

The Emergence and Development of

Religious Intellectualism in Iran

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There has been no major revolution in modern history without intellectuals; conversely there has been no major counterrevolutionary movement without intellectuals.

—Edward Said, *Presentations of the Intellectual*

Intellectual history is an elusive subject. How does one define it? What issues exactly does it address? Who is an intellectual? When and where exactly does an intellectual movement begin and end? A good part of these difficulties has to do with the fact that intellectualism deals with thought—a complex phenomenon that develops gradually and subtly with almost no sudden or sharp shifts. Unlike political history, whose transformations are usually demarcated by certain factual events, it is very hard, if not impossible, to periodize and characterize the intellectual history of a nation with any degree of precision. It is only possible to embark on such a task after the impacts of intellectual trends become manifest in social or political transformations. Furthermore, since intellectualism deals primarily with matters of thought, it is by nature a diverse phenomenon. Therefore, a multiplicity of intellectual trends may be at work in any given historical period. One should be careful not to reduce this multiplicity to a single or particular tendency.

Nevertheless, there is a general consensus that intellectualism is essentially a modern phenomenon in Muslim countries, where it emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. In Iran it reached its apogee during the Constitutional Revolution (1906-11). It was then that a new stratum of educated individuals, other than the traditional literati, the ulama, appeared on the scene offering novel ideas not only hard for the public to ignore, but offered solutions to existing social and political problems. Indeed, according to the generally accepted view, the development of a new intellectual current apart from the one represented by the ulama constitutes one of the defining characteristics of intellectualism (*rawshanfikri*) in the modern sense of the word. However, this does not mean that it was necessarily secular or antireligious.

The intellectual history of modern Iran is as diverse as that of any other nation. It has witnessed a wide array of intellectual trends with a variety of ideological pronouncements and distinctive discourses responsive to different historical conditions. Some survived the ebb and flow of rapidly changing social and political contexts; some faded away in spite of having an impressive start; others proved to be more consequential in terms of a lasting impact on the intellectual and socio-political development of Iran, while still others made marginal contributions. However, the role that Iranian intellectuals have played in the recent history of the country has been undeniable in its transition into modernity.

This study aims to examine the emergence and development of religious intellectualism in Iran—a rather unique and contemporary strain within the Iranian intellectual tradition that has played a significant and consequential role in shaping the country's modern history. To do this, I will examine the intellectual, social and political conditions that gave rise to this current, as well as the characteristics of its discourse in its two distinctive phases of evolution, namely, the pre- and postrevolutionary. Particular attention will be focused on its discourse on religion and politics and their interaction. To do this, however, will first necessitate clarifying what is meant by the terms intellectual in general and religious intellectual in particular.

Who Is an Intellectual?

Various definitions are given for the term intellectual, each pertaining to one or another aspect or function of this rather fluid but complex phenomenon. Edward Said contends that

... the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma, to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose

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raison d'être is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug¹.

In reaching a definition, a number of parameters must also be taken into consideration. Some definitions recognize “criticism” or maintaining “a permanent critical standpoint against the status quo” as quintessential qualities of the intellectual. “Creating new ideas and concepts,” “having knowledge of and sensitivity to problems of the society and culture,” and “protest, action and resistance” are also equally designated. In some definitions the field of activity of the intellectual becomes so vast as to include all writers, professionals, technocrats, specialists and the educated,² while in others, such as that of Julien Benda, the scope is restricted to a few who are “able to speak the truth to the power.” They are “crusty, eloquent, fantastically courageous and angry individuals for whom no worldly power is too big and imposing to be criticized and pointedly taken to task.” As such they are ready “to risk being burned at the stake.”³

In this article the definition of intellectual in the Iranian context includes those few whose ideas created a paradigm shift in cultural and social discourse. Other writers, journalists, technocrats and professionals function as a link between the intellectually creative and the public. They are the first consumers and promulgators of the new ideas and language as they adopt, elaborate and present these concepts to society at large. By doing this they also participate in building the new intellectual repertoire and shape the process of transformation by weaving a texture for original concepts in which the latter can grow and be enriched. According to the primary parameters considered in our working definition, an intellectual, then, is a person who has the ability to recognize/diagnose and articulate the problems/crises of his/her society. He/she has the ability to theorize those problems and to work out solutions/remedies for them. He/she has the ability to produce new concepts and categories of thought consequential in the society. That is to say, he/she creates novel outlooks and discourses that have the power to capture the hearts and minds of his/her audience, which will eventually appropriate and use them over and over again. In this way the new discourses become so pervasively and routinely a shared commodity of the society’s mind set and language that the old is almost imperceptibly transformed or replaced. This creative intellectual is no creature of the ivory tower; indeed, because of his/her social commitment, he/she is quite likely to be driven to action. As such, an intellectual cannot but be critical of or opposed to the status quo. In this case he/she often becomes subject to persecution and harassment by the establishment.

Iranian Intellectuals

From the middle of the nineteenth century onward ideas and ideals of modernity and modernization slowly crept into the Persian cultural milieu. The forerunners of this process were, at first, some members of the Qajar court and, later on—particularly in the decades immediately preceding the Constitutional Movement—various writers, journalists and political activists. These individuals, often from the educated and upper social strata, voiced longstanding aspirations of the masses for social justice and political change. They presented these hopes through a new pattern of thought and language that went beyond mere criticism of the status quo. They demanded changes be established through new institutions such as a parliament. These individuals were called *munavver al-fikr* (enlightened in thought), an Arabic term in use until the 1930s when, in the wake of Iranian nationalistic sentiments, the Persian Academy, purging Arabic words and coining a new Persian vocabulary, offered the substitute *rawshanfikr*. This semi-Persian and semi-Arabic expression with the same meaning of enlightened in thought or mind has since been the preferred equivalent for the English term intellectual and, in some instances, intelligentsia.

1. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York, 1996), p. 11.

2. See for instance Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks: Selections*, trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York, 1971.)

3. See Julien Benda, *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, trans. Richard Aldington (1928; reprt. New York, 1969), as presented by E. Said in *Presentations of the Intellectual*, pp. 5-7.

For most of the twentieth century the term *rawshanfikir* was almost exclusively synonymous with secular attitudes. In the century's early decades the aftermath of the Constitutional Movement set the stage for the supremacy of secular-oriented reformers, while the modernization of the country proceeded along secular, Western lines. Emulation of Western lifestyles and artistic expressions were signs of being modern and indicative of intellectual decorum. Gradually, the traditional literati—the ulama—and their companions, the old aristocracy, were side-stepped by the newly emerging educated social stratum whose leading members had either been trained in Europe or were inspired by Western achievements. With newly established institutions, such as a modern judiciary and state-sponsored public schooling, the ulama's monopoly over knowledge was gradually curtailed. From the perspective of intellectual history, the significance of this shift of power lies in the fact that it indicated the new order was more than the result of a political change—it expressed a completely new intellectual outlook on the world, society and its institutions.

On the political level, too, the ulama and the aristocracy began to lose their prerogatives and significance with the advent of a parliamentary system of government and a written constitution. Two major events heralded the successful take over of the new order and its liberal and secular-oriented proponents. The first was the execution of Shaykh Fazlullah Nuri, the top ranking *mujtahid* who demanded *mashru'ah* (the rule of shari'ah) instead of *mashrutah* (constitutionalism), which he considered incompatible with the Islamic way of life and the sovereignty of God. The second was the abolishment of the Qajar dynasty along with its established aristocracy by the *Majlis* (Parliament) in 1925. All in all, the relative ease with which these events took place—with almost no serious opposition—marked the strength and general appeal of the new order, which was antitraditional by nature or at least critical of whatever was old, including religion. The latter had not only lost its sway in the political, judicial and education arenas, it had even gone into abeyance in modern intellectual discourse and etiquette.

Antipathy and aversion to religion and religiosity, at least in public, became an indispensable element of the intellectual's behaviour; otherwise, he would be considered a “fanatic” (*mutu'asib*) or a “reactionary” (*murtaji*). Nor was this hostile attitude towards religion merely due to the strength and thrust of modern, secular intellectual trends, or the imposition of a Westernization process by the political establishment. It can be argued that religion and its custodians were definitely not prepared for the strenuous challenge posed by modernity and failed to provide viable solutions for emerging problems at a critical period of transition in Iranian history. Thus, religious forces quietly receded into a shell for a period of time that gave an opportunity for self-reflection as the new course of events unfolded. Meantime, Communism and liberal nationalism became the two most powerful rivals of religion in the 1940s and 1950s—two influential ideologies that vied with each other. After the abdication of Reza Shah in 1941—an event that ushered in a period of political and intellectual freedom—Communist ideas were popularized by the pro-Soviet party with the result that leftist parlance and ways of thinking became an attractive and dominant mode of *rawshanfikri*. Communist ideologues such as Taqi Arani, Ihsan Tabari, Nurudin Kianuri and a number of other journalists and writers were granted the title of *rawshanfikir*, as they became the torchbearers of protest and political opposition against the oppressive traditionalism and state liberalism of the Pahlavi regime. Well into the 1950s and 1960s the hallmarks of intellectualism were oppositional political activities with a Communist bent. Even liberal nationalists who led the successful oil nationalization movement in the early 1950s and stood behind the democratic and constitutionalist government of Muhammad Mosaddiq were not considered *rawshanfikir* as such. Thus, even within the contemporary frame of reference, protest and political activism were not sufficient to qualify non-Communists as *rawshanfikir*.

In any event, for most of the twentieth century intellectualism and the intellectual were associated with anything but religion; it was as if intellectualism had to be an alien species born in the secular ideological universe of either the West or East. Even as late as the mid-1960s, when some self-critical voices began to make themselves heard within intellectual circles,⁴ religion and intellectualism were still deemed mutually exclusive. It was not until the appearance of Ali Shari'ati in the second half of the 1960s that this assumption was seriously challenged and the existing definition of the intellectual revised. This became a turning point in Iran's intellectual history. Shari'ati produced a novel intellectual discourse that came to be far more effective and popular than that of the current revolutionary left or those imitating Western liberalism. Shari'ati's rapid and widespread influence, and particularly his significant role in bringing about the 1979 Revolution, proved that a new breed of intellectualism had been born and come to stay. This new phenomenon belonged neither to the traditional literati represented by the clergy nor the

4. Jalal Al-e Ahmad and his works *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication) (Tehran, 1962) and *Dar Khedmat va Khiyant-e Rawshanfikran* (On the Service and Treason of the Intellectuals) (Tehran, n.d.) are distinctive examples of this voice.

secular intellectual strata. In spite of a general consensus on Shari`ati's possession of an "intellectual's qualifications," his confused competitors were reluctant to refer to him as *rawshanfikr*. So how was the new trend he represented to be designated? What was its nomenclature? Perhaps Shari`ati's untimely and sudden death followed by the rapid course of the Revolution and the supremacy of the clergy prevented a clear designation to emerge at the time. It was not until some years after the Revolution that Abdolkarim Soroush, Shari`ati's spiritual heir, coined the term "Religious Intellectualism" and elaborated its distinctive features in the late 1980s.⁵

