It was against such structural factors that Khomeinism used certain ideas, institutions and leadership skills to dominate the revolutionary field.

Karl Marx once wrote that 'men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted

---

[20] Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, 17.
[21] John Foran, 'The Iranian Revolution of 1977–79: A Challenge for Social Theory', in *A Century of Revolution: Social Movements in Iran*, ed. John Foran (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994),167–8.

from the past'.[22] Marx's account of the relations between structure and agency suggests that there is a web of possibilities for an agent to make choices, but only within certain constraints set by pre-existing structures. However, equally important is the fact that political actors are neither passive nor mechanically determined by structure. Khomeinism as an idea and movement took advantage of the structural opportunities in the 1970s. The radical-populist culture of Iran in the 1970s, the influence of traditional institutions and the charismatic clerical leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini – the trilogy of ideas, institutions and individuals – constituted the three most important factors that turned Khomeinism into the dominant voice of the opposition to the Shah. Given the diversity of political forces in pre-revolutionary Iran, the revolutionary movement was made of a populist coalition of left and right, religious and secular trends, and liberal-nationalist and socialist groups. Out of this situation emerged a set of ideas and ideologies that mobilised the people. The question, however, remains why Khomeinism came to dominate the revolution in 1978–9.

Khomeini succeeded in incorporating a set of modern ideas and new cultural idioms that were foreign to traditional Islam. He adopted ideas developed by progressive Muslim thinkers and even secular intellectuals that went beyond the traditional purview of the clerical orthodoxy in Iran. The ideas of lay intellectuals such as Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad and Ali Shari'ati influenced Khomeini's transition from a traditional ayatollah to a revolutionary. By the 1970s, Khomeini was transformed into a populist and revolutionary ayatollah with an ability to communicate with different strata of society within Iran and beyond. Hence, Khomeinism became a mixture of ideas and a marriage of opposites, as Khomeini and his close circle of clerics hired, if not hijacked, modern progressive idioms.

Ali Shari'ati died from a massive heart attack in London, just before the revolution in June 1977. Amidst the revolutionary upheaval and in his absence, the authentic meaning of his ideas, which were based on a radical deconstruction of Islamic thought, were lost. Henceforth, Shari'ati's words and idioms were applied outside of their original intellectual and political context.

---

[22] Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. R.C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 595.

As a result, his discourse was manipulated to fit the politics of the day, in part due to its partial and improper use within the hegemonic discourse of Khomeinism. Moreover, on the eve of the revolution, Shari'ati's discourse, like other non-clerical discourses, was not supported by institutions and was not carried forward by a single charismatic leader. Thus, his death led to confusion and misrepresentation of his ideology.

Institutionally, the relative economic and political autonomy of the clerical establishment helped the clergy as an institution to survive and to serve Khomeini's revolutionary purpose. Conversely, in the post-coup era, the secular constitutionalists, progressive Muslims, liberals and socialists were experiencing institutional decline in the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, the Khomeinist factions filled the institutional gap among the opponents of the Shah's regime.

Lastly, Khomeini's personal character, his religious status and revolutionary charisma were effective in the making of Khomeinism. He was an unusually unorthodox ayatollah and a personification of many syntheses and contradictions. To the people he represented he seemed 'traditional', and to the young idealistic intelligentsia he represented unorthodoxy and resistance. In this way, his political message reached the members of all social classes.[23]

In sum, Ali Shari'ati's ideas, among other Muslim reformists, were influential only within such complex dialectics of structures and agencies. Although Shari'ati's thought, like that of other intellectuals, must be critically examined and problematised, it seems quite ahistorical to blame him and his plan of Islamic reformation/renaissance for the current catastrophe under the clerical oligarchy. The power of ideas in isolation of their socio-historical contexts is not omnipotent; they are constrained and structured by their context. It seems naïve to argue that an Islamic reformation brought religion into the public sphere and changed the course of Iran's 'linear' path towards secular modernity.

---

[23] Mahdavi, 'The Rise of Khomeinism'.

The Myth of the Universalist Enlightenment Project:
Public Religion in Modern Times

The second problem with the argument on the failure of Islamic reformation is that it is deeply rooted in the myth of the unilinear trajectory of secular modernity – the Universalist Enlightenment Project, in which religion either will disappear or will be pushed into the private sphere. It is not quite clear on what socio-historical bases/analysis Iran would have turned into a progressive secular democracy, had modern Muslim intellectuals and activists not modernised Islamic discourse.

