

## **Religious Intellectuals, the “Woman Question,” and the Struggle for the Creation of a Democratic Public Sphere in Iran<sup>1</sup>**

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The ideas of the new generation of religious intellectuals in Iran have been the main engine for the call for reform. These intellectuals have attempted to locate their views about the way women are and should be treated in Islamic societies in their much broader—and to them more significant—attempt to offer a modernist religious understanding and a more democratic reading of the role of religion in modern polity. Iranian feminists, on the other hand, have begun to insist that the particular situation of women in Iran is in need of more attention. Religious intellectuals have responded by engaging in reluctant analysis of the way the “woman question” poses itself in the Iranian context. So far, their analyses fail to take into account the gender implications of the struggle against absolutism and traditional authority. However, the dynamic interaction of the reform project with demands and aspirations of various sectors of Iranian public life will not allow the issue to rest here. Religious intellectuals, in their attempt to recreate essential religious truth in the form of new intellectual concepts and systems, will increasingly have to deal with systemic gender inequalities in a more systematic manner.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

There is a new generation of religious intellectuals in Iran whose perspective on the meaning of Islam and its interaction with various aspects of social life has been an important source for the call for democratic reform. Until recently, they have not included gender issues in their reformulation.

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Their views about the position of women in Islamic societies are grounded in a broader, and to them, much more significant attempt to offer a perspective upon which a “modernist” (some say, “liberationist”) religious understanding can be built. Iranian women, both inside and outside of Iran, have insisted that their particular situation be included. An analysis of how the religious intellectuals have begun to address Iran’s “women’s question” (*masale-ye zan*) provides a window for assessing how women’s issues are discussed and how they are being factored into this particular version of religious modernism.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that no single essay can cover the entire range of religious discussions on women in Iran, which Ziba Mir-Hosseini (in her comprehensive analysis of the religious debate on gender) identifies as spanning from traditionalist to neo-traditionalist to various types of modernist dialogues.<sup>2</sup> The focus here is on the works and pronouncements of an unclearly defined group of Iranians who have come to be known as “religious intellectuals” (*roshanfekr-e dini*). In recent years, the term *roshanfekr-e dini* has been used (often self-referentially) to denote a group of people who are closely identified with the reform movement. Their views were initially given expression in the pages of the journal *Kiyan* and later in many other reformist journals and newspapers that came into print after the election of Mohamad Khatami as president. The intellectual lineage of these discussions can be found in the works of earlier Iranian thinkers such as Mehdi Bazargan, Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleqani, Ali Shariati, and Ayatollah Motahhari. There is also a history of intellectual engagement with the works of Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers outside of Iran.

In this essay, however, the latter elements are not considered. We are more interested in recent statements by Iranian thinkers who, by their own testimony, are Muslims in so far as they believe in the authenticity of the religious experience of the prophet of Islam. However, unlike the more traditionalist religious thinkers, they also believe in “the recreation of essential religious truth in the form of new intellectual concepts and systems.”<sup>3</sup> In short, as Ebrahim Soltani (the last editor of *Kiyan* before it was suspended) said, they do not find the phrases “modernist Muslim” or “religious intellectual” to be paradoxical.<sup>4</sup>

Second, this is an “exploratory study,” which must be considered (as a whole and in its parts) as an exercise in “thinking out loud” about how “the woman question” has become prominent in Iranian society. To do this, the arguments of a variety of people are used to highlight both what is emphasized and what is missing in the choices made and dilemmas faced by religious intellectuals in an especially fluid and often raucous political context. This does not *necessarily* invite a discussion of the contradictions besieging Iran’s Islamic state about its treatment of women, but it does illuminate

some of the ways in which a particular strand of religious thought is being directed towards making sense of such contradictions. An approach of this sort is best because, as Abbas Abdi (a leading reformist journalist) says,<sup>5</sup> the phenomenon of *roshanfekri-ye dini* (somewhat unsatisfactorily translated as “religious intellectualism”) is still in formation.<sup>6</sup> This strand of thought cannot offer, just yet, a “clear opinion” on all social issues. It is evolving, through interaction, with the ever-changing Iranian political landscape and is itself in search of conversation amidst an array of opinions, some of which include declarations about the presence and participation of women in the public sphere.

Introducing and discussing such an evolving societal conversation to an audience that may not be familiar with what is going on in Iran risks both distortion and, more problematically, decontextualization. Just let it be said that it is well known that some Iranian religious intellectuals (both cleric and non-cleric) are engaged in a heated, often perilous, but for now, open-ended struggle over the democratization of decision-making. They are engaged in wresting Islam and the state from the hands of those (again, both cleric and non-cleric) who have found rigid religious beliefs and practices useful tools for maintaining political control.<sup>7</sup> Any discussion of their ideas must be assessed against this very backdrop.

The problems of reporting on ideas in such a fluid situation should be evident. Given the current situation in Iran, religious intellectuals do not speak in unison or in an unequivocal manner. Lack of unity stems from the evolving nature of the conversation and from its genuinely dynamic and open-ended (and perhaps improvised) qualities. It is also generated out of the conversation’s unevenness, which ranges from the opinions of “iconic intellectuals” who “are the producers as well as embodiments of ideas, and as such are held in semi-religious veneration,” to the views of those who are engaged in a more topical and “user-friendly” dissemination of those ideas.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, ambiguity and occasional inconsistency among religious intellectuals is also the result of a very delicate attempt to maintain a balance between: (1) their general uneasiness about reducing the problems of Islamic societies to bad or obsolete laws and (2) their attempt to come to terms with the perceived reality (both inside and outside of Iran) that contemporary laws are stunting both the general well-being of Iranian women and are impeding their attainment of genuine democratic rights. At an even more basic level, ambiguity and inconsistency derive from the fact that intellectuals must negotiate their way between different audiences.<sup>9</sup> They find themselves caught between a heated debate with “conservative” clerics (who, according to Iran’s leading religious intellectual, Abdolkarim Soroush,<sup>10</sup> can always “produce a *hadith*—or religious saying—to silence you”) and the demands of rights-oriented female audience (both inside and outside of Iran). Their

conscious choice of dealing with the issue in broader conceptual terms has become increasingly difficult. In this way, religious intellectuals have been “put on the spot.” They must participate reluctantly in debates at various levels (political, legal, sociological, anthropological, and philosophical) in which their arguments are not necessarily all clearly or cogently worked out.

What follows here, therefore, is an attempt to explore the core of recent statements by religious intellectuals about the problems faced by Iranian women. It involves determining how these intellectuals fit such statements into their “pluralist and democratic” religious discourse. In particular, the discussion here will focus on: (1) their understanding of history; (2) their analytical reduction of fundamentalism to traditionalism, despite their acknowledgement of the difference between the two; and (3) their understanding of what democratic participation involves.