Evidently, religious intellectualism is a phenomenon belonging to a religious society. The religious intellectual shares certain major characteristics with his nonreligious peers: cognizance of the conditions of the time and of society and its problems; the role of producer of new concepts and categories of thought; a sense of responsibility leading to protest and criticism, etc. In addition, the religious intellectual has, on an individual level, religious commitment and, on the societal level, a conviction that religion can still be functional in the modern age, helping humanity with its serious and profound problems. As such, religion constitutes one of the resources, including science and philosophy, from which solutions must be sought in order to improve the human condition. Also, on a societal level, the religious intellectual recognizes that ignoring religion can only widen the gap between the intellectual and the masses. At the same time, religious intellectuals differ in some important respects from traditional religious literati, the ulama. A religious intellectual is first and foremost cognizant of the transition of his/her society from tradition to modernity, and is aware of and sensitive to the fact that in this transition religion, as it stands, has become dysfunctional and thus demands new interpretations. Another important difference has to do with their respective sources of knowledge. While traditional ulama are epistemologically single-sourced, relying solely upon religious authority, religious intellectuals are multi-sourced; they use and benefit from both religious and nonreligious fields of knowledge such as philosophy, history and sociology. Moreover, unlike the ulama, religious intellectuals do not gain their livelihood from preaching religion. Religious intellectualism is generated and led primarily by lay religious individuals, though some clerical figures are among its active representatives.⁶

Socio-Political and Intellectual Settings

Although religious intellectualism first manifested itself in a distinct fashion in the 1960s and 1970s with the emergence of its founding figures, Mehdi Bazargan and Ali Shari`ati, its roots reach back to the turn of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, the heyday of Muslim reawakening and Islamic modernism. Evident are imprints of early Muslim reformers like Sayyid Jamal al-din Afghani (d.1897), Muhammad `Abduh (d.1905) and Muhammad Iqbal (d.1938), who were mainly concerned to alert Muslims to their decline and to rejuvenate their faith at a time when Western scientific and technological advancements had cast shadows of doubt on the viability of religion. The efforts of these men were focused on proving Islam compatible with the spirit of scientific progress and rationality. At the beginning of the twentieth century—during the period of political modernization in Muslim societies that culminated in constitutional movements in Iran and Turkey—religious-oriented intellectuals and political activists contended that the major tenets of Islam were not contrary to the modern ideals of freedom, equality and democracy. These efforts were aimed at preserving the presence of Islam in the stormy seas of rapid social and political change that had engulfed Muslim societies. Nevertheless, the course of events pointed toward the ascendance of secular intellectual and political trends. The aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran—which culminated in the trial and execution of Shaykh Fazlullah Nuri—polarized the

5. The characteristics of religious intellectuals presented in this section are taken mainly from Abdolkarim Soroush, *Rawshanfikri, Razdani va Dindari* [Intellectualism, Sagacity and Religiosity], (Tehran, 1997).

6. As will be discussed later, pre-Revolutionary religious intellectualism was led by Bazargan and Shari`ati and the post-Revolutionary by Abdolkarim Soroush, while two prominent clerical figures, Ayatollah Mahmud Taliqani and Mohammad Mojtahed-e Shabestari, have contributed in each phase respectively.

community and accelerated the recession of politically active and reform-oriented religious forces. The decades of the 1920s and 1930s witnessed the uncontested dominance of secular forces supporting Reza Shah's policies of modernization in line with Western models. Ideologically speaking, these forces had virtually no single rival, religious or nonreligious. During the 1940s, when Iran experienced a period of political freedom after the abdication of Reza Shah, a newcomer emerged on Iran's intellectual and political scene: the Communist Tudeh Party (Party of the Masses). Expanding its organized ideological and political campaigns, the Tudeh Party reached its highest popularity during the oil nationalization movement in early 1950s. Indeed, in the first half of the twentieth century there was no pre-eminent or influential trend in Iran—either intellectual or political—with the slightest religious coloring. Rather, during these decades the faintest inclination towards religion was considered by its secular contenders as a sign of backwardness and fanaticism. Because of this, rejection of religion had come to be a salient feature of a vanguard intellectualism. The only activities pointing to the presence of religion on the political scene were those of popular forces led by Ayatollah Kashani during the oil nationalization movement and the radical militant group Fada'iyan-e Islam that carried out assassinations against the regime's notables. Both were short-lived, and neither was based on a systematic and theoretical attempt at rejuvenating Islam in the modern world. After overthrowing the democratic nationalist government of the popular Prime Minister Mosaddiq in 1953, Muhammad Reza Shah consolidated his autocratic monarchical rule. By the early 1960s almost all political opposition had been curbed. The traditional left, represented by the Tudeh Party, was suffering the regime's suppressive measures, and its leaders had either been arrested or had fled to the Soviet Union. Its popularity was equally damaged by a backlash against the difficulties it had created for Mosaddiq's government and which had accelerated its fall. In other words, the traditional left with its overtly pro-Soviet agenda had lost popular legitimacy both on the theoretical and practical level.