Moreover, the rise of modern and reformist Muslim discourse should be analysed in the context of Iran's encounter with colonial and autocratic modernity. The failure and crisis of autocratic modernity profoundly contributed to the emergence and popularity of an alternative 'Islamic discourse' in the 1970s. Besides, contrary to the linear positivist modernist trajectory of progress, it is quite plausible to imagine if there had been no attempt to reform religion, Iran today may have encountered even more deteriorating socio-cultural conditions. The rise of religious fascisms such as ISIS, the Islamist extremism of Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Boko Haram and al-Shabab, and even the Muslim Brotherhood in modern Muslim contexts suggests that Iran was not immune to such reactionary discourses. More specifically, the rise of the *Mashru'eh* discourse of Sheykh Fazlollāh Nuri and the religious fanaticism of the Fadā'iyan-e Eslām and the Mo'talefeh-ye eslāmi, together with the Anjoman-e Hojjatiyeh and other individual and groups in modern Iran, is indicative of Iran's fertile soil for the extreme forms of Islamic fundamentalism.

Khomeinism is certainly a regressive political discourse and has betrayed the emancipatory message of the 1979 revolution; Iran under the Khomeinist oligarchic Islamist regime is suffering. Nonetheless, Iran's 'post-Islamist' societal conditions[24] and its paradigmatic socio-cultural shift towards democratic values are in part due to the reform in Islamic discourse. Islamic reformation has contributed to the de-sacralisation of the religious discourse and religious politics in Iranian society. Such a profound societal change is best exemplified

---

[24] See Mojtaba Mahdavi, 'Post-Islamist Trends in Postrevolutionary Iran', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 31:1 (2011): 94–109.

in the current progressive movement of *zan, zendegi, āzādi* (woman, life, freedom), a movement led by women and identified by such a women-friendly motto and discourse.

Furthermore, an anti-hermeneutics approach and cultural essentialism are another shortcoming of the idea of a unilinear trajectory of secular modernity. Jazani's argument seems to fall into this trap: 'Islam, like all other religions, being based on divine truth and revelations, is in fundamental disagreement with reason, science and modern thought.' He seems to stress the abstract text, rather than a social context within which a Muslim as a free agent can make religion and reason compatible. As Asef Bayat argues, the question is not whether religion and reason are compatible; the real question is under what social conditions a Muslim – as an agent of interpretation – could make them compatible.[25] In other words, a sociological, not a theological, approach seems more appropriate in the study of religion in society. Furthermore, religion is not just an abstract divine text. Rather, it is more about a religious person. For the most part, *religion is what the religious person makes of it*. A religious person is an embodiment of religion in each society and in a different historical era. Because religious persons evolve and their understanding of religiosity/spirituality/transcendence develops, religions evolve, too.

Moreover, both Jazani and Abrahamian seem to have underestimated the positive contribution of Islamic reform outside the clerical establishment. Modern Muslim intellectuals have actually succeeded in creating a counter-hegemonic discourse, challenging clerical monopoly of religious interpretation and also, to some extent, producing an alternative voice for the mobilisation of the masses. They have challenged submissive and deterministic recommendations that legitimise the monopoly of religious interpretation for the conservative religious establishment. For modern Muslims, religion is not the property of the clergy; it belongs to the people and should be liberated and reclaimed. The liberation theology is a fact of modern history in some religions, and Islam is no exception.

---

[25] Asef Bayat, 'Islam and Democracy: What is the Real Question?', *ISIM Papers 8* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 5–21. https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A2721956/view (accessed 26 March 2023).

Besides, it is important to remember that Islamic reformation does not have to follow in the footsteps of the Reformation/Protestantism in Europe. Modern Muslim reformists seem to have used Protestantism and/or Reformation as metaphors for grassroots change towards development and prosperity. The method, scope and nature of religious reform are determined by the particularities of each society and history. Muslim-majority societies may choose their own particular approaches to reform.