### BEGINNINGS, QUESTIONS, AND CONTEXT

The first question pertains to beginnings. In the context of women’s rights, how does a male religious intellectual begin to deal with a topic that is so charged and so politicized? More bluntly stated, how does a Muslim *intellectual* begin to deal with a topic which “outsiders” have historically used as an indicator of Muslim man’s backwardness and even of his innate inferiority? Without completely disassociating himself from his religious beliefs, how does an Iranian Muslim male begin to deal with the abysmal record that Islamic societies have displayed, in the past few decades, in their treatment of women? And most especially, how can this be done in a world that tends to simplify and homogenize Islamic beliefs and practices as exhibiting an inherent inability to adapt to the more open and democratic standards of the modern world?<sup>11</sup>

The question of beginning is even more charged for Iranian religious intellectuals. Initially, Iranian religious intellectuals were supporters and promoters, but are now reformers, of an Islamic regime that has relied on brute force to impose standards of how a “proper Muslim woman” should look and behave in public. As such, in comparison with their secular male counterparts, they have been increasingly pressured to explain their position, in light of their emphasis on a modern and more democratic “reading” of Islam.<sup>12</sup> The situation is not helped by the fact that “the woman question” has been all but ignored by many of Iran’s religious intellectuals. From the point of view of some of their prominent spokesmen, there are simply too many other more pressing and “deeper” issues to think about. The “on the ground” realities of Iranian politics, which have led to the crystallization of more general

issues related to religious pluralism, democracy, and individual freedom (as well as to the desperate need to ease religious, social, and cultural control for all constituencies) have helped to foster this detached disposition towards women's issues. At the same time, these same "on the ground realities" and the fact that so much of the momentum for the election of the reformist president Mohammad Khatami came from women (and especially from young women) have made it unavoidable that religious intellectuals take a public stance on the women's rights issues.<sup>13</sup>

To ask again: How does an Iranian religious intellectual begin to deal with such a charged and demanding question? *The answer is* that he starts reluctantly at first and, in doing so, ignores the politicized nature of the question. "Reluctantly" because until recently the new generation<sup>14</sup> of religious intellectuals has not been confronted with and has not had to face up to the issue head on. That situation changed because of a series of interviews with prominent religious intellectuals published in the feminist journal *Zanan*.<sup>15</sup> Two out of fourteen translated articles or interviews on the web site *Seraj's* "What's New" section are also now dedicated to Abdolkarim Soroush's recent works and ideas and present his view of the "women's problem."<sup>16</sup> One of these is an interview with *Zanan*, while the other includes an analysis by Ziba Mirhosseini, a feminist anthropologist.<sup>17</sup> Some might say that the translator's being a woman influenced these postings, but there is no doubt that the *Zanan* series illustrates that religious intellectuals are becoming more pressed to answer questions about how women fit into their reformulation of Islam.

The evident fact that religious intellectuals are being pressed (or "put on the spot") is further demonstrated by the conversational *format* presented in the *Zanan* series and in the constructed *categories* that make such conversations possible. As followed by the feminist journal, the procedure goes like this: the "religious intellectual" (i.e., a male who is always personally identified by name and as being familiar with the project of new religious thinking) is asked questions that are intended to probe whether or not religious intellectuals agree that the "women's problem" exists. They are then asked if their own line of religious reasoning can offer solutions to the problem. Thus, the gender of the religious intellectual being questioned is apparent (especially since they appear in accompanying photographs). However, the same cannot be said about the questioner since one cannot know if that person is or is not also a man.<sup>18</sup> The interviews are always friendly and presented as attempts to "clarify" interviewees' positions.<sup>19</sup> Women (who are identified only by name and who come from inside and outside of Iran) have sent written and often critical responses to the positions taken by those interviewed. Religious dispositions of female respondents are kept deliberately vague.

On the whole, the series presents a fascinating forum between religious intellectuals *and* women (seemingly constituted as mutually exclusive categories) regarding the current attempt to reformulate religious understanding, in all its strengths and shortcomings, and to assess the way such reformulation has come to grips with “the woman question” in Iran.<sup>20</sup>

### LOOKING AT THE “WOMAN QUESTION”

As noted, religious intellectuals interviewed in *Zanan* do not speak in unison. Like Hassan Youssefi Eshkevari (1379/2000: 36), some readily acknowledge that, so far, the “new religious thinking” have offered women very little beyond generalities.<sup>21</sup> Majid Mohamadi (1378/1999) bluntly states that religious intellectuals’ project to reread and critique the existing religious tradition is limited in its ability to deal with specific gender-based inequities.<sup>22</sup> Other religious leaders maintain that the reform movement, in its political and philosophical-theological manifestations, offers an “umbrella” under which women are empowered in their demands both for more rights and more “modern” definitions of womanhood. An “umbrella” of this type, they argue, cannot be expected to relieve tensions between the movement towards reformulation of religious understanding and women’s demands for universal democratic rights. In itself, it cannot do the work women must do themselves as they become more socially prominent and vocal in Iranian civil society.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, subtle changes of opinion are becoming evident. There is now at least an implicit admission that a distinct “woman question” exists in Iran. It is acknowledged that a large segment of the Iranian female population (particularly among elite women) is unhappy with the current situation and demands transformation. Some religious intellectuals admit this quite explicitly. Alireza Alavi Tabar (1379/2000: 44–45) acknowledges that women suffer from legal inequalities and inequalities of opportunity. He admits that there is an absence of civil institutions that pursue women’s specific interests and distinct grievances. However, this concession is by no means part of a more general critique of patriarchy. Instead, it is presented as a problem that women have perceived and clearly articulated only recently in the Islamic republic.

Some religious intellectuals have made a more concerted effort to explain how the reform movement can help women’s causes. Given their emphasis on independent and critical (i.e., modern) rationality, many of them believe religious modernism contains an inherent criticism of Iran’s semi-modernist society and, thus, implicitly includes the situation of women in its discourse. They seem to think that, in their pursuance of two main projects

(i.e., the modernization of society and a modernist interpretation of religion), they provide a *means* or path for women to utilize or follow. In one of his *Zanan* discussions, Alireza Alavi Tabar (1379/2000: 44–45) says that this is proceeding in at least four ways. First, by opposing Islamic fundamentalism, which dominates the legal arena and decision-making circles, the reform project also opposes gender inequalities that have been promoted by the fundamentalist point of view. Second, the reform movement facilitates the creation of civil institutions through which women's interests can be advocated. Third, reform promotes changes in the legal status of women. The most recent example of this was the repeal of a law that prohibited giving state scholarships to unmarried women for studying abroad. Fourth, it is believed that reform creates incentives for the participation of women in decision-making processes.