The coalition of nationalist forces that constituted the National Front was not treated any better by the Pahlavi regime. Mosaddiq was tried by a military tribunal and placed under house arrest for the rest of his life. Other leaders of the National Front were imprisoned or executed, or escaped to Europe. Some constitutive forces of the National Front regrouped under the name of the National Resistance Movement, but they were contained within a few years. Later on in 1961 a faction of the National Resistance Movement emerged as the Freedom Movement of Iran (FMI). Among the religiously oriented founding members who came to play important roles in the following decades were Ayatollah Sayyid Mahmud Taliqani (d.1979), an exceptional member of the clergy who was politically active, and Mehdi Bazargan (d.1996), a university professor and civil servant under Mosaddiq. The FMI, with its modernist attitude towards religion, was the first independent organized entity of religious nationalist forces in Iranian politics. This, however, did not ensure it a better fate than other parties. Bazargan was tried in a military court and, along with other members, sentenced to exile and imprisonment in early 1963.⁷

In the early 1960s Muhammad Reza Shah, under pressures from the Kennedy administration and in reaction to severe socio-economic crises in the country, launched his reform plan called The White Revolution. The pronounced objectives of the plan were social and economic development through measures such as land reform, suffrage rights for women and increased literacy. In the light of Washington's Cold War policies these reforms were meant to block the influence of Communist and socialist ideologies in Iran. The Shah also hoped they would bring socio-economic justice and hence improve his image as a monarch concerned for national interests and development. This was vital to rehabilitating the regime's legitimacy, which had been badly damaged by its reinstatement through the CIA-engineered coup of 1953. On the other hand, giving numerous economic and military concessions to the United States that increased its military presence, granting "capitulation rights" to American military personnel, joining the Baghdad Pact and supporting Israel, represented a series of actions that did not go unnoticed by the Shah's political opponents, whatever their ideological tendencies. Nevertheless, the regime's crackdown on opponents had left it with no serious challenger. As mentioned above, the traditional religious establishment was generally quiescent after the Constitutional Revolution, and to an extent even supported the Pahlavi monarchs in their efforts to restore order

7. For a detailed account of activities of Taliqani and Bazargan and the FMI see: Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953-2000): From Bazargan to Soroush*, (Leiden and Boston, 2001), pp. 69-112; H.E. Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism* (Ithaca, 1990), pp. 103-222.

and political stability. Be that as it may, just before his death Ayatollah Boroujerdi (d. 1961), the supreme *marja` taqlid* of the time, expressed his opposition to the Shah's plans for land reform and women's enfranchisement. More serious opposition came later in the form of a popular uprising in 1963 against the Shah's dictatorial and proimperialist policies led by Boroujerdi's successor, the prominent religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini. The bloody suppression of this uprising and Khomeini's exile put an end, for a time, to further public political activism. Thanks to its secret intelligence police (SAVAK) and its notorious treatment of political prisoners, the Shah's regime continued to rule until 1979.

Under these circumstances the younger generation, having become increasingly disillusioned, began to seek new ways to express its disappointment with existing socio-political conditions. The 1960s and 1970s, decades of revolutionary ideology, persuaded some that armed resistance was the only credible mode of political protest. A new left emerged that was, unlike its predecessor the predominantly Stalinist Tudeh Party, theoretically inspired by a variety of Marxist-Communist and socialist ideological brands of Chinese Maoism, Soviet Leninism and Cuban Castroism. From among these new leftist underground organizations the guerrilla group Fada'iyan-e Khalq became known for its militant activities and armed uprisings in the 1970s. In the ideological fervency of these decades the Pahlavi regime also constructed its own brand of Iranian nationalism based on the romantic conceit of the ancient Iranian Achaemenid Empire. This state ideology, however, was more than 2500 years distant from the reality of Iranian society and even more from the "nationalist" policies of a regime that had made Iran a puppet of Western imperialism. These endeavors to forge a national identity inevitably failed, and the regime was severely criticized both at home and abroad. Meantime, important demographic changes had occurred. There was massive urbanization as much of the rural population, as a consequence of failed land reform, moved to the major cities in search of work. There was likewise an increase in the general population and an expansion of the urban middle class coupled with an increase in the numbers of educated youth. Also, the injection of petrodollars into the economy resulted in widening the gap between the privileged few and the underprivileged masses while giving the new middle class a false sense of prosperity. All these socio-economic changes generated social and moral crises. There was a confusion of norms. Traditional moral, religious and social boundaries had become relatively dysfunctional and a new set had yet to be established.

Emergence of a New Trend

Under these circumstances no existing ideology could easily be adopted: neither the secular Westernized ideology of a state that self-delusively claimed to be at the "Gates of a Great Civilization," nor the distant and alien utopia of Marxism with its strange dogmas and parlance associated with Russia, a historically hostile neighbor and which was, even worse, antireligious. Against this political and ideological background religious intellectualism emerged in interaction with and reaction to three politico-intellectual forces: traditional Islam, Marxist/Communism and state-sponsored Westernized secularism. The religious-intellectual trend led by Ali Shari'ati generated the alternative ideology that proved to be most attractive to members of the young educated class and finally became most effective in mobilizing the masses for revolutionary change. Easily comprehensible, it appealed to an Iranian nation that was, at heart, deeply religious. A "native" ideology, it addressed the socio-political concerns and cultural sensibilities of the time. Indeed, the "Islamic Ideology" that Shari'ati formulated seemed, from the perspective of its supporters, to have all the benefits and then some of its rivals. It was, for example, as militant and revolutionary as any radical Marxism for socio-political activism—a fact demonstrated by the underground Muslim guerrilla group, the Mojahedin Khalq, that carried out armed attacks on governmental institutions. Islamic ideology was as much antiestablishment as any other Third World revolutionary ideology of the 1970s. It seemed equally progressive in its socio-economic outlook, which promoted justice and a fair distribution of wealth and power, as well as affirming rights for the downtrodden and underprivileged (*mustaz`afin*). And unlike religious traditionalism, it encouraged social and political activism for women. Moreover, its discourse was replete with familiar idioms and imagery taken from Shi'i Islam, in stark contrast to Marxism. Its ideal figures and icons were the Shi'i Imams Ali and Hossein, the embodiment of justice and resistance against oppression. Although Islamic, it was nationalist given its overtly Iranian Shi'i symbolism and the attention paid to immediate national issues. It also boasted a charismatic ideologue in the person of Shari'ati, who was a passionate, erudite and eloquent preacher. In sum, religious intellectualism provided exactly what the young generation at that time craved. To quote Arvand Abrahamian, it was "a radical layman's religion that disassociated itself from the traditional clergy and associated itself with the secular trinity of