A bottom-up and home-grown model of development needs a serious and meaningful engagement with local tradition, and religion is one component of the tradition in Muslim-majority contexts. Reform is a complex and multidimensional project, which involves socio-economic, political and cultural – including religious – reforms. It is true that religious reform alone does not guarantee the success of a comprehensive change in the society. However, it is also true that religious reform plays a significant role for achieving grassroots and durable change in a semi-traditional society where religion is an important part of people's socio-cultural life. Contrary to the idea of historical materialism, societal transformations do not materialise exclusively through economic structures and modes of production. Progressive changes may be started and/or complemented by meaningful reforms in socio-cultural/religious norms. These dialectical relations between material structures and ideas seem to better explain the course of changes in different societies across history. Shari'ati's approach towards social change seems to follow such dialectical relations, as he once argued he had bridged Marx (who believed in the primacy of material objectivity over the mind) and Max Weber (who believed in the primacy of subjectivity over objectivity, and culture over economics), and synthesised the two into '*Marx Weber*'![26]

Additionally, as shown repeatedly in both semi-traditional and modern post-industrial societies, it is impossible to push religious tradition into a private, isolated arena. Religions find their own ways to get into the public sphere. They are constantly reinvented by religious citizens in modern times, either in the form of violent extremisms or emancipatory peaceful alternatives. Hence, religious traditions need to be confronted, challenged, negotiated, rediscovered and reformed. The alternative to the Islamic reformation

---

[26] Ali Shari'ati, 'Cheh bāyad kard?', in *Majmu'eh-ye Āsār* 26 (Tehran: Amun, 1993), 467.

is not necessarily the privatisation of religion; it could be the politicisation of reactionary religion, as has been the case in Muslim contexts. In their reformation projects/processes, modern Muslim reformists have contributed to the secularisation and demystification of religious traditions, making such traditions the source of progressive change for religious people. At the same time, the Islamic reform facilitates a *civil dialogue* between religious traditions and non-religious traditions/citizens; it profoundly contributes to the rationalisation of arguments made by religious citizens and to the democratisation of religious traditions.

Contemporary theories of secularisation, contrary to those of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have shown that the privatisation of religion is wishful thinking. The rise of new religious and/or spiritual movements (both regressive and progressive) in the global South and global North is a fact of contemporary life. More importantly, Habermas, the iconic figure of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, among other critical and progressive scholars, has argued that we are living in a 'post-secular age' where both religion and reason are more humbled. Hence, a meaningful dialogue between the secular mind and religious traditions for mutual understanding/learning is warranted. According to Habermas, one could learn from religion but remain 'agnostic' in the process. In other words, religion can be a source of moral values that one can learn from, even if one remains agnostic about the truth claims of religious beliefs. He believes that the secular person/society can benefit from the rational-critical examination of religious beliefs and the incorporation of its positive aspects into a secular worldview.[27] This is clearly a radical departure from the old secularist approach towards religion, and most likely a great lesson for both the religious and secular left/liberal in Iran. Furthermore, the search for transcendence and a modern and progressive post-religious spirituality are facts of modern life. Also, inspired by Émile Durkheim's approach, there is an ongoing debate about the positive role of religion to promote social cohesion and solidarity and, as shown by Robert Putnam, religion may provide social capital. Religion, in sum, seems no longer regarded as an outdated regressive phenomenon doomed to disappear.

---

[27] Jürgen Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Sphere', *European Journal of Philosophy* 14:1 (2006): 1–25.

Lastly, the process of autocratic modernisation and top-down secularisation in Iran and other Muslim-majority nations immensely contributed to the politicisation of religion and its greater role in the public sphere. Hence, we may argue that religion was already a public phenomenon with or without modern Muslim reformist efforts. Religion was already active in the public sphere and modern Muslims simply addressed and acknowledged its presence. Reformed religion has served as an antidote to the regressive and reactionary responses of religious fanaticism to autocratic modernity, without which today's Iran would have probably been in a much more disastrous condition. Modern Muslims seem to have offered a modern response (although with limitations and contradictions) to both autocratic modernity and the religious orthodoxy. Ali Shari'ati was certainly a leading figure in this camp.

Revisiting Ali Shari'ati: Did He Give a New Face to the Old Regressive Ideas?[28]

Was Ali Shari'ati (1933–77) the most sophisticated and influential socialist Muslim in modern Iran? Or was he a new face – a modern version – of the regressive clerical discourse of Khomeinism? In this section, I suggest that there are fundamental ontological and epistemological differences between Shari'ati's discourse and the clerical oligarchy of Khomeinism. Shari'ati's core ideas are twofold: a 'return to self' (*bāzgasht beh khⱽish*) and a trinity of 'freedom, equality/social justice and civil spirituality' (*āzādi, barābari, erfān*).

