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To cite this article: Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (2015): Islamic Secularism and the Question of Freedom in Iran, Middle East Critique, DOI: [10.1080/19436149.2015.1101873](https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2015.1101873)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2015.1101873>



Published online: 04 Nov 2015.



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# Islamic Secularism and the Question of Freedom in Iran

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**ABSTRACT** *My research deals with the question of 'freedom' in Iran and the appropriation of 'liberal' ideas by influential intellectuals with an Islamic persuasion. At the same time, I am conceptualising the term 'Islamic secularism' with a particular emphasis on the spectre of democracy in Iran. I argue that Iranian thinkers, whose philosophical nodal point continues to be a modernistic interpretation of Islam (or Islamism), have struggled to formulate a theory that would transcend the confines of the revolution and satisfy the demands for pluralism and liberty put forward during several protests in Iran and, of course, during the 2011 Arab revolts.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Democracy; Iran; Islam; Islamic philosophy; Mohsen Kadivar; liberalism; political theory; secularism; Abdolkarim Soroush*

The meaning of 'freedom' in Iran cannot be unravelled exclusively from an 'Islamic' perspective. At the same time, liberal concepts and the idea of freedom itself repeatedly have figured prominently in the writings of leading Islamic theoreticians and philosophers in the country. In order to give a brief overview of these ideas and the debates they have provoked, this article will follow three steps. Firstly, it will demonstrate that the idea of freedom has been at the heart of political events in modern Iran. I will start by sketching some of the major political upheavals in the country, with a particular emphasis on the events surrounding the revolution of 1979. In a second step, I will look at the nexus between Islam and liberal ideas in the political philosophy of major contemporary Iranian thinkers. And thirdly, I will sketch some of their flaws with a short philosophical critique. In all of this I have not started with a strict definitional yardstick to measure complex concepts such as liberalism, democracy or freedom. Rather, I am trying to sketch how these concepts are handled within an Iranian and Islamic framework, acknowledging that they are defined by context and historical circumstances. The freedom to carry arms in many parts of the United States seems irresponsible to most Europeans. The freedom to smoke Marijuana in Amsterdam may be considered too liberal elsewhere. Of course, there are norms and rights that might be shared universally by most societies, but it is really the nuances and margins, the grey zones, if you want, that interest me. To that end, I am refraining from starting with an *a priori* definition of freedom, democracy or liberalism, so that the sites of my analysis can speak for themselves.

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## Of Imperialism and Resistance

What makes the Iranian case so pertinent is that the Islamic revolution of 1979 continues to be constructed and reinvented. Beyond the pragmatism that the humdrum affairs of governance demand, there is no consensus in Iran about the core tenets of the revolution, either within the state or society.<sup>1</sup> The issue of freedom particularly is contested. Consequently, what has happened since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 is a struggle to define the revolution and its position in Iranian history. A diverse range of intellectuals, students, workers, women's rights activists and members of the Iranian state has contested the polity that emerged. Hence there has been recurrent spells of upheaval, the discourse of reform, and recurrent mass demonstrations in favour of change.<sup>2</sup> What we have witnessed, in short, is a struggle for the meaning of the Islamic revolution, a struggle that is framed in terms of freedom from the authority of the state on the one side, and from foreign dictates on the other. As such the revolution is a continuation of Iran's historical quest for representative government and for independence.<sup>3</sup>

Islamic symbols, imagery, and norms, moulded and reconstructed in accordance with historical necessity and Iran's political culture, repeatedly were employed in order to articulate this quest for freedom. There was certainly no exclusively 'Islamic' narrative to establish a freer society. Islam in Iran (as anywhere else) has been invented and reconstructed in close dialogue with political, economic, cultural and sociological realities on the ground.<sup>4</sup> True, in the popular imagination in the 'west,' Islam continues to be the antithesis to liberal ideas. If the 'west' represents feminism, democracy, freedom of speech and religious tolerance, the Muslim world regularly is represented as inherently misogynistic, homophobic, authoritarian and antagonistic. However, the political thought of the figures I will discuss seems to indicate that Islam could be a recipe for dictatorship as much as a blueprint for liberalism, pluralism and democracy, depending on how the canon is interpreted. For example, Islam can be revolutionary, in the political thought of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, or it can be liberal and democratic as in the writings of Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohsen Kadivar, Hasan Eshkevari and others whom I discuss below. In fact, Islam can be turned into a recipe for dictatorship *or* a philosophy accentuating freedom. Modern Iranian history is emblematic of this interpretive elasticity that discourses of Islam afford their followers. Islam in Iran (and elsewhere) is an invention of the mind.<sup>5</sup>