It is important to note that, from this perspective, “women's problems” are conceptualized as being not too unlike those of other groups, e.g. young people, workers, the unemployed, and minorities. Whether from a juridical or “liberal” point of view, the inequality experienced by all of these groups is conceptualized as an instance of social, economic, or cultural discrimination since they are all confronted with legal discrimination and lack of opportunities. However, women have a distinct impediment because, historically, they have been hesitant to enter the public sphere; a problem that can be remedied through education.<sup>24</sup> Such an analysis allows reformist intellectuals to acknowledge women's problems, while also offering a path for overcoming them. Not analyzed, although acknowledged by some, are questions that go beyond women's rights and deal with how a “gender perspective” might change the categories customarily used to understand the world.<sup>25</sup>

A focus on the rights-oriented *articulation* of the “the woman question” provides a genuinely interesting way for religious intellectuals to come to terms with the reality of the problem *and* with their distaste for reducing women's issues (along with others perhaps) to questions of law, whether Islamic or not. In this way, they can begin to discuss women's issues as being distinct since feminists have demanded that such issues be conceptualized as specific to “this time and this place,” (i.e., distinctly Iranian). At the same time, they can “keep a distance” between the feminists and themselves by ascribing the responsibility for improving legal and social conditions to a need for continued agitation by women themselves. They may insist all the while that their reformist discourse provides a space for such agitation, despite the fact that they themselves do not find agitation for changed laws regarding women to be a useful entry into the discussion of reform.

In fact, as Mir-Hosseini (1999) has aptly pointed out, true-to-form and despite their acknowledgement of the discrimination against women, religious intellectuals are quite wary of being bogged down in the legal arena or

in the realm of Islamic jurisprudence called *feqh*. The phrase “true-to-form” applies because religious intellectuals are mainly interested in the dynamics between tradition and modernity. Like other problems facing Islamic societies, what has come to be known as the “women’s problem” is seen as a product of a disharmony, in this case between “traditional morality and law” and “the new definitions of womanhood and manhood.” According to Soroush (1378a/1999) traditional societies did not face a “woman question” because there was “perfect harmony between the understanding they had of women and the commands and narratives concerning women.” There was no “rupture” in the traditional understanding of women, leading to a situation in which “women’s rights” and “women’s existence” became “out of line and raised cries of protest.” Today, however, the new perception of women is not in harmony with the old laws concerning them. The chasm has become too wide between women, who perceive themselves as possessing specific rights, and a closed and limited legal system that denies them those very rights. As such, these laws have to and eventually will be changed.

In Soroush’s words, changed circumstances and perceptions call for the creation of new outer layers for the protection of relevant and deeply held values:

The fact of the matter is that the new perception of women is out of harmony with the old laws concerning them. We have to examine our religious commands and see what theories about the nature of human beings they were based on. Some new thinkers, such as Fazlur Rahman, are of the opinion that, on the commands and laws concerning women (such as woman’s testimony as the witness), if we look at the philosophy underpinning them, many of them would change. I believe that deeply held values (which are at the service of justice) need to be extracted from religious and rational sources and we need to see laws as temporary husks protecting these values and having no sanctity in their own right. On this basis, if the circumstances change, new husks need to be devised protecting the relevant deeply held values. (Soroush, 1378a/1999)

But, Soroush goes on to say that these outer layers and laws are “the weakest links in the chains restricting women.” One can see a similar type of suspicion of laws in the arguments of others. One legal expert, Kambiz Norouzi, acknowledges that there are inequalities in both civil and criminal laws, but he argues that, in actuality, many Iranian laws are based on equality. He goes on to state that, even in areas where equality is legally assured (such as in politics and economics), substantial inequalities persist. Norouzi believes that this persistence is based on two important aspects of Iranian society. First, the problem of women is “part of the country’s social problem and its rise and fall a function of general problems.” Second “its focal kernel is more social than legal” (1379/2000: 20–21). The issue is not the recognition of women’s *rights* (which he believes has already happened) but recognition of women’s *capabilities*.



To Soroush, however, the issue is a bit more complicated. He insists that current contradictions are obvious and that, clearly, current regulations and commands do not correspond to the social needs, especially in the context of the roles that men and women perform in Iranian society. His conclusion is that if religious laws must be abrogated if they fail to safeguard moral values, as they were intended to do. Soroush believes that this is further necessitated by the fact that, through reason, it is impossible to establish the superiority of religious laws and regulations over more modern rules and regulations. As he says:

*Feqh* is a series of practical, individual and social laws and regulations and the modern world is considered a serious competitor in the promulgation of social regulations. That is, rational reasoning can in no way prove that the social regulations of the modern world are superior to the social regulations of religion or vice versa . . . In this regard religion neither has a particularly profound message for the contemporary human being nor is the logical proof of its superiority possible. (1379/2000: 5)

In the long run, however, Soroush argues that religious or modern secular laws are both inadequate entries into the debate over women's status in society. He suggests that they both fail to go to the core of the problem when he says:

To enter a debate on the women's question via the path of women's right is incorrect, and I consciously don't pursue it. Not because I don't believe in them or want to ignore them, but because I believe this isn't a starting point and will lead us astray. I start from your question: what's the status of women? Women's status mustn't be reduced to law; it's much broader . . . Unless a people's understanding of the women's question is changed, there will be no basic change; women will remain less than second-class citizens; if they are given rights, it's from charity or necessity. Look this is the milieu in which I'm talking, as a person; this is where the status of women must be corrected; in my opinion, we'll get nowhere by haggling about women's legal rights (1999: 242).<sup>26</sup>

Soroush does not linger on the point of whether or not such "haggling" might eventually affect a desired outcome, and he avoids considering the means by which cultural understandings and legal frameworks become interwoven in the fabric of the society.<sup>27</sup> Instead, his attention is focused on the sources of resistance to change and on the associated insistence on maintaining laws that do not meet the needs of current gender relations. He sees the latter as being embedded in the traditional definition of manhood and womanhood, in which case, he asserts, our attention must turn both towards changing the definitions surrounding gender relations and to assessing the consequences of such changes on current and future Islamic societies. In other words, enough has been said about *feqh* and the clash between religious commands and existing realities. The debate needs to be moved to the broader field of "philosophy, science and theology." (Soroush, 1378/1999a)

This is the place, though, where the religious intellectuals' consideration of "the women's problem" in Iran becomes more tentative and exploratory.

Rather than suggesting definite solutions they offer a path to follow in thinking about the constraints imposed by current definitions of what it means to be male and what it means to be female.