Shari'ati made a clear distinction between his indigenous and authentic idea of a 'return to the self' and a regressive, nativist and nostalgic return to the past. The first approach, he argued, involves a critical re-examination of our tradition/historical legacy in order to liberate the nation's tradition from all kinds of hegemonic discourses, such as the institutionalised religion of the clerical class and the autocratic/colonial modernisation. The second approach, however, is best represented by 'return to the plough' (*bāzgasht beh khⱽish*)! The two homophones *khⱽish* (self) and *khish* (plough) in Persian were used to conceptualise and characterise the discourse of return to the self. In other

---

[28] This section of the chapter draws significantly from my earlier work: Mojtaba Mahdavi, 'From Nakhshab to Neo-Shariati: Three Generations of Iran's Modern Muslim Left', in *Mapping the Role of Intellectuals in Iranian Modern and Contemporary History*, ed. Ramin Jahanbegloo (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books; Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 275–94.

words, there is an elective affinity between Shari'ati's future-oriented and utopian approach towards religion and the vision of the European neo-Marxist Ernest Bloch (1885–1977) about the function of hope and utopia in society.[29] Such progressive visions are ontologically different from a nativist and regressive view of religion and tradition shared by Ayatollah Khomeini and his close clerical circle.[30]

For Shari'ati, his trinity of 'freedom, equality/social justice and civil spirituality' provides a counter-hegemonic and emancipatory alternative to the multiple structures of domination. In his Gramscian approach/formulation, structures of domination rest upon a triangle of economic power, political oppression and inner ideological/cultural justification. In his innovative and poetic wording, the 'trinity of oppression' is listed as *zar-zur-tazvir* (gold-coercion-deception), or *talā-tigh-tasbih* (gold-sword-rosary), exploitation (*estesmār*, connoting material injustice), political dictatorship (*estebdād*) and religious and other forms of cultural alienation (*estehmār*). Shari'ati then offers a 'trinity of emancipation', a three-dimensional ideal type and a counter-hegemonic alternative of 'freedom, equality/social justice and civil spirituality' (*āzādi, barābari, erfān*), to dismantle the trinity of oppression.

For Shari'ati, history shows that freedom without social justice has degenerated into a freedom of market, not a freedom of human beings. Social justice without freedom has undermined human dignity; and religion and spirituality without freedom and social justice have ignored the essence of our humanity. These ideal types have turned into regressive forces and new means of domination, and have served the status quo. The solution to this problem, Shari'ati argued, is the synergy and synthesis of these three ideal types to make a three-dimensional self, society and polity.[31] The unity of such three ideals would free human beings from the bond of divine and materialistic determinism. It 'frees mankind from the captivity of heaven and earth alike and arrives at true

---

[29] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols (Boston, MA: MIT Press, [1954] 1995); see also Michael Löwy, 'Romanticism, Marxism and Religion in "The Principle of Hope" of Ernst Bloch', trans. Rodrigo Gonsalves, *Crisis & Critique* 2:1 (2015): 350–5.

[30] For a critical examination of Shari'ati and Khomeini, see Mojtaba Mahdavi, 'One Bed and Two Dreams? Contentious Public Religion in the Discourses of Ayatollah Khomeini and Ali Shariati', *Studies in Religion* 43:1 (2014): 25–52.

[31] Ali Shari'ati, 'Khod sāzi-ye enqelābi', *Majmu'eh-ye āsār* 2 (Tehran: Ershād, 1982), 37–47.

humanism'.[32] More specifically, the core of Shari'ati's discourse is threefold: freedom and democracy without capitalism/market fundamentalism, social justice and socialism without authoritarianism and materialism, and civil spirituality and ethics without organised religion and clericalism.

Democracy and Freedom

For Shari'ati, existing democracies offer only a minimum requirement of an ideal radical democracy, a *demokrāsi-ye showrā'i* (consultative democracy), which relies on active, equal, effective and more inclusive participation of all citizens not only in the legal-political sphere but also in socio-economic domains. In other words, he seems to advocate a radical democracy in which democratic principles are seen beyond the traditional structures of representative government, facilitating direct citizen participation and decision-making in all areas of society, including the economy and workplaces. However, Shari'ati's position on democracy and the role of intellectuals in the state is controversial. For Shari'ati, the *rowshanfekrān* as Iran's organic intellectuals are obliged to launch a renaissance and reformation. As such, in *Ommat va emāmat* (Community and Leadership), the *young* Shari'ati advocated the idea of a 'committed/guided democracy', in which the *rowshanfekrān* were obliged to raise public consciousness, and guide public opinion only in a transitional period after the revolution. Such a revolutionary leadership would transform the quantity/number of the ignorant masses (*ra's*) into informed citizens with a quality opinion (*ra'y*), and a *procedural* formal democracy into a substantive *radical* democracy.[33]