A few historical examples will illustrate what I mean by such elasticity. It is generally agreed that the first modern mass upheaval in Iranian history occurred in 1891, when Ayatollah Mirza Hossein Shirazi issued a *fatwa* [religious opinion] forbidding his followers to use any tobacco-based products. He did this in response to the concession of exclusive

1. See further A. Adib-Moghaddam. (2006) The pluralistic momentum in Iran and the future of the reform movement, *Third World Quarterly*, 26(6), pp. 665-674.

2. On the history of democracy in Iran, see F. Azimi. (2010) *The quest for democracy in Iran: A century of struggle against authoritarian rule* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

3. I have expressed this on the eve of the 36<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolution in an interview with *Tehran Times*, 'Iranians rose against Shah to gain freedom', 10<sup>th</sup> February 2015; available at: <http://www.tehrantimes.com/component/content/article/93-interviews/121728-iranians-rose-against-shah-to-gain-freedom-justice-scholar>, accessed 11 March 2015.

4. See further A. Adib-Moghaddam. (2002) Global Intifadah? September 11<sup>th</sup> and the struggle within Islam, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 15(3), pp. 203-216.

5. For a recent examination of the dialectic between Islam and liberalism see J. Massad. (2015) *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). For western misperceptions see also the introduction to A. Adib-Moghaddam. (2013) *On the Arab revolts and the Iranian Revolution: Power and resistance today* (New York: Bloomsbury).

tobacco rights in favour of Major G. Talbot, a British citizen who endeavoured to establish the Imperial Tobacco Company in Persia, and which Iranians saw as a Trojan horse for further British imperial control of the country. A *fatwa* by a *marja-ye taghlid* [source of emulation] has an important impact on pious Shias comparable to an edict by the Pope for believing Catholics. Hence the repercussions were immediate.

The role of Ayatollah Shirazi was certainly important, and his activism is analytically pertinent given that it galvanized the clerical strata into a politically active role. Nevertheless, several different strata of Iranian society expressed opposition to the Qajar monarchy at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> The revolt was aided and abetted by a range of individuals and movements. The role of Jamaladin al-Afghani (also known as Asadabadi), one of the most prolific and prominent non-clerical pan-Islamists, for instance, has not been sufficiently explored in the scholarly literature.<sup>7</sup> Yet it was al-Afghani who colluded with leading clerics in the seminaries of Qom and Najaf to galvanize protests against the tobacco concession. This explains the transcendental power of the movement, i.e., it moved beyond and motivated several strata of society. As a result of this resistance to the Qajar monarchy, al-Afghani was exiled to Iraq, from where he continued to agitate against the concession and Iran's dependence on foreign powers. The ensuing revolts, which started in Shiraz and moved to Tabriz and from there to Isfahan and elsewhere, prompted Nasseredin Shah to revoke the concession.

With the Tobacco revolts, we find for the first time in modern Iranian history, a mass upheaval with transversal potentiality against the monarchy and in opposition to outside interference in Iranian affairs. With al-Afghani, and later on with his Egyptian disciple Muhammad Abduh, an Islam emerged that was geared to themes such as progress and independence. Freedom was not merely sought from oppressive governments but also from imperialism, in this case in its British variant. Subsequently, Al-Afghani was also a great proponent of the constitutional revolution in Iran, which occurred primarily between 1906/1907. This upheaval led to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Iran and entrenched the vocabulary of liberalism and republicanism in the country. As with the tobacco revolt, freedom was not associated merely with opposition to the Qajar monarchs but also with being against imperialism. After all, during this period Britain and Russia agreed to divide Iran into 'spheres of influence:' The north was designated a zone of exclusive Russian influence; the south, a zone of exclusive British influence; and the center of the county, including the capital, Tehran, was designated as a neutral zone. This agreement was an imperial response to Iran establishing a parliament and adopting the country's first modern constitution in 1906. Iran's experiment with constitutional monarchy lasted until 1921, when Reza Khan took over the state in a coup d'état and eventually established the authoritarian Pahlavi monarchy. The British and Russians (as the Soviet Union) jointly intervened in 1941, this time to oust him; Britain would remain the dominant external force in Iranian affairs at least until 1971, when British forces retreated from the Persian Gulf.

