## **BOOK REVIEW**

Naser Ghobadzadeh, Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State

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This book is an important – though controversial – addition to the discourse surrounding Islamic political thought. It traces its lineage to the debate advocating a separation of religion and politics. By putting this politico-religious discourse into a new oxymoronic term, 'religious secularity', the author attempts to construct another theological challenge to the concept of an Islamic state. Hailing from Iran, Dr. Naser Ghobadzadeh (currently a Research Fellow at the Institute for Social Justice, the Australian Catholic University), examines Islamic politico-religious discourse in the context of his homeland. Briefly reviewing the political struggles Muslims have faced during the second half of the twentieth century while trying to fulfil their aspirations of establishing an Islamic state, he attempts to describe the parallel Iranian quest for a democratic secular state. Being aware of the varied definitions and understandings of the term 'secularism', he intentionally uses the term 'secularity' to clarify the distinction between the emerging discourse in Iran and the conventional understanding of secularism as a global paradigm. This discourse, according to the author, was first developed following a series of articles written by Abdulkarim Soroush in 1989, in which the latter emphasized a separation of religion from religious knowledge (p.25). The author ignores, however, the Sunni scholar, Shavkh Ali Abdul Raziq, who, in his book entitled al-Islam wa usūl al-Hukm (1925), held the same view. This might be because of the author's focus on Shi'ite political thought.

The author considers 'religious secularity' to be part of a modern-day Iranian religious reform movement which seeks to challenge the legitimacy of the Islamic state and draw attention to the detrimental impact that the unification of religion and state can have on both institutions. By articulating the term 'religious secularity', the author challenges both clerical control in the political sphere and the unification of state and religion entailed by that control. The author maintains that the Iranian clerical state model has been contested by both the Reformist Movement (1997-2005) and the Green Movement (2009 onwards). The first of these (both ultimately ineffectual) movements advocated the incompatibility of Islam with democratic forms of government, while the second argued that "modern political ideas such

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as democracy, human rights, freedom, and secularity are compatible with Islam" (p. 4). However, for the author 'religious secularity' conforms to neither of these opposing views: it objects to both authoritarian secularism and the politicisation of Islam

The structure of the book is thematically well-arranged, systematically investigating major themes like: (a) the contradictions inherent to an Islamic clerical state; (b) the compatibility of Islam and a secular democratic state; (c) claims of divine foundation for the state; (d) conflation of religion and state; and (e) the exclusive right of the clergy to political leadership.

In the first chapter, the author challenges the notion of divine authority. Via a brief history of the Shi'ite understanding of divine and popular sovereignty (the latter an essential requirement of secular democracy), the author attests to the compatibility of Islam with democracy (pp. 30-72). By quoting Eshkevari, the author argues that (qualified) democracy is the most effective, logical and Islamic way of administering society, thereby challenging the legitimacy of divine sovereignty (pp. 52-54). In the second chapter, Seeding Secularity (pp. 73-95), the author argues that Iran's Islamic state has had a damaging effect on Islam because "the coercive character of the state...contradicts the very nature of the Sharī'ah" (p.73). Stressing the necessity of freeing religion from state pressure, the author quotes Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im: "By its nature and purpose, Shari'ah can only be freely observed by [a] believer; its principles lose their religious authority and value when forced by the state" (p. 73). The chapter also attempts to show how a ruling clergy tends to abuse religion to suffice its own interests. In addition, it examines shifting trends in state-religion relations and how the Islamic State of Iran has prioritised political interests over religious considerations.

The third chapter, *Religious Rationale for Separation* (pp. 96-127), critically examines the state-religion relationship and ends by arguing that the unification of the two institutions has a negative impact on both entities. The fourth chapter, *Political Construction of Clericalism* (pp. 128-149), examines Iran's clerical establishment, arguably the most distinctive feature of that country's political system. The chapter comprehensively outlines the political ideas of Ayatollah Khomeini – in particular his concept of *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist), a term he first used in 1943, in his politico-religious work, *Kashf al-Asrār* (Secrets Unveiled). Interestingly, the author tackles the notions of 'rule by the clergy' and 'rule under the supervision of the clergy' with special reference to *Velayat-e Faqih*. He also traces the prominent Islamic slogan, 'Islam is the solution', to Khomeini's politico-religious discourse, in which the latter maintained that: "God, as the law-giver, provided instructions for each and every aspect of the lives of humankind, which could be applied irrespective of time and space" (p. 138). Khomeini's assertion of "the right and responsibility of the clergy to ensure implementation of

the Sharī'ah by assuming political leadership," (p. 142) but while never referring "to the religious right of the clergy to possess political leadership," (p. 144) are seen as two contradictory statements. Indeed, Ghobadzadeh highlights how this contradiction is seen in both theory and practice: the first two presidents of the Islamic Republic of Iran, for example, Abul Hassan Banisadr and Mohammad Ali Rajaee, were not clerics (p.145). Another, important observation made by the author in this chapter is the extreme fluctuation which characterised the practical political engagement of Khomeini during the post-1940 period (p.142). The author maintains that Khomeini's "statements and political stance have since been viewed as a surreptitious strategy to gain political power" (p. 145). However, Morteza Motahhari, a key ideologue of the Islamic revolution, advocated the supervisory role of the clergy. For him, "Velayat-e Faqih had only a supervisory role: Velayat-e Faqih does not mean that a jurist becomes the head of state and rules [the country]. In an Islamic country...a jurist possesses the role of an ideologue not the position of ruler" (p. 146).

The fifth chapter, *Clerics against Clericalism* (pp. 150-170), explores how senior Iranian clerics resisted Khomeni's political discourse. In particular, it notes that the clerical Islamic state model has not been promoted in other Shi'ite majority countries, such as Iraq. The author also maintains that the clergy's political leadership was challenged shortly after the revolution. This statement then paves the way for the sixth and final chapter, *Clerical Hegemony: Contradictions and Paradoxes* (pp. 171-207), which argues that clerical hegemony is mostly challenged by religious intellectuals – in particular, those scholars who are not religious leaders in the conventional sense, but nonetheless place religion at the centre of their scholarly works. These scholars are identified as leading proponents of religious secularity and those who continuously urge the clergy to retreat from their political positions.

Ghobadzadeh tries to confine the concept of religious secularity to the political arena, wanting to neither promote "the marginalization of religiosity nor the privatization of religion" (p. 214). For the author, the objectives of his discourse are: (1) to challenge the dominance of radical Islam in Iran's official political lexicon; (2) to establish a religious argument for the acceptance of secularity in the Muslim world; and (3) to offer Islamic justification for the acceptance of a secular democratic state.

Despite its controversial statements about Shi'ite political thought, this book explores many essential elements of late twentieth-century Iranian political history. It sets the ground for further research into the challenges and possibilities associated with the implementation of religious secularity. For those interested in Islamic politics – and especially in the Shi'ite and Iranian paradigms – this book is a must read.