social revolution, technological innovation, and cultural self-assertion.⁸

Another factor contributing to the popularity of the new ideological trend was the national memory of religiously-motivated cases of protest and resistance against the regime: the armed struggle of the Fada'iyān-e Islam in the mid-1950s, the Freedom Movement of Iran and the activities of Bazargan and Taliqani (late 1950s and early 1960s), and finally the 1963 uprising led by Ayatollah Khomeini. Although the Islamic ideology of Shari'ati and the young Muslim activists of the time were not necessarily theoretically aligned with the Islam of any of these three, they benefited indirectly from the credit the public granted these three prominent episodes and individuals.

In any event, by the early 1970s, when Shari'ati began the second round of his lectures at Hosseiniyeh Irshad,⁹ it had become evident that a new intellectual movement had been born and was rapidly claiming its space among its intellectual and socio-political peers. Perhaps nothing better signified the tenacity and thrust of this new movement than the strong reactions and controversial responses it elicited from the traditional religious establishment, the intellectual left and secular modernizers, followed by SAVAK's crackdowns and the imprisonment of Shari'ati.¹⁰

Religious Intellectualism: Two Phases

Iran's religious-intellectual movement has gone through two distinct phases in its rather short history, and although major continuities exist, each phase has developed unique features. The distinction between the pre- and postrevolutionary phases has best manifested itself in two different understandings of religion and its relationship to politics. Since this movement is "religious," an examination of its understanding(s), definition(s), and expectation(s) of religion is in order. Furthermore, since the movement is "intellectual" and must by definition be socially and politically engaged, an examination of the relationship between religion and politics affirmed by involved religious intellectuals will shed light on the role played by this movement in the socio-political events of contemporary Iran as well as reveal transformations that occurred within the movement. In what follows I will present a comparative summary of the main features of religious intellectualism's discourse in its pre- and postrevolutionary phases with special focus on issues of religion and politics and with reference to their socio-political outcomes. In order to animate the discussion, I will refer to these phases as those of the ideological and the nonideological discourse respectively; or as the ideological and the epistemological/democratic discourse.¹¹

Phase I: The Ideological Discourse

Religion in the ideological discourse is understood and interpreted in a way that suits the movement's ideological objectives. As a result, the traditional concepts of God, prophethood and other religious doctrinal and institutional principles take on new meanings and are linguistically formulated in such a way that invoking them enhance's revolutionary fervor and connotes ideological messages. For instance, God is not invoked in His commonly used names of *al-Rahman* and *al-Rahim* (The Compassionate and The Merciful), but is most often called upon by His attributes of might, which are more politically loaded terms: *Qassem-e al-Jabbarin* (The Smasher of Oppressors). Similarly He is seldom called *Rabb al-'alamin* (The Lord of the Universe), but more often referred to as *Rabb al-mustaz'afin* (The Lord of the Oppressed). Prophecy is not just an act of divine mercy to guide humankind toward salvation; it is more a logical act much expected from the Lord of the Oppressed to raise up a revolutionary leader who will first and foremost subvert the temporal status quo on behalf of the downtrodden. The assumption is made that social aspects of the missions of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad transformed these figures into

8. Arvand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, 1982), p. 473.

9. For Hosseiniyeh Irshad, its history and significance see: H.E. Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism*, pp. 203-10; Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian* (London and New York, 2000), pp. 226-42.

10. For details of these responses see *ibid.*, pp. 201-209, 246-59, 312-29.

11. In this section I have benefited and borrowed some ideas and expressions from Abdolkarim Soroush, "Goftemanhaye Dini dar Jami'ah-e Irani"[Religious Discourses in Iranian Society] in *A'in-e Shariyari va Dindari* [The Etiquette of Ruling and Religiosity] (Tehran, 2000), pp. 3-53; "Dhati va 'Aradi dar Adyan" [Essentials and Accidentals of Religion], "Din-e Hadd-e Aqalli, Din-e Hadd-e Akthari" [Maximalist Religion, Minimalist Religion] both in *Bast-e Tajrubehe Nabavi* [Expansion of Prophetic Experience] (Tehran, 1999), pp. 29-82 and pp. 83-112 respectively; "Qara'at-e Fashisti az Din" [The Fascist Reading of Religion] in *Rawshanfikri, Razdani va Dindari* [Intellectualism, Sagacity and Religiosity] (Tehran, 1997), pp. 79-116.

revolutionary reformers fighting the triple threat of economic exploitation (*zar*), political dictatorship (*zur*) and intellectual deception (*tazvir*.) The Shi'i Imams are depicted not simply as successors of the Prophet, but as torchbearers of his revolutionary movement; they have the primary tasks of combating reactionary and antirevolutionary forces which had usurped the role of the caliphate and restoring the just order established by the Prophet.¹² More than just acts of piety, rituals—and particularly congregational ones—are granted extraordinary symbolic meanings carrying socio-political and ideological designations. The elements of struggle against evil are exhibited in most. Daily prayers, the fasting of Ramadan, the Hajj pilgrimage, etc., are meant to remind the individual of his/her ideological commitment, i.e., belief in the *tawhidi* system and preparation for selfless sacrifice in the cause of an ideal system of justice.