## DEFINITIONS OF GENDER: MANHOOD AND WOMANHOOD

Religious intellectuals in Iran are aware of the historical construction of gender spheres (i.e., definitions of womanhood and manhood), but they continue to insist on difference by positing it as a moral value that underpins the relations between men and women. They also offer “history” as evidence in order to defend this position. For instance, although he concedes that it is extremely difficult to offer a definition, Soroush maintains that there is a moral and valuated difference between the spheres of womanhood and manhood. He says:

I believe that one of the most important values in the relations between men and women is that a woman should be a woman and man should be a man. Thinkers throughout the ages have by and large agreed that the measure of excellence for any person is specific to them and that there is no universal measure of excellence. And this excellence lies in people being themselves. I believe that this idea is one of the most important values governing the relations between men and women, and governing women’s behavior and men’s behavior. The relations between men and women should not impede their attainment of excellence in terms of manhood or womanhood. In other words, these relations must not turn men into women or take women out of the sphere of womanhood. The philosophy underpinning this idea is that every creature has its own ideal excellence (particular potential) and attaining excellence depends on the fulfillment of this potential. (1378/1999a)

On a more poetic note, Morteza Mardiha, a reformist journalist and philosopher by training, offers the following:

Woman, for whatever reason she has been created, here and now refines the ambience of the universe; further reveals the essence of humanity; is the basis for passion, poetry, and vitality; is the excuse for life, for all, not merely for men; is the best rationale against violence; is the sublime verse of the creation ode; is the purest cut of existence. And in confronting such a creature, men are thinking about how to offer an equal but not similar definition of her. The paradigm of “good and devoted woman” must be changed. Being a beautiful wife and kind mother is no longer a woman’s only positive function. Seeing her deserving of pity and favors is no longer perceived a positive approach. All true enough; but a woman is different from a man and this is not men’s fault. (1378/1999: 43)

There are two themes about women in this kind of narrative. One is the rejection of “gender sameness,” whether as a just ideal or as an expression of equality. In the other, religious intellectuals seem to have an unstated concern (or perhaps a fear) that a woman-centered dialogue, which reflects what has happened in the West, will lead to undesirable results. The philosopher Mostafa Malekian (1379/2000) sees this fallacy as one of viewing

feminism as a mere social movement for gaining legal equality and freedom (or even worse for setting men aside).<sup>28</sup> This concern may stem from a fear of actual confrontation between men and women. Religious intellectuals seem to suggest that such a confrontation would be neither just nor helpful to the more general struggle of modernizing religion and achieving democratic rights for all. Perhaps they fear that it will lead to a kind of life for men and women that is not fully satisfying, either in its spiritual or material dimensions.

To support these two themes, religious intellectuals offer history as evidence. They argue that women have revealed themselves throughout the course of history and to ignore this history would be irrational. Rejecting the notion that the entire existence of women thus far has been “imposed or accidental,” they call upon us to dwell upon why history has revealed itself in a patriarchal way. And in posing this question, many religious intellectuals are uncomfortable with adopting the view that women have been oppressed throughout history. Their argument in this regard goes like this: if oppression and cruelty against women have been a norm throughout history, then it is not inconceivable to think that “women have generally been prone to tolerating cruelty and, if they have done so in the past, they can continue to do so in the future; unless women decide to stop being women.” (Soroush, 1378/1999a)<sup>29</sup>

Soroush believes that a more fruitful approach will have to take into account four significant elements: women’s perception of themselves, women’s perception of men, men’s perception of themselves, and men’s perception of women. In his *formulation*, these four viewpoints have created the general historical system known as patriarchy. In this system, women have been oppressed, even if Soroush wonders out loud about the meaning of oppression under these circumstances. After all, when something is an inevitable consequence of historically driven circumstances, how could it be inherently oppressive? Soroush’s point, though, is not to deny oppression, but to argue that an oppression-based analysis (or an analysis that treats human history as “more or less virtuous than it has turned out to be,”<sup>30</sup>) begs the question of how the system came into existence. This question stimulates his proposing that a multiplicity of perspectives interacted to create the patriarchal system. To change the context of male/female relations, the four variegated perspectives must be changed first.

Other intellectuals have taken Soroush’s subtle argument and have transformed it into one that is more definitive and politically inspired. For instance, Morteza Mardiha (1378/1999) argues that any consideration of oppression has to address a system of general injustice in which no one, either male or female, can become complete. In the current situation, such an approach sees the real rift as not involving the rights of men and women, but

as involving a clash between the supporters and opponents of human rights. It is apparent that pronouncements like Mardiha's would evoke the ire of Iranian feminists<sup>31</sup> who rightly detect in this line of analysis a defensiveness and fear of "feminism," perceived as a movement and an ideology that seek to obliterate differences and to blame men for the oppression which women have experienced. There is also a sense of *déjà vu* here, reflecting the kind of criticism that most feminist movements have faced at one time or another vis-à-vis broader movements that agitate for social justice. Still, the underlying narratives of the particular Iranian context are interesting to consider.

### **RELIGIOUS INTELLECTUALS AND THE "WOMEN'S QUESTION" RECONSIDERED**

In general, most Iranian reformists feel fairly confident that their more general argument about the necessity of moving away from an understanding of religion that locks it into the replication of the outer forms of the society into which it is revealed, opens society for the gradual abandonment of laws inhibiting the adaptation of new gender roles; roles that enhance the fulfillment of rights for both men and women in modern societies. They seem to be convinced that this task must be accomplished through a gradual and patient adherence to the "calculus" of Iranian social forces and cultural dynamics; a position very much in keeping with their reformist argument and agenda. However, they are less certain and revealing when the question turns to prescribing practical solutions that account for "the pull and tug" of conflicting points of view.

Iran is not merely, if at all, a traditionalist society trying to become modern. It is a complex society with a diverse population: men and women, with differing voices, aspirations, and interests, situated in a more extensive social context. Iran has also encountered modernity and westernization in its own particular way and not according to a set formula. As with other countries, its experience with modernity has been uneven and has initially been in the form of a "top down" program of development (in economic growth, technology, schooling, militarization, and, in general, globalization). But as some astute anthropologists have pointed out this initial "top-down" encounter with modernity is becoming less disciplinary and more experiential. It has become integrated, sometimes subtly and sometimes not so subtly, into the everyday life of consumerism and cultural appropriations.<sup>32</sup>

The global market provides both material and symbolic aspects of culture that are appropriated and transformed, as "micronarratives," into more localized forms of expression (e.g., in literature, music, film, sports events,

forms of celebration, etc.).<sup>33</sup> As Arjun Appadurai (1996) says, these allow “modernity” to be rewritten into a more “vernacular globalization” which is less of a concession to large-scale (national or international) policies or trends. Yet, in contemplating the specific shape “the woman question” has taken in Iran, rather than tackling their society’s particular encounter with this “modern” issue, many religious intellectuals continue to be caught in the crosscurrent of what they perceive to be a contest between Islamic intransigence and western-inspired feminist orthodoxy. Accordingly, they end up making a series of reactive declarations about the necessity of avoiding sameness between men and women, rather than interrogating the choices with which they are faced. They also end up avoiding the key question of why “the woman question” specifically presents itself as a legal problem at this particular moment in Iranian history.