A young egalitarian Shari'ati was sceptical of procedural democracy in the Third World; his scepticism was primarily based on the experience of the newly independent countries after World War II where the ignorant and conservative masses 'would not be attracted by a progressive leadership concerned with the total transformation of society's old modes of thought, concepts and ways. If the people were to vote under such circumstances, Shari'ati argues that their vote would be for ignorant and conservative leaders like themselves.'[34]

---

[32] Ibid., 47.
[33] Ali Shari'ati, 'Cheh bāyad kard?', 461–634.
[34] Ali Rahnema and Farhad Nomani, *The Secular Miracle: Religion, Politics and Economic Policy in Iran* (London: Zed Books, 1990), 67.

Shari'ati's position should be examined in the context of the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Bandung in 1955, where the postcolonial revolutionary leaders advocated 'committed/ guided democracy' to stop the manipulation of public opinion in the electoral process in new postcolonial states. In the phase of transition from the old order to the new society, 'the principle of democracy [was] considered to be in contradiction with the principle of revolutionary change, progress and leadership'.[35]

Nonetheless, the *mature* Shari'ati changed his earlier position and explicitly rejected dictatorship of any form, or of any social class. He often quoted Rousseau: 'do not show people the "path," and do not assign them [what to do]; just give them "sight" [vision]!, and they will find the path properly, and will know their own obligations'.[36] The mature Shari'ati seems to have echoed Antonio Gramsci's view on the role of intellectuals for enlightening the masses. In his own words, 'the function of intellectuals is not the political leadership of a society, rather, their sole job is to give awareness on the masses, that's all. If an intellectual awakens his society, the product of his mission will be heroes who can lead the intellectuals themselves.'[37] Moreover, the primary agents of change in history and society are the people, not political or religious elites. He even suggests that the concept of God in the Koran can be equated with the people in social issues: 'We can always substitute the people for God.'[38] As such, the theory of committed/guided democracy does not seem to represent the core of Shari'ati's political theory.

Did Shari'ati advocate a religious state? Did his ideas contribute to the theory of *velāyat-e faqih*? Shari'ati articulated a humanist Islamic discourse in that people are the only true representatives of God on earth. In '*Mazhab alayh-e mazhab*' (religion against religion) Shari'ati accused the clergy of monopolistic control over the interpretation of Islam in order to set up a clerical despotism (*estebdād-e ruhāni*), which, he argues, is the worst and the most oppressive form of despotism possible in human history, the 'mother of all despotism and dictatorship'. The religious state, he argued, is a clerical oligarchy. It is a clerical despotism. It is not accountable to people because it projects

---

[35] Ibid., 67.
[36] Ali Shari'ati, 'Bāzgasht', *Majmu'eh-ye āsār* 4 (Tehran: Elhām, 1998), 257–8, 342.
[37] Shari'ati, 'Cheh bāyad kard?', 49–108.
[38] Ibid., 153.

itself as God's representative on earth. The basic rights of the opposition groups, non-religious and religious other, are denied because they are God's enemy. Brutal injustice is justified in the name of God's mercy and justice.[39] However, for Shari'ati, modern and civil progressive spirituality, not organised religion, still plays a constructive role in the public sphere.

Social Justice and Equality

Shari'ati's strong egalitarian leaning and constant critique of all forms of social injustice/inequality make him a socialist thinker. For Shari'ati, however, socialism is not merely a mode of production; rather, it is a way of life.[40] He is critical of state socialism, and worshipping personality, worshipping party and worshipping state; he *advocates humanist* socialism. He was, in fact, very critical of Soviet and other state-centred socialisms and was clearly influenced by European neo-Marxists and democratic socialism. There is a strong affinity between Shari'ati and marginal/subaltern European neo-Marxists such as anarchists and cultural humanist Marxists. It is probably fair to argue that Shari'ati was among the first very few Iranian intellectuals who introduced new ideas of European neo-Marxism to the Iranians when the dominant discourse of Iranian Marxism (except to very important but marginalised figures such as Khalil Maleki) was Soviet and/or Chinese Marxism. Shari'ati was clearly influenced by the Hungarian neo-Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács (1885–1971), German neo-Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885–1977), and certainly German-American critical philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979). It is not clear to me to what extent Shari'ati was familiar with the Italian neo-Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), but it is very clear that he was influenced by Gramsci's socio-cultural approach to transforming society as well as the impact of cultural hegemony and counter-hegemony. The affinity between Shari'ati and Gramsci, argues Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, is clear as Shari'ati's cultural approach was 'a Gramscian moment in contemporary Iranian politics'.[41] Furthermore, Shari'ati studied under European

---

[39] Ali Shari'ati, 'Mazhab alayh-e mazhab', *Majmu'eh-ye āsār* 22 (Tehran: Chāpakhsh, 1998), 153.