This religious ideology makes large promises: to create an ideal society and establish an ideal political order. As such it upholds a “maximalist” reading of religion, which is expected to have preplanned programs for administering every aspect of life. Human intellect is supposed only to discover, sort out and use these plans. Ideological religion proclaims to be change and action oriented. To attain its utopian goals the resort to forceful means are perfectly justifiable, even inevitable. Hence, militancy, jihad (understood as revolutionary action) and martyrdom are promoted as the highest religious and social values. As such, one’s ideological “duties” should always override one’s personal “rights.”

As events proved, in contrast to its success in mass mobilization and guiding society toward revolutionary objectives (the task of deconstruction), ideological discourse proved inadequate for the challenge that followed the Revolution (the task of construction). Being “ideological,” this discourse naturally required an “official” reading of religion. But who was to set the parameters of this “official” religious understanding that was to be the ideology of the new state? The Mojahedin? Or Shari`ati? The Mojahedin, the only organized guerrilla group with an Islamic ideology, had already gone through several ideological metamorphoses followed by a bloody internal rift between its Marxist and Muslim factions. Even though the organization still enjoyed great popularity during and soon after the Revolution thanks to the martyrdom and bravery of its founding and prominent figures, it was in no position to translate this approval into unwavering support for seizing the country’s leadership. Its ideology at this point was neither Islamic nor Marxist, but a blend of the two. There was much suspicion and mistrust regarding its overtly eclectic ideology.

12. See Shari`ati’s lectures on Ali, Hossein, and Zeynab. Now published in his *Majmu`ah-e Athar* [Collection of Works] (Tehran, 1979-84). See, for instance, vols. 4, 16, 19, 20, 26.

Shari`ati, chief architect of Islamic revolutionary ideology was no longer around to work out a theory for the new conditions, and when alive had been too busy with the more urgent task of preparing his audience for bringing about revolutionary change. His works, moreover, do not give a clear idea of what type of government he envisioned for his modern *tawhidi* society in the absence of the Imams and the Prophet. He was ambivalent about democratic rule and at best might have supported a guided democracy.¹³ Under these circumstances, and particularly in light of the charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini that made him the uncontested leader of the Revolution, the “official” reading of religion came to be constructed by the ulama and the traditional jurists (*fuqaha*), not the revolutionary modernists. Ideological Islam had simply no well thought out or systematic theories for running the country after the Revolution. The gradual takeover of the government by the clergy seems to have been an unintended but logical consequence of the ideological Islamic discourse of Shari`ati. Despite the fact that the religious establishment had previously and consistently condemned Shari`ati, it was quick to harvest the benefits of his ideological discourse.¹⁴ Trading on the popularity of Ayatollah Khomeini and selectively using certain ideological idioms and doctrines of Shari`ati’s politicized vision, clerics created a state ideology whose content was based on a traditional, normative legal understanding of Islam—i.e., *fiqh*—and on the aim of implementing the *shari`ah*. There was some irony in the clergy endorsing the very same revolutionary ideology that had previously criticized them as reactionary forces responsible for perpetuating economic exploitation and political dictatorship. In the end, the clerics necessarily proved decidedly selective in their use of Islamic ideological discourse. What they were most interested in borrowing was its exclusivism and militant justification of the need to marginalize or eliminate whatever and whomever they came to designate as “other.” After consolidating their official and legal roots through interpolating the theory of *velayat-e Faqih* (Rule by Juristconsults) into the new Constitution, they began to marginalize, defame and remove from office those who had contributed to the ideological build up of the Revolution and had played a significant role during its early critical stages. Even Shari`ati’s books were banned from display in school libraries. Lay religious intellectuals and activists such as Mehdi Bazargan (the first Prime Minister of the Islamic regime appointed by Ayatollah Khomeini), Abolhasan Bani Sadr (the first president of the Islamic Republic), Ibrahim Yazdi (long-time political activist and minister of foreign affairs under Bazargan) and Sadeq Qutbzadeh (a long-time political activist) and many others who assumed political positions in the first few years of the Islamic regime were among the first set aside.¹⁵ The moderate and nonmilitant Muslim faction was also forced to recede into the background as its members either resigned or were gradually replaced by more “ideologically correct”—or as some said, *mutu`ahed-e maktabi* (ideologically committed)—individuals. The fate of non-Islamic ideological groups was no better. From the well-established nationalists and Mosaddiqists to the Islamic left of the Mojahedin and to the many brands of Marxist and Communist groups, political displacement ruled the day by a wide range of methods: polemical propaganda, imprisonment, executions and military operations. In this ideological settling of accounts, other factors emerged that the regime manipulated to its purpose: the armed uprisings for autonomy in Kurdistan and Turkmenistan orchestrated by the Marxist Fada`iyan-e Khalq and eventually supported by the Mojahedin; guerrilla attacks carried out by armed groups targeting civilians; and, most importantly, Saddam Hussein’s invasion and occupation of considerable parts of Iran. These provided the regime with the pretext to mobilize general public support behind its policies, including suppression of political opponents, for preserving the country’s territorial integrity, maintaining law and order and preserving the achievements of the Revolution.¹⁶ Social and economic conditions grew increasingly grim as Iran suffered through eight long years of war with Iraq, enduring massive losses and suffering from international sanctions imposed by the United States and its European allies. In the meantime, the ideological *fiqh*-based regime also implemented social and public policies that were disconcertingly repressive. Policing the public and even private lives of its “subjects,” it sought uniformity in

13. For Shari`ati’s position on democracy see Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953-2000): From Bazargan to Soroush*, pp. 119-26.