The third example, and perhaps the most consequential for the Islamic revolution in 1979, was the nationalisation of Iran's oil company under the premiership of Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh between 1951 and 1953. Dr. Mossadegh was Iran's first democratically elected Prime Minister. When he came to power in 1951, he nationalized the Anglo Iranian Oil Company (out of which British Petroleum emerged) and endeavoured to establish a viable democratic order in Iran. In 1953 he was ousted by a CIA/MI6 engineered coup d'état,

6. See further Mansoor Moaddel. (1992) Shi'i Political Discourse and Class Mobilization in the Tobacco Movement of 1890-1892, *Sociological Forum*, 7(3), pp. 447-468.

7. For a recent exception see Umar Ryad. (2014) Anti-imperialism and the pan-Islamic movement, in David Motadel, *Islam and the European Empires* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). pp. 131-149.

which re-established the dictatorship of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (son of Reza Khan), who subsequently ruled the country as a key western ally until the Islamic revolution in 1979. In all the examples of modern mass movements in Iran we find a recurring dialectic: opposition to state authoritarianism on the one side and opposition to external interference in Iranian affairs on the other. Ultimately, the aim was a freer society, a pluralistic order in terms of governance and independence from external powers. Narratives employing Islamic imagery, symbols and norms repeatedly were used in order to accentuate this quest for a freer polity in Iran. Even nationalists such as Mossadegh had a progressive vision of the role of Islam in Iranian politics. He would have agreed that Islam is not inherently anti-democratic and illiberal, which may explain why figureheads of his National Front coalition, such as Mehdi Bazargan, later believed in the Islamic revolution. I will discuss their vision of an Islamic-democratic republic in Iran in the following section.

### Of Governance and Liberty

The two grand ambitions of Iran's modern history, democracy and independence, were central to the Islamic revolution as well. The mainstream of the Iranian revolutionaries imagined an authentic Iranian-Islamic order that would be accountable to the people and independent of the dictates of external powers. It was the culmination of the protest of Iranians against both their political masters and the international system enveloping their country, as expressed in their revolutionary slogans, *na sharghi na gharbi jomhuri-ye islami* [neither east nor west, only the Islamic republic] and *esteghlal, azadi, jomhuri-ye islami* ([independence, freedom, Islamic republic]). Iran, even today, is in many ways trying to bridge the tensions between these slogans. Even Ayatollah Khomeini had to engage with these narratives in order to boost his position within the revolutionary struggle. If freedom and democracy were not at the heart of the demands of the revolutionaries, Khomeini would not have been forced to refer to the 'God-given right of freedom and liberty' that Islam guarantees and to accentuate that 'freedom is the primary right of humans' at the beginning of the revolution, promises he breached rather blatantly once his vision for the Iranian state was institutionalized.<sup>8</sup> Khomeini spoke liberal and acted authoritarian, not least because he was more concerned with solidifying the power of the state rather than the sovereignty of the people. In this sense, Khomeini was typically modernist – a state builder par excellence because he understood that any modern state needs a sophisticated and multi-layered bureaucracy and institutional framework to claim and exert its sovereignty both vis-à-vis the people and the international system.<sup>9</sup> Mehdi Bazargan provides an interesting example of how an Islam was invented in the build up to the Iranian revolution, was amenable to democracy and a liberal order within society, and stood in opposition to a totalitarian interpretation of the state. Bazargan had been the first director of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) after its nationalisation during the Mossadegh premiership. In 1961 he founded the Freedom Movement of Iran, which included such iconoclastic figures of Iran's intellectual and political scene as Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleqani, Ali Shariati and Yadollah Sahabi. In 1977 he inaugurated Iran's Human Rights Association. For this generation of Iran's political class, Islam was a conduit to institute pluralism, human rights and democracy. In this vein, the charter of the Freedom Movement of Iran declares that the 'servitude of God requires refusal of

8. M.-H. Jamshidi (ed.) (2005) *Andisheh-e siyasi-ye Imam Khomeini* [Political thought of Imam Khomeini] (Tehran: Pajoheshkade-ye Imam Khomeini va enghelabislami, 1384), pp. 245, 246 (author's translations).