In many respects, this is a familiar and oft-repeated trap or dilemma that is not exclusive to the narratives and counter-narratives centered on women. Some religious intellectuals, like Soroush, have been quite reflective about such a trap and have tried to counterbalance it with what Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi (2000) calls “hybrid ingenuity.” Such ingenuity has opened “the sanctuaries of religious knowledge to the scrutiny of contemporary scientific views and promoted a radical rethinking of the curriculum” at the seminary. Soroush also believes that a particularly harsh version of Islam has taken root not because of the essence of Islam but because of a historical grasp for political power. He very succinctly says:

The masses are followers. Had Ibn Sina become their leader, they would have accepted his opinion and now that Majlesi is their teacher, his opinion is accepted as the basis. But the reason for why they have chosen Majlesi as their teacher and not Ibn Sina or Mulla Sadra, must be sought in the history of politics and power. Its mystery and secret, more than being hidden in righteousness, resides in power. (1378/1999b)

Despite the focus on power, however, an important issue has not yet found its rightful place in the discourse of these religious intellectuals. This issue entails questions about why and how this “harsh version” of Islam has historically found women and women’s bodies to be a particularly useful site to make a case for its distinct version of Iranian identity, in a world that has become increasingly sensitive to women’s rights.

## **HISTORY, FUNDAMENTALISM, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE CREATION OF A DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC SPHERE**

For religious intellectuals, the neglect of this dimension of the historical construction of power does not mean the rejection of history as a useful tool

of inquiry. Abstracted history does, in fact, offer them useful means for deciphering regularities and patterns. At the core of the religious intellectuals' view of history is the concept of *rupture*; a social break that transforms societies from harmonious to conflictive. In the rhetoric of the time, this view is employed as a means of trying to convince religious conservatives that they must aspire to a more harmonious situation than now exists. The plea is that they refocus their efforts on what is *essential* in religion and that they discard what is (to list an assortment of expressions) accidental, variable external, unstable, corruptible, and harsh in current religious interpretations. To do so, it is asserted, is the only way to maintain the influence of the religious experience in the modern world. Such an approach, while very useful for intra-religious dialogues, would require a suspension (or willed neglect) of alternative interpretations of history.

For instance, many feminist historians (and for that matter social or labor historians) object strongly to the depiction of abstracted tradition as harmonious. They would point to a male-centered historiography that has been shy in reporting patriarchal oppression and has ignored some of the imaginative ways in which women throughout the world have opposed it. Their main objective is to assess the ways in which gender inequalities have operated to reinforce male domination throughout society, including areas where knowledge is produced (e.g., historical studies). It cannot be overstressed that an analysis of the portrayals of women (and their bodies), along with the opinions about their place in society, offers an important glimpse of the mechanisms of power politics. Such portrayals and opinions present important data for understanding the dynamic interplay among internal forces and of their relationships with the outside world. As such, in Iran, varying interpretations (or "readings") of Islamic principles can be better understood by studying consistent disagreements about "the women's question."

Religious intellectuals argue that there are three competing "readings" of Islam: fundamentalist, traditionalist, and modernist. Some religious scholars have tried to explain the differences among them. Mostafa Malekian (1379/2000: 32–37) identifies eleven such differences, but emphasizes two of them to distinguish fundamentalism from the others, especially in regard to how they address the problems of women and women-related issues. First, fundamentalism favors literal interpretations of Islamic tenets and rarely accepts (or permits) "deviation from word." The other two "readings" are more concerned with how "the spirit and message" of revelation extend beyond specific wordings. The second difference has to do with juridical readings of religion which fundamentalism offers, often defining religion as purely limited to *feqh*. Traditionalist "reading" also considers *feqh* important but only as a guide for ethical conduct. Malekian contends that those who rely on a literal reading of words and traditions are more prone to advocate

patriarchal views. Traditionalists and modernists, on the other hand, tend to be more flexible.

Religious intellectuals believe that they and the traditionalists can converse more effectively because they are similarly disposed in their concerns about ethical conduct. They do not have the same view as the fundamentalists, to whom they ascribe many of Iran's current religious problems. They argue that fundamentalists have an obsession with appearances and with what could be called a "reified" collective memory. At the same time, despite the preeminence given to the critique of the fundamentalist reading of religion, religious intellectuals offer a limited assessment of its origins and dynamics as a phenomenon. In other words, very little is said about how this juridical understanding of religion has come to play such a prominent role in Islamic societies in general and Iran in particular. They are all but mute about the role of fundamentalism in making laws about women the center of contest for religious dominance. Instead, these new religious intellectuals have been more satisfied with centering the discussion on categorical differences between fundamentalism and traditionalism. Once these points are acknowledged, the discussion proceeds, based on a collapsing of the traditionalist and fundamentalist categories, with a rather generalized discussion of the dynamics between tradition and modernity and the rise of a "rupture" coming to the fore.

In this kind of scenario, a "reluctant analysis" of the "women's question" is depoliticized, being abstracted out of its immediate social context and defined as just another manifestation of the difficulties created during a transition from traditional to modern social arrangements. In this transition, as Soroush (1378/1999c) puts it: "[O]n the basis of his theoretical innovations, the intellectual has the task of taking his society by the hand and guiding it from one state of being to another." From this perspective, the problems of women in Iran are merely a manifestation of how tradition struggles to transform itself into a more modern form. Questions related to imposed modernization from the top, the interaction of nascent nationalism with the colonial/modernist discourses, the use of women's bodies to make statements about Iran's "modern" and "modernist" state, and the counter offensive to further rigidify religion and use it as an instrument of political control are simply and perhaps conveniently left out.<sup>34</sup> Also left out are the dynamics of how a perceived question or problem unfolds among and appears to historically situated players and spectators.

Afsaneh Najmabadi (1993) shows that, for more than a century, Iranian women and their bodies have been a "contest site," over which definitions of the Iranian self have been constructed and re-constructed. Najmabadi contends that two opposing viewpoints stand in opposition to each other. At one extreme are those who claim to be offering Iranian women the fruits of

womanhood in a modernized patriarchal society (i.e., to invoke Gramsci's language, in a "bastardized" form). At the other end are those who resist the imposition of "modernity from the top," but whose alternative is an equally undesirable version of traditionalism, namely fundamentalism. Some historians, like Kathryn Babayan (1998), probe further into history and invite a genuine examination of the historical (and quite complicated) dynamic that led to the seemingly sudden rise of fundamentalism or Islamic literalism in late seventeenth century. That movement imposed a peculiar type of Islamic garb on women, banned their attendance at gatherings where music was played (such as at male-oriented parties), and forbade their appearance in public without the accompaniment of a male relative.

Although it may be correct, as religious modernists say, that traditionalist views can be changed only through intra-religious conversation, the current dialogue in Iran is inadequate for questioning (even in a self-reflective way) how fundamentalism, with its insistence on detailed legalism and its nit-picking controls on women's daily lives came to play such a crucial role in contemporary Iranian culture.