14. Unlike some other ulama who had directly condemned Shari`ati, Ayatollah Khomeini had an ambiguous and ambivalent position regarding him. He never publicly expressed approval or disapproval of Shari`ati.

15. Although these individuals had their own differences, they collectively belonged to the camp of prerevolutionary Islamic ideological discourse. Also, each one was removed from the political scene for a different reason; some received public support and some did not. The point here is not to discuss each case, but to show to what extent an “ideology”—religious or nonreligious—is so exclusivist it cannot tolerate even those that most resemble it.

16. Another factor that contributed to weakening the left was the global decline of Marxist-Communist ideologies and regimes beginning in the mid-1980s in Eastern Europe and ultimately in the Soviet Union.

people's beliefs and actions. Policies and measures of this sort generated further opposition among the general public and gradually radicalized existing opponents. Yet, the public had no official forum by which to express its dissent.

Even as Iran was grappling with the war and its attendant problems, the ideological struggle continued. Nevertheless, by the mid-1980s the ideological regime of the clerics had firmly consolidated itself under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. With new amendments to the constitution, extra prerogatives were allocated to the supreme leader that would make official his absolute rule. These prerogatives were called *velayat-e mutlaqeh-e faqih*. Regardless of the difficulties endured by its subjects, the regime still enjoyed vast popular support. There was simply no sign of any serious ideological or political alternative that could *effectively* challenge the Islamic rule of the jurists and their legitimizing ideology. Nevertheless, an entirely unlikely development was emerging within the country's Islamic milieu.

Phase II: Epistemological/Democratic Discourse

In the middle of the 1980s a new intellectual movement began to take shape from within the same prerevolutionary ideological circles that had brought about the Revolution. The earliest stages of the trend, which soon introduced the second phase of religious intellectualism, can be traced back to 1984 and the founding of a new cultural magazine known as *Kayhan-e Farhangi*.¹⁷ Providing an artistic and nonpolitical forum, it devoted its pages to intellectual issues and often printed articles on neglected or silenced artists and academics. The magazine at first ran more or less smoothly, for its editors were cautious not to pass the red line of official censorship. A turning point, however, came when it began to publish a series of articles entitled *Qabd va Bast-e Te'urik-e Shari'at* (The Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge) between 1988 and 1990 by Abdolkarim Soroush. Given their controversial nature and the implications of Soroush's ideas, the editorial board was forced to resign—only to found a new journal, *Kiyan*, in 1991. In spite of constant restrictions and official pressures, *Kiyan* survived until 2001, serving as the forum of the postrevolutionary religious-intellectual movement led by Abdolkarim Soroush.¹⁸

Thus, in contrast to the pre-Revolutionary period, when it operated in reaction to non-Islamic ideologies, religious intellectualism during the post-revolutionary phase emerged as a counter trend to the prevailing Islamic ideology. Again, unlike its first phase, in which religion was politicized and ideologized, religious intellectualism during the second phase has tried to depoliticize and de-ideologize questions of religious belief. Although critical of social and political conditions, it has leveled its main criticism against the prevailing understanding of religion, and especially the official ideological *fiqh*-based understanding. Its opposition and protest do not seem to be the tactical or strategic position of yet another politically motivated movement. Rather, they seemingly stem from essential principles and the way that the movement defines and understands religion and its relationship to politics. Postrevolutionary religious intellectualism is ostensibly based on a different understanding of Islam, which is epistemological rather

17. For details of earlier activities of this kind and the story of *Kayhan-e Farhangi* and its editors see F. Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism*, pp. 140-43.

18. On Soroush see: Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism*, pp. 140-85; Jahanbakhsh, "Abdolkarim Soroush: New 'Revival of Religious Sciences'" in *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 8 (2001); Vala Vakili, "Debating Religion and Politics in Iran: The Political Thought of Abdolkarim Soroush" in *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, ed. John Esposito (Oxford, 2001), pp. 150-76; John Cooper, "The Limits of the Sacred: The Epistemology of Abdolkarim Soroush" in *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, ed. John Cooper, et. al. (London and New York, 2000), pp. 38-56; Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse, 1996), pp. 156-76.

than ideological, and which might best be described as epistemological-democratic in its discourse. In the following paragraphs I will outline the main features of this discourse pertaining to religion and politics in contrast to the ideological discourse.

Postrevolutionary religious intellectualism emphatically places “religious experience” or inward faith (*iman*) at the core of its definition of religion. Its religiosity is more geared to spiritual experiences of the divine than to ritualism or outward practices (*a`mal*.) In its rhetoric God is often depicted as the compassionate and loving God of the mystics rather than the fear-inspiring God of jurists or the combative God of ideological militants. Therefore, rituals are to be performed out of love for rather than fear of Him or for the sake of ideological symbolism. Prophecy and prophethood are understood and valued as the most exalted expression of “religious experience.” Yet this unique “prophetic experience,” with all its exaltedness, is not completely out of reach of common humanity. It is expansive in the sense that individuals can enjoy, to a certain degree, similar experiences of encountering the divine.¹⁹ Since religious experience is pluralistic by nature, the epistemological discourse promotes diversity as opposed to uniformity in religious expression. This diversity reflects the plurality of religious understandings and points toward tolerance rather than exclusivist rigidity. Moreover, there is no need for an official class of religious interpreters, and indeed Soroush insists that there is no single or final interpretation of religion.²⁰ Nor can any one person or any group claim *a priori* rights for himself on that basis. This key point, derived from his Theory of the Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge, challenged the clerics’ claim arrogating for themselves exclusive rights to religious and political leadership, now one and the same under the *fiqh*-based ideology of the state.