9. See further A. Adib-Moghaddam (ed.) (2014) *A critical introduction to Khomeini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

servitude to any other master. Gratefulness to God is contingent upon gaining freedom and utilising it to attain rights, justice, and service.<sup>10</sup> For Bazargan himself, ‘freedom is God’s gift to His steward on earth, humankind. Whoever takes away this freedom is guilty of the greatest treason against humankind.’<sup>11</sup> Obviously, Bazargan was opposed to the absolutist interpretation of Islam that the Khomeinist forces espoused in their emphasis on the total sovereignty of the Supreme Jurisprudent [*velayat-e faqih-ye motlaq*], who would be positioned at the helm of the state. ‘Islamic government’, Bazargan argued ‘cannot help but be at once consultative, democratic, and divinely inspired.’<sup>12</sup> It must follow from this that ‘in Islamic government the relations among individuals and the administration of society are predicated upon relative shared freedom and mutual responsibility.’ In more concrete terms this means that ‘Islam permits difference of opinions even within the realm of the tenets of religion, let alone in administrative and governmental issues. Shi’i theology under the rubric of *ijtihad* [independent reasoning]’, Bazargan pointed out, ‘has left the gate of such debates open until the end of the time and the coming of the messiah.’<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, the Supreme Jurisprudent or any ‘source of imitation’ (the highest Shi’i authority) cannot claim to be infallible. Citizens should be free to express their grievances because ‘freedom means the freedom to oppose, criticize, and object – even if the criticism is untrue and unjust. Where there is freedom there are opponents and currents that disturb routine stability and normalcy.’<sup>14</sup> In terms of governance all of this translates into the ‘principle of division of powers and their mutual non-interference and orderly checks and balances.’ The Islamic corpus, the Quran and the *sunnah* [Prophet’s practices], according to this interpretation of Bazargan, is intrinsically just and partial to freedom of choice: ‘God bestows both freedom and guidance concerning the consequences of actions. His mercy is infinite and His vengeance great.’ In the end, individuals must choose for themselves: ‘Freedom exists, so do responsibility and restraint. The choice is ours.’<sup>15</sup>

Ayatollah Taleqani, perhaps the most prominent clerical ally of Bazargan, shared this emphasis on freedom and individual choice. Ayatollah Taleqani was one of the co-founders of the Freedom Movement of Iran. His discourse typically blended leftist ideas into his vision of Islam. Prominent among the Iranian intelligentsia and opposed to Khomeini’s doctrine of the *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the Supreme Jurisprudent), Taleqani argued that ‘government must be like the representative and deputy of individuals and not the representative of a special class ... Its purpose is nothing but the preservation of individual rights and of the collectivity of individuals.’<sup>16</sup> It must follow that ‘government does not have the right to deprive or limit the freedom and independence of individuals or the rights of some classes for the profit of another class in the name of the higher good of the government.’<sup>17</sup> In the last sermon Taleqani delivered before his death in September 1979, in a period when his opposition to Khomeini became more explicit, he emphasized that the goal of the Prophet Mohammad himself was

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10. M. Bazargan. (1998) Religion and Liberty, in: C. Kurzman (ed.), *Liberal Islam: A sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 77.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid, p. 79.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid, p. 81.

15. Ibid, p. 84.

16. Ayatollah M. Taleqani. (2007) ‘The characteristics of Islamic Economics’, in J. J. Donohue and J. L. Esposito (eds.), *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 233.

17. Ibid, p. 233.



to 'free the people, to free them from class oppression, to free them from pagan thoughts which had been imposed upon them, to free them from the ordinances and laws which [were] imposed for the benefit of one group, one class, over others.'<sup>18</sup> According to Taleqani, the 'call of Islam is the call to mercy and freedom.' With reference to the Qur'an he accentuated that 'even the sinner who is condemned to death—under Islamic law there is mercy for him too. ... His [the prophet's] *jihad* [religious struggle] was mercy, his *hijra* [migration from Mecca to Medina] was mercy, his laws were mercy, his guidance over principles was mercy—the Islamic order ought to be based on mercy.'<sup>19</sup>

The revolutionary reality on the ground bitterly disappointed these lofty views, couched in notions of freedom of expression, democratic Islamic governance and human rights. The anarchic environment of Iran did not lend itself to the calm and collected paradigm put forward by Ayatollah Taleqani, Bazargan and others. The daily battles for power and the frantic, utopian hope for a better future for Iranians after the departure of the shah in January 1979, gave impetus to revolutionary radicalism and the politics of antagonism that Bazargan and his allies tried to minimize.<sup>20</sup> The reality was that Bazargan and his cabinet were increasingly powerless and that the