Facing up to the dimensions of Iranian patriarchy (in its pre- or post-revolutionary forms) and, especially, of how women and their bodies have been used to reproduce the patriarchal state, does not necessarily call for accusatory statements. Religious intellectuals are correct to point out that, in a struggle for democratic rights, a "blame game" gains very little advantage. At the same time, it is just as counter-productive to avoid discussing women's issues in the peculiarly Iranian context. Furthermore, the argument offered by some religious intellectuals that public deliberation about gender implications of the struggle against absolutism is not a male intellectual task and the assertion that it is women's responsibility alone to "produce" their own ideas and to pursue their best interests in Iranian society<sup>35</sup> beg the question of why women have been hesitant to enter the fray. In the end, the argument also becomes yet another move to avoid the discussion of "the woman question" in the particularly Iranian context.

### **CONCLUSION: THE REFORM PROJECT IN IRAN**

In their current debate over the creation of a more democratic public life, intellectuals' neglect of the "gender dimension" produces an incomplete analysis of the Iranian political situation. Almost carelessly, some of them have framed women's concerns within a more general struggle against absolutism and traditional authority. By solving these general problems, they



say, Iranian women's legal and cultural problems will be mastered in one of two ways: *Sociologically*—as women become more educated and employed, they will discover how to pursue their own sectarian interests in an independent, organized, and public fashion. *Politically*—with the establishment of modern, rational authority, women will be empowered to further their own, distinct civil interests.

But, as political theorist Nancy Fraser (1997) has said, the emergence of a democratic public sphere cannot be described as involving only a struggle against absolutism and traditional authority. It always involves the exclusion of specific groups from public life and the containment of their political behavior. Drawing on evidence from post-revolutionary France, she argues that public discourse is guided by variables of accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies. This is much like the language that has been adopted by some reformist religious intellectuals in Iran, which, as a “strategy of distinction,” disregards the difficulty women (and other subordinate groups) have in gaining access to situations where public discourse occurs.<sup>36</sup> In Iran, even the reformist intellectuals have chosen a political strategy that denigrates the means through which women (of whatever social class) express their interests, despite their exclusion from an official public sphere where citizens deliberate about their common affairs, in Fraser's apt words, in a “rational, virtuous, and manly” style.

As Fraser (1997) argues in her critique of Habermas (1989), such a discursive arrangement gives preference to a singular, all-encompassing public sphere in which “rational” deliberation and argumentation are valued above everything else.<sup>37</sup> And this type of public tends not only to exclude women and minorities, but it also devalues other kinds of association (such as those in which women are heavily and creatively involved). These alternative publics (or what Fraser calls “a counter civil society of alternative, woman-only, voluntary associations,”) include charity organizations of both religious and secular types. In many respects, these associations are similar to all-male associations, but in other respects, they are highly innovative. As Fraser points out, members of women's associations can use the “private idioms of domesticity and motherhood” as mediums for public activity.<sup>38</sup>

In contrast, the rules for religious intellectuals' “publics” are centered on selectively rational argumentation and decision-making. This is true for everything that is decided about the development of state, economy, and civil society. For these intellectuals, public life is a kind of forum for open communication and popular participation, within which, alternative possibilities for action are collectively discussed and decided. Iranian women have been excluded from this public arena because, as Fraser says, the medium

of exchange is a kind of “linguistic capital” which is unequally distributed among the members of society.

Even though the population of Iran exhibits ethnic, cultural, and economic variety (to name only three), inequality exists because discussion and debate are controlled through an extensively Islamic juridical bias in which familiarity with religious texts is a requirement for public engagement. Being well versed in Islamic law is the primary criterion upon which admission to that public is based. Anyone who lacks the “proper credentials” is automatically excluded from participation because they are defined as being “linguistically incompetent.” Although they may be quite proficient in other areas (such as artistic or expressive forms of communication), they are condemned to silence by those in power or who are seeking to be in power.<sup>39</sup>

In conclusion, it is important to note that the so-called reform project in Iran is extremely important. No analysis can take away from the fact that it has received considerable support from women, students, and minorities. The basis of such support is in the reform project’s democratic message for all constituencies, particularly in comparison with the kind of discourse propagated by the anti-reform forces. The present consideration is certainly not out to debunk the efforts of these new religious intellectuals.

In calling for what Morad Saghafi (1999) denotes as “the democratic participation of Islam in politics” rather than its obliteration from politics, the reform movement clearly reflects an extensively-based desire to find an alternative to the didactic interaction between fundamentalist practices and relentless westernization. It seems clear that the dynamic interaction of this project, with demands and aspirations from various sectors of Iranian public life, will not be easily stopped. Religious intellectuals, in their attempt to recreate essential religious truth in new intellectual concepts and systems (and in opposition to the ossified version of Islam) will have to contend with systemic inequality in a more systematic manner.

As some religious intellectuals have recognized, the “women’s question” is a complex social problem, with a diverse collection of concepts and approaches, and cannot be reduced and then rejected as a search for “gender sameness.” At the same time, the “women’s question” cannot be almost carelessly portrayed as a mere part of the broader struggle against absolutism. The dynamic and contentious politics of Iran will not allow the situation to rest there. The conversation is just beginning, and, so far, religious intellectuals have proven themselves to be apt participants since they are determined, by inclination or circumstance, to persuade others that their approach will ultimately bear fruit.