[40] Shari'ati, 'Khod sāzi-ye enqelābi', 107.

[41] Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, 'Contentious Public Religion: Two Conceptions of Islam in Revolutionary Iran: Ali Shari'ati and Abdolkarim Soroush', *International Sociology* 19:4 (December 2004): 512.

Marxologists such as Georges Gurvitch (1894–1965) and Henry Laufer, and taught their work in Iran. Shari'ati's humanist, cultural and Gramscian socialism seems to reject state-sponsored socialism. He remained critical of any interpretation of Marxism which admires economism, determinism and authoritarianism. In his own words,

> It is clear in what sense we are not Marxists, and in what sense we are social-ists. As a universal and scientific principle, Marx makes economics the infrastructure of man; but we [hold] precisely the opposite [view]. That is why we are the enemy of capitalism and hate the bourgeoisie. Our greatest hope in socialism is that in it man, his faith, ideas and ethical values are not super-structural, are not the manufactured and produced goods of economic infrastructure. They are their own cause. Modes of production do not pro-duce them. They are made between two hands of 'love' and 'consciousness.' Man chooses, creates and sustains himself.[42]

Shari'ati's egalitarianism and his passion for social justice were not influenced merely by European neo-Marxism; he was equally influenced by Iranian move-ments such as those of Mazdak and the Shu'ubiyya, as well as by Arab left scholars such as Judah al-Sahhar, the author of *Abu Dharr al-Ghifāri*.

Civil and Progressive Spirituality

For Shari'ati, freedom and social justice must be complemented with modern, civil and progressive spirituality. Nonetheless, he makes it crystal clear that freedom and social justice remain the top priorities for ordinary people, and spirituality is futile without freedom and social justice. Shari'ati uses the symbolic story of Adam and the Forbidden Fruit in the Garden of Eden to highlight the significance of civil rights and social justice, and to demonstrate how mysticism may turn into a false conciseness and religious deception: 'In the Garden of Eden', argues Shari'ati, 'Adam was blessed with every gift from God. Every fruit in this bountiful garden was permitted, with the exception of one fruit, [the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil], which had

---

[42] Ali Shari'ati cited in Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers, 2006 [1992]), 143.

been forbidden.' Yet in our world, continues Shari'ati, 'the ordinary people are denied access to most every fruit. *The permitted fruits have become forbidden for us.*' He then asks, 'How are we to go after the forbidden fruit when our basic human rights [*hoquq-e ādamiyat*] have not been recognised, when we have been denied the God-given gifts of this garden, when we have not tasted even its permitted fruits?' Then he forcefully makes his point:

> To preach about love to those who do not have bread is nothing but a nasty deception dressed as piety and asceticism. And to tell those with no drinking water the story of Alexander's search for the fountain of eternal life is nothing but a bad joke! Intellectuals must remember that in our context, our mission is to *help people find the permitted fruits, not to send them after the forbidden one*.[43]

Moreover, Shari'ati is well aware of the shortcomings of official mysticism: established/institutionalised religion and mysticism 'became a shackle on the foot of the spiritual and material evolution of mankind'. It 'actually separates man from his own humanity. It makes him into an importunate beggar, a slave of unseen forces beyond his power; it deposes him and alienates him from his own will. It is this established religion that today we are familiar with.'[44] Nonetheless, modern critical *erfān* and spirituality, he argues, provide a modern spiritual vision; ontology and epistemology sharply differ from religious formalism and passive, apolitical mysticism. It provides us with a synthetic spirituality in a critical dialogue with other religious traditions and modern concepts. It is, in fact, a *post-religious spirituality*.[45]

