

Review of

Naser Ghobadzadeh, *Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

This book aims at answering to some fundamental questions. Is it really impossible to reconcile Islam with secularism? Why is Islamic state not a desirable option anymore? Why did the Iranian intellectuals change their positions regarding Islamic state after the Revolution of 1979?

Considering the difficulties that Islamic intellectuals face in dealing with secularism, Naser Ghobadzadeh in six chapters examines the necessity and possibility of the establishment of a secular state in Iran. He underscores the fact that secularism does not have any exact equivalent in the main languages of the Middle Eastern political powers (Arabic, Persian, and Turkish). This issue testifies the lack of such a political culture in this region. Nevertheless, the author believes that if secularism is not considered as an antithesis of religion, a possible progress in this debate can be achieved within Islamic societies. As an alternative to an all-encompassing definition of secularism, Ghobadzadeh divides it into two different types: one deems politics injurious to religion, hence tries

to shield the latter against the harms of the former, the other considers religion damaging to politics, accordingly tends to safeguard politics from the possible harms of religion. In the case of Islam, the *Religious Secularity* offering an alternative definition of secularism intends to show that not only secularism and religion are not idiosyncratic (as held by mainstream western scholarship) but secularism, at least for what the Iran's experience has proven, is achievable and much more preferable for Islamic countries.

The book offers also a comparative analysis between three different forms of secularism. The European experience of the civil wars among Christian sects ended up in a more aggressive attitude towards religions, whereas American model orphan of such a background has remained religious in the individual sphere but secular in the public arena. The main concern of both, however, is the protection of politics and economy from possible interventions of religions. Islamic intellectuals' attempts, by contrast, are focused on the salvation of Islam from political expediency. In this regard, the peculiarity of the Iranian emerging secularity, that distinguishes it even from other Islamic countries, is that it is not anti-clerical.

*Religious Secularity* scrutinizes various episodes of the Iran's history, from the Constitutional Revolution to the Iranian protests of 2009, shading light on the role of the Shia clergy during them. In examining the Islamic intellectualism the author's references are not confined to the Iranian sphere, thus the positions of eminent Islamic authors such as An Naim, Khaled Abou El Fadl and clerical figures like Mohammed Jawad Moghniya, Mohammad Mehdi Shams al-Din are displayed as well. The main Islamic thinkers' concern, according to the author, is protection of the religion from harms that pragmatism and political contrivance can inevitably inflict upon it. Accordingly, he calls this type of secularism "religious secularity" in that its advocates are deeply committed to Islam therefore their fundamental concern is religion and not politics.

This book provides the reader with a detailed comparative study among prominent Iranian thinkers in order to introduce different voices within the current intellectual circles of this country. One of the best arguments of this book, located in the sixth chapter, is a debate on the recent conflict between two principal Shiite political notions namely *velaya* (tutelage) and *marja'iyah* (authority). Struggles between Marja' Taqlids (sources of emulation) and the Supreme Leader have ushered in imprisonment, violent attacks and defrocking of some Iranian clerics.

In Ghobadzadeh's view, religious scholars are the most popular figures of the contemporary Iranian political sphere; however, he fails to consider that what he calls "religious secularity" and its concern to safeguard the religion is not attributable to all Iranian intellectuals and not even to the most popular ones. Without a shadow of a doubt, Shiism has become an integral part of the Iranian

identity, but it is worth noting that there are many Iranian intellectuals and activists who campaign against violation of human rights in Iran without backing their arguments necessarily with religious discourses. This group includes feminists, university professors and representatives of the religious minorities. Women, religious and sexual minorities are those who advocate for secular state not for religion's sake but for their own violated rights. However, the voices of these groups are usually neglected by the main Iranian intellectuals.

The other important issue is that the theorists cited in this work were the principal advocates of the Islamic revolution and only after the implementation of the Khomeini's doctrine i.e. Velayat-e Faqih, became critics of the Iranian regime. It is extremely important to notice that the recent criticism of the clerical theocracy could not have emerged if the clerics had not gained power. Awareness of the fact that sovereignty is not divine, Islamic sacred texts do not introduce any specific political paradigm and not all *ahkam* (Islamic ordinances) can be put into practice in today's societies, developed among Muslims only when they finally stood the chance of realizing their utopias. The assumption of expediency to prepare the context for realization of Velayat-e Faqih was the only device that could push Iran towards secularization of the political sphere.

In a wider panorama of the Shiite universe, Ghobadzadeh observes that Iraq and Lebanon, in spite of their large Shia population, did not form a clerical state. Citing Lebanese and Iraqi clerics' opinions, he intends to imply that the lack of the clerical states in Iraq and Lebanon emerged due to the clerics' critics to the Iranian political model. He, thus, overlooks an obvious matter: no Islamic country in the world has such a homogeneity in terms of religion that we witness in Iran. Obviously, the ulama's hegemony in Iran, with 98 percent Shia population, could not encounter that much hindrance that it may face in any other Islamic country.

According to *Religious Secularity*, after the Second World War, Muslims were in front of two main options: authoritarian secularism imposed by dictators (Atatürk and Reza Shah) or creation of Islamic state. The "religious secularity" is a third alternative which moves towards a moderate form of secularism, since the elimination of Islam from politics of these countries is neither possible (at least in the immediate future) nor desirable.

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