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## ENDNOTES

1. The Persian terminology poses translation difficulties. The term *masale* can mean both problem and question. The “woman question” is probably a better English translation than the “woman problem,” but in Persian, the term can be attached to either “woman” (*masale-ye zan*) or women (*masale-ye zanan*). The meaning is essentially the same. Hence, we may speak of the women question/problem or the women’s question/problem. Of course, the plural form is not commonly used in English, leading to an awkward translation. Generally, the singular phrase is used here, but when a direct translation uses the plural form, the translation “women’s problem” is used. I am indebted to Ziba Mir-hosseini for an exchange about this.
2. Mir-hosseini, 1999.
3. See Soltani, 2000. I understand that this definition may include thinkers who are not identified with the reform movement and is also subject to much internal debate. Discussion over what the term connotes has led to the usage of different terms. Some have preferred “religious modernism” (*nogarayi-ye dini*), while others use “religious thinking” (*no-andishi-ye dini*); with the terms usually referring to different strands of efforts to reinterpret religious texts and experience. In this essay, however, I steer clear of the definitional problems and focus on people who identify themselves as religious intellectuals. For a cursory typology of different strands of new approaches to religious interpretation, see: Jalaeipour, 2000.
4. Soltani, 2000.
5. See, Abdi, 1378/1999: 38. Although I disagree with the gist of Abdi’s argument about the contemporary need to subsume women-related issues to the broader democratic context, I agree with his point about the fluid and emerging qualities of the discourse among religious intellectuals. A similar view is taken by Morteza Mardiha (1378/1999: 42), who says: “Religious intellectualism is not a political party or full-fledged ideology or solidified intellectual-cultural current to have given opinions about all important matters, including the ‘women’s problem.’ Religious intellectualism is a philosophical-cultural rethinking of religion. It is an unfinished project. And perhaps it will remain this way. Perhaps it will never transform into a comprehensive thought that has answers for all questions.”
6. The term *roshanfekri-ye* has been translated as “religious intellectualism,” which leaves much to be desired as a translation. As suggested in note five, scholars have dwelt on and critiqued the Persian terminology, including the variant “religious intellectual,” as possibly representing an oxymoron and/or as not reflecting its mission. My concern here, however, is more with the translation itself. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines intellectualism as “a devotion to the exercise of intellect or to intellectual pursuits;” while *The Oxford English Dictionary* says it is, “the exercise, especially when excessive, of the intellect at the expense of the emotions.” English speakers hardly ever to use the term by itself, although the use of “anti-intellectualism” is quite common. The translation may also be saying more than what the term *roshanfekri* connotes, perhaps putting it on the same level as other “isms.” Religious intellectuals consciously resist the identification of their efforts as being ideological. In fact, they pose their “reading” of religion against a backdrop of more ideological “readings” offered by their predecessors. In this context, the seminal essay is Soroush, 1370/1991. A better term for translation may not be available. Sadri and Sadri (1999) use term “religious intellectuality” in their introduction to Soroush’s (1999) works

in English. That translation might convey a better meaning, but it still does not grasp it all, and it is not of common English usage. Throughout the essay, I intentionally avoid the term, except when directly translating the works of others and consider those who identify themselves as religious intellectuals. I am indebted to Negin Nabavi and Mehrzad Borujerdi for a conversation on this topic.

7. Of course, some observers of Iranian politics object to this statement. They doubt the genuineness of the *religious* effort to “reform” a patriarchal religious system that they see as being essentially not open to reform by people who have been involved in the creation of that very system. As I hope to show in this paper, however, the dynamics of the reform movement and project are not limited to a particular set of people who are identified as religious reformists or intellectuals. Rather, they are shaped also by the interaction with ideas and forces in the broader context. As such, the religious intellectuals’ ideas and positions and their limitations must be explored in interaction with the broader field.
8. The notion of “iconic intellectuals” is taken from Sadri and Sadri, 1999. In their introduction to a volume of articles by Abdolkarim Soroush, they identify him as an iconic intellectual. The choice here to consider both the “icons” and the “distributors” of ideas is directed by the desire to capture the “flavor” of how ideas interact and “play” at a variety of levels, but, obviously, not in unison.
9. In one interview, Abdolkarim Soroush (1378/1999c) describes the multiplicity of tasks and audiences faced by religious intellectuals: “An intellectual is educated, but not every educated person is an intellectual. This is especially the ease with religious intellectuals who much not only have a commanding view and case of movement regarding the links and ruptures between the old and the new, but must also be insightful enough to distinguish between mundane religion and elevated religion; must, while maintaining their devotion to religion, not fall into narrow-mindedness and not confuse the peripheral with the fundamental; must be capable of distinguishing the incidental from the essential; must know and understand religion’s position in the present age; must know the difference between husk and kernel; and must investigate in earnest the relationship between rationality and religion.”
10. Quoted in Mir-Hosseini (1999): 242.
11. A similar question is more often posed for Muslim women, who have been historically forced, in Leila Ahmed’s powerful words, to make an “intolerable choice between religious belief and their own autonomy and self-affirmation.” Leila Ahmed, 1986: 679. It is, at times, neglected that a similar choice is often forced on progressive Muslim men, if indeed such a category is not deemed to be an oxymoron.
12. See Kar, 1377/1998 for a blistering criticism of the religious intellectuals’ treatment, or rather neglect, of the woman question in the reformist weekly *Rah-e No*. The editor of the *Rah-e No*, Ganji is a leading reformist journalist. For a short while, before it suspended publication in the heat of press closures by the Judiciary, the journal offered a forum for a discussion of a variety of issues related to the reform project. Throughout the life of *Rah-e No*, Kar’s essay was the only one dealing with women. For a more overarching rejection of the reformist religious discourse and a criticism of its limitations in staking the feminist position on women’s concern, see Haideh Moghissi, 1999. Moghissi’s critique is more directed towards feminists in the West who entertain the possibility of an Islamic and feminist response to fundamentalism. It is important to note, however, that the pressure to explain does not necessarily only come from the perennial opponents of the Iranian state’s heavy hand against women. This is what Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri, the conservative candidate for president had to say regarding reasons for his loss to Khatami. “The closer we got to the [presidential] election this propaganda atmosphere became heavier. They came and said if Nateq becomes president Taleban’s Islam will become dominant. Walls will be put in walkways to separate men and women, they will put cement walls in university classes to segregate boys and girls. People were bombarded with propaganda. The opportunity to think was really taken from people. That is, they didn’t give people the opportunity to think that this Nateq Nouri is the same person that manages the parliament. Does he act in a “Taleban” manner there? Isn’t this Nateq after all the same Nateq who as the interior

minister dealt with people who descended on the streets and beat up people's daughters at a time when no one dared to stop them? Now we have become "Taleban" and this man who on that day was beating women and girls has become a liberationist and a reformist!" The reference to "they" is to the reformers and to "this man" is to the same Akbar Ganji mentioned above and now in prison for his writings. Nateq Nouri (1376/1997), of course, only alleges/accuses without offering any proof.