For Shari'ati, the trinity of freedom, social justice and spirituality *(āzādi, barābari, va erfān)* is not a mechanical marriage of three distinct concepts. Rather, it is a dialectical approach towards self- and social emancipation; it puts together three inseparable dimensions of man and society. In sum, Shari'ati's trinity of emancipation, the most relevant core of his discourse, seems to translate into an *ethical/humanist democratic socialism*. This ideal type clearly needs theorising the role of civil spirituality in the public sphere so the theory could

[43] Ali Shari'ati, 'Goftoguhā-ye tanhā'i', *Majmu'eh-ye āsār* 33 (Tehran: Āgāh, 1995), 1266, emphasis added.
[44] Shari'ati, 'Khod sāzi-ye enqelābi', 52, 60.
[45] Mahdavi, 'Post-Islamist Trends', 102–6.

translate into a workable synthetic political model. Hence, for the mature Shari'ati, the role of religion at the state level seems to be unofficial without a legal and institutional setting. Religion can, however, play a constructive role in advancing a spiritual perspective in politics and in the service of his trinity theory of emancipation.

In sum, Shari'ati's three-dimensional alternative discourse of freedom, social justice and spirituality was an attempt to overcome the dark side of modernity and to emancipate humanity from modernity's 'iron cage'. Equally significant, however, was his radical critique of the resilient fence of tradition. In his own words, two equally destructive and deceptive forces/discourses captivate us, and each produces a different form of false consciousness, cultural alienation and deception: new *estehmār* and, again, old *estehmār*! The first refers to colonial modernity, market fundamentalism and alienation by the hegemonic/colonial Western modernity. The second refers to religious deception and dogma.[46] Shari'ati seems to invite us to exercise an act of 'epistemic disobedience',[47] 'delinking' from the establishment – 'the gatekeepers' of 'word of reason' and 'word of God'. His approach is an invitation to think through a solution from within towards emancipation from all forms of *estehmār*, and a realisation of individual and society empowered by *āzādi, barābari, va erfān*.[48]

Iran after the revolution and under an Islamist clerical oligarchy is not the same as Iran in the 1960s and 1970s when Shari'ati lived. The Middle East region and the world have changed, and these changes require new thinking. Besides, there is much *unthought* in Ali Shari'ati's thought, and Iran's new post-Islamist generation is addressing and acknowledging such limitations. More specifically, Islamism seems to be one of the most significant aspects of Shari'ati's unthought.

Shari'ati criticised the religious clerical establishment of the ulema for its regressive and reactionary outlook, looking backwards to a mythical glorious age. It is evident from Shari'ati's writings that he visualised an Islam without

[46] See Shari'ati, 'Khod sāzi-ye enqelābi.'
[47] Walter Mignolo, 'Foreword: Yes, We Can', in *Can Non-Europeans Think?* ed. Hamid Dabashi (London: Zed Books, 2015), viii–xlii.
[48] Mojtaba Mahdavi, 'Iran: Multiple Sources of a Grassroots Social Democracy?', in *Iran's Struggles for Social Justice: Economics, Agency, Justice, Activism*, ed. Peyman Vahabzadeh (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 284.

the clergy's monopoly on religious inspiration and interpretation. Iran's clerical authority and organised religion (*ruhaniyyat*), Shari'ati argued, represented 'Safavid Shiism' – a passive and apolitical Shiism, which has corrupted revolutionary and progressive 'Alavid Shiism'. Organised clerical Islam, he argued, has served as a socio-cultural base of political despotism by withdrawing religion from its public responsibilities, depoliticising it except for legitimising the current social order and transforming it into individual piety and asceticism.[49] An Islamic liberation theology and an Islamic renaissance/reformation, he thought, would be a solution to Iran's stagnation and social status quo.[50] However, the rise of revolutionary Islamism in post-revolutionary Iran is probably one of the most significant unthoughts in Shari'ati's thought. The question is whether Shari'ati underestimated the socio-organisational power of the clergy and the rise of radical Islamism in post-revolutionary Iran. He seems never to have anticipated the return and reincarnation of the same regressive and conservative clerical Islam of Safavid Shiism but masked with a revolutionary Alavid Shiism, that is, revolutionary Islamism. Islamism was unthought in Shari'ati's thought. Hence, the post-revolutionary context requires new thinking about how to challenge Islamist hegemony and its complex mode of domination. This new condition may also require rethinking the nature and methods of an Islamic reformation. Some liberal religious intellectuals have already challenged the hegemonic discourse of the *velāyat-e faqih*. However, a more sophisticated and radical critique of not only clerical Islamism but every aspect of the Islamist ontology and epistemology is needed. This is particularly important since the rise of the *zan, zendegi, āzādi* (woman, life, freedom) movement in September 2022.