Regarding the socio-political role of religion, the epistemological discourse has “minimalist” expectations. “Rationalism,” Soroush states, “is one of the most sturdy elements of epistemological discourse,”²¹ especially as it promotes democratic methods of governance. Further, the collective intellect of society should decide its administration, not a preplanned religious platform that is, in reality, the cumulative understanding of the *fuqaha*. The rhetoric of this democratic discourse is noncombative and emphasizes the personal “rights” of “citizens” and calls for the institutionalization of civil liberties. Therefore, people’s participation in politics should be based on their political rights and free will as citizens of the state, and not on the basis of their ideological/religious duties as subjects.²²

In sum, the task of postrevolutionary religious intellectualism is manifold. Its most immediate objectives have been to de-ideologize religion and move beyond the rigidity of a *fiqh*-based reading of Islam by exposing the foundational limitations of both ideology and *fiqh*. This has included the difficult task of proving that religion does not essentially fit into the fixed mold of ideology: “It is more sturdy and comprehensive than ideology.” Moreover, religious intellectualism has had to show that ideologization of traditional *fiqh* is doubly problematic because “traditional *fiqh* is poorer at providing viable social and political plans.”²³

19. Soroush’s extensive discussions on this subject are published in his book: *Bast-e Tajrube-e Nabavi* [Expansion of Prophetic Experience] (Tehran, 1999). On religious pluralism see his book: *Serathaye Mustaqim* [Straight Paths] (Tehran, 1998).

20. See Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 69-87; Soroush, “The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge” in *Liberal Islam*, ed. Charles Kurzman (Oxford, 1998), pp. 224-51.

21. Soroush, *A’in-e Shahriyari va Dindari*, p. 51.

22. See Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, chaps. 6, 8, 9, 11; Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism*, chap. 5, 6.

23. Soroush, *A’in-e Shahriyari va Dindari*, p. 27.

On the practical level, epistemological discourse has made an immense contribution to the current democratic movement in Iran by providing the intellectual/theoretical foundations for reform. The current movement, contrary to reductionist analyses that depict it as a solely political phenomenon concerning a youth alienated by social restraints and economic deprivation, is far more complex than often thought. Given the nature of Iranian society, which is deeply religious, and the strong legitimacy of its state based on religion, it seems unlikely that a mere socio-economic protest could lead to a pervasive and inclusive public mobilization, such as the one suddenly revealed to the world on the eve of the presidential election of 1997. Besides, there is no sign that the vast number of supporters of the reform movement have given up on religion. Rather, what has happened is that the present generation, in comparison to the pre-Revolutionary one, has a more informed approach to the role of religion in society and politics. It is able to distinguish between religion and its sacredness and different religious understandings that are neither sacred nor immutable. Therefore, it demands a more defined and rational role for religion, if any at all, in determining the rules of the country's social life. This is in itself a religious reform, something much needed as a preliminary step to any meaningful and viable political reform in Iranian context. Thanks to religious intellectualism and its new discourse, Iranians are now better able to disentangle the enigmatic and often mythologized relation of religion to politics. This discourse was, however, already at work at least one decade prior to the events of 1997, systematically questioning and challenging the theoretical foundations of the legitimizing ideology of the regime—an accomplishment that nonreligious political or ideological groups could not achieve given their lack of religious legitimacy. Epistemological discourse, with its pluralistic interpretation of religion, was able not only to promulgate a tolerant, alternative version of religion, but also to disseminate a democratic discourse conducive to human rights, freedom, rationality and pluralism without compromising the lofty position of religion itself or demanding that Iran's religious society abandon its faith in order to acquire political freedom.²⁴

This later phase of religious intellectualism, like the first, has its own points of strength and weakness that will be revealed with time, particularly if it is given a chance to engage in critical dialogue with other trends of thought in an open and democratic atmosphere. So far, its critics have been mostly politically and ideologically motivated and as such polemical. The religious/political establishment has sometimes gone so far as to accuse religious intellectualism of being a heretical discourse. Nor have its secular rivals treated it much better, whether for obvious ideological reasons or the political fear of losing leadership once again to a "religious" competitor.

To recapitulate, the emergence of religious intellectualism in the modern history of Iran has undoubtedly been one of the most consequential developments to take place in the country's intellectual and political arenas. This trend has already gone through two distinct phases in its evolution, with each offering a new understanding of religion conducive to a different role of religion in politics. Yet, both phases have been change-oriented and politically and religiously subversive in their own contexts. While the first phase resorted to an ideological and militant mode of discourse contributing to the 1979 Revolution, the second has adopted a nonmilitant and pluralistic-democratic mode of discourse, relying on intellectualism to nourish the religious and political reforms currently underway in Iran.

24. I have dealt with the contribution of religious intellectualism to the current reform movement elsewhere. See Jahanbakhsh "Religious and Political Discourse in Iran: Moving Toward Post-Fundamentalism," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 9 (2003): 243-54.