13. See: Farhi, 1999.
14. I talk about the "new" generation of Iranian religious intellectuals as part and parcel of what Ramin Jahanbegloo has characterized as the Fourth Generation. According to Jahanbegloo this generation of mostly younger thinkers, of both secular and religious varieties, is one that in contrast to the previous generations, has "moved away from master ideologies, opposing both fundamentalist politics and utopianism." Jahanbegloo also uses the term "dialogical intellectuals" for this generation to emphasize their penchant for a "non-imitative dialogical exchange with the West." While I may not be totally convinced of Jahanbegloo's optimism in a sudden rupture between the old and new thinking and would like to see a more in-depth analysis of the intellectual shifts in Iran and how they relate to broader global shifts of thinking (after all Iranian intellectuals have always been rather good at following the international trends and fashions), I still find the distinction useful for analytical purposes. See Jahanbegloo, 2000: 135–138.
15. Zanan also held a series of roundtables in 1995–6 focused on whether there is such a thing as a distinct woman question. The men and women participating in the roundtables who were from different political orientations debated the issue and at that time the few religious intellectuals who participated insisted that the distinctiveness is neither justified nor prudent in the particular Iranian context. Abdolkarim Soroush has also given a series of lectures on Islam and women earlier that has been captured by Ziba Mir-hosseini, 1999: Chapter 7.
16. [www.seraj.org](http://www.seraj.org)
17. The interview and analysis are from Mir-Hosseini, 1999. This marvelous book is not limited to *religious* intellectuals but instead, considers an array of views and approaches along the Iranian political and intellectual spectrum. It is important to note that as far as Mir-Hosseini is concerned "for the *ulama*, 'women' are now a 'problem' for which a religious solution must be sought. But this is not yet the case for male religious intellectuals who believe that gender inequality is not an issue requiring urgent consideration. Instead, they see it as part of a larger problem, which they hope it will go away when their vision of Islam is realized." Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, the theoretical efforts of women like Mir-Hosseini (along with the increased political and social presence of women in the public sphere) are forcing changed perspectives even on religious intellectuals.
18. Not all discussions are in the form of interviews. Some are in the form of responses to a set of questions.
19. The religious intellectuals questioned are almost all from the circle associated with *Kiyan*, the preeminent journal of new religious thinking in Iran, until it was suspended in January, 2001. The friendliness of the conversation can be explained by the fact that both *Zanan* and *Kiyan* have been housed in the same building, have cooperated closely with each other, and have essentially been generated out of the same reformist intellectual milieu.
20. It should be noted that none of the women responding to the points made by the male religious intellectuals have taken up the challenge of reflecting upon the broader theme of what the ideas generated by the reform movement have to offer women. So far the focus has mostly been on the criticism of the point of view that does not acknowledge the distinctiveness of the woman question and attempts to subsume women issues under the broader struggle for democratic rights. Criticism has also been directed against the equation of equality with sameness.
21. Eshkevari is usually identified as a "new religious thinker" more closely associated with the Freedom Movement and the journal *Iran-e Farda* than the *Kiyan* circle.
22. Mohamadi particularly points to limitations in terms of discussing sexuality and "earthly" love.

23. See, for instance, the interviews with Baqi, Abdi, and Jalaeipour in *Zanan series*.
24. There is a blatant absence of women's faces in the reformist movement. In an auto-critique of reformism, Birjandi (1379/2000) addresses this aspect of the problem by saying: "Reformism has a duty to reform the way woman is viewed and to do something so that the woman before others would begin to believe that she is a human being with human capabilities and dimensions and is a partner with other members of the human society in the promotion of everything that she can manage to pursue."
25. In their interviews with *Zanan* both Malekian (1378/1999) and Kashi (1379/2000) explicitly point out the distinction between these two approaches to gender issues. They also acknowledge the contributions to philosophy, political theory, and economic theory that can be made through the incorporation of gender analysis. They admit, however, that, so far, religious intellectuals have failed to approach gender analysis in this manner. Neither of them attempts to offer an alternative conceptualization, but Malekian mentions the works of feminists, such as Sandra Harding, Hilary Rose, Nancy Hartsock, Jane Flax, and Dorothy Smith (in philosophy of science, epistemology, psychology, etc.) and suggests the possibility of similar works entering into theological and philosophical discussions as they proceed in Iran.
26. Mir-hosseini (1999: 237) calls this a "skilled evasion of any kind of serious debate over women's legal rights."
27. Mir-hosseini usefully contrasts this position with the position of other "modernists" such as Seyed Mohsen Saidezadeh, a cleric, who also makes a distinction between the essentially unreachable essence of the *Koran* as intended by God and knowledge of it as it appears to historically situated spectators and readers. Saidezadeh nevertheless goes on to argue that established legal inequalities between men and women can be reinterpreted and reevaluated by relying on "the *Koran*, *ahadith*, *feqh*, and rational proofs and incontestable scientific principles." It can be done not merely by tackling "details and instances" but also by tackling "the premises on which they're based." (1999: Ch. 7). Mir-hosseini goes on to conclude that Saidezadeh's reliance on Islamic scholarship to argue for gender equality offers interesting similarities to the works of feminist writers such as Riffat Hassan, Amina Wadud-Muhsin and Fatima Mernissi. They all reach the conclusion that "gender equality is a Principle of Islam and an inseparable part of the message of the Prophet, but in time Muslims bypassed and even inverted this message, and it is this inversion that is reflected in what came to be part of Islamic law." Mir-hosseini (1999: 272). Soroush, on the other hand, would have a more difficult time deriving essential equality, or inequality for that matter, from the Prophet's message.
28. Malekian further argues that because of this, feminist contributions to psychology, metaphysics, epistemology, ontology and so on are ignored.
29. Soroush also says, "When something becomes a norm in history, it must be considered rooted in human psyche or biological structure."
30. Abdolkarim Soroush, quoted by Sadri and Sadri (1999).
31. For instance, see Nourbaksh, 1378/1999: 64–65.
32. See, for instance, Appadurai, 1996.
33. For a very interesting, even if somewhat discursive, analysis of cultural appropriations, Iranian style, see Adelkhah, 2000.
34. Although I am not convinced that this is necessarily left out, it is worth pondering whether such a neglect is part and parcel of the conceptualization that sees Iran as being a society in transition from tradition to modernity. It is also worth pondering the extent to which this is an intentional part of the political dynamics of the reform project, which sees itself as engaging in a conversation to persuade those in the middle, conceived as traditionalist as opposed to fundamentalist.
35. On this point, see particularly, Jalaeipour (1378/1999).
36. For instance, see Eley, 1992. Fraser uses Eley's work on France, England and Germany to suggest that a burgeoning civil society does not necessarily offer open access to all and may in fact be a "training ground" for a stratum of men "preparing to assert their fitness to govern."

37. For a comprehensive view of this issue, see Calhoun, 1992.
38. The idioms of domesticity and motherhood have been quite effective in Iran, not only in voluntary associations but also in political action. Hamidreza Jalaeipour was the publisher of *Jame'eh*, the newspaper billed as Iran's first civil society daily. After *Jame'eh* was closed he was involved in the publication of a series of other reformist papers. He was arrested with two others when the Iranian Judiciary closed another one of the dailies he helped to publish (*Tous*). His mother, also the mother of two "martyrs" of the war and revolution, successfully demanded his release in a direct meeting with Ayatollah Khamenei. Reportedly, she was driven to prison immediately after the meeting to secure the release of her son.
39. Under such conditions, individuals may come together to form associations that can be thought of as alternative publics or, as Fraser calls them, "subaltern counterpublics." Combining the works of others, she offers this term to discuss alternative publics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (1997: 81). Moghissi (1999: 147) uses the same idea to suggest that, "by definition, a religious state prohibits such developments." I don't think this idea can be substantiated, given the outright expression of the struggle for democracy in Iran for the past few years. Indeed, I think the Iranian religious state would have been much more pleased and settled had Moghissi been right.

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