Conclusion

The *zan, zendegi, āzādi* movement in today's Iran has demonstrated a paradigm shift towards a *post-Islamist social condition* in Iran. It shows a sea-change in socio-cultural norms and the social structure of Iranian society in general, and the new generations in particular. It also demonstrates that Iran's clerical

[49] Ali Shari'ati, 'Tashayyo'-e alavi, tashayyo'-e safavi', *Majmu'eh-ye āsār* 9 (Tehran: Chāpakhsh, 1998).
[50] Shari'ati, 'Cheh bāyad kard?.'

oligarchy of the Islamist state – the Islamic Republic – is an anachronical phenomenon for a post-Islamist (not post-Islam) society; a society that is far ahead of the ruling Islamists. The movement represents Iran's progressive 'post-Islamist' civil society that radically challenges the state's Islamist socio-cultural code of conduct. In this context, while Islamism and its project of an 'Islamic state' are politically still in power, they have socially failed and are exhausted. Islam as a religion and culture, however, will continue to play its role in both the private and public (society, not the state) spheres. Public religion is a fact of modern life. As shown in new theories of (post)secularisation, privatisation of religion is neither possible nor probably desirable. Progressive interpretations of religion in the form of an alternative epistemology may contribute to civil rights movements and progressive politics. They can also provide a radical critique of religious fanaticism, Islamic fundamentalism/ Islamism and the Islamic state from within the Islamic traditions. Some Muslim reformist intellectuals in post-revolutionary Iran have radically challenged the theory of *velāyat-e faqih* and the Islamic state, and clearly proposed the idea of a secular (*orfi* or *madani*) state for a Muslim-majority society. This is not exclusive to Iran, as there are many modern Muslim reformists across the Muslim word who have theorised the idea of a secular state while accepting a civil role of religion in the public sphere.[51]

In the 1979 Iranian revolution, religion played a significant role, but it was one among many other factors leading to the revolution. One has to examine the dynamic and dialectics of multiple structures and agencies that contributed to the revolutionary conditions and contextualise the role of religion in revolutionary Iran. Furthermore, Islam was represented by multiple and diverse voices/forces during the 1979 revolution; it was not monolithic. Did progressive Muslim voices facilitate the hegemony of Khomeinist clerical Islam? The success of Khomeinism overshadowed progressive ideas introduced by modern intellectuals. Khomeinism was a mixture of ideas and a marriage of opposites, as Khomeini and his close circle of clerics utilised political concepts introduced by the secular intelligentsia and progressive Muslim intellectuals, particularly

---

[51] For an excellent account of this argument, see Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); and Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

those of Ali Shari'ati, and incorporated them into a hybrid discourse of Third Worldism, populism, radicalism and Islamism. Moreover, the authentic meaning of Shari'ati's thought was lost in the midst of the revolutionary waves. His words and idioms were applied outside of their original intellectual and political context, creating much confusion among the middle class. As a result, his discourse suffered, in part, due to its partial and improper use within the hegemonic discourse of Khomeinism.

Bizhan Jazani had argued that 'reckless exploitation of religion was tantamount to placing one's own head under a sword of Damocles'.[52] This is only partially true, as in the end a progressive interpretation of Islam served a clerical conservative political Islam; it was instrumental in the making of Khomeinism. Nonetheless, this line of reasoning is equally problematic if it implies the following arguments: public religion would naturally bring catastrophic outcomes, so religion must be privatised; the reform project by progressive Muslims is useless and has to be abandoned because a reformed public religion would inevitably serve regressive religious forces; and finally, spiritual ontology and epistemology are inherently and essentially regressive. I have shown in this chapter that all these claims are deeply problematic. Without the efforts of the modern Muslim reformists in Iran, the dominance of clerical Islamism would have been even more oppressive. The reformers, who advocated for a more moderate and inclusive interpretation of Islam, have played a significant role in promoting socio-cultural reforms. Their advocacy for justice, freedom and greater political participation has been instrumental in challenging the conservative clerical establishment and fanatic/fascistic accounts of religion.

---

[52] Jazani, 'Mārksizm-e eslāmi ya eslām-e mārksisti', 22–27, 36–40, quoted in Ervand Abrahamian, 'The Islamic Left: from Radicalism to Liberalism', in *Reformers and Revolutionaries in Modern Iran: New Perspectives on the Iranian Left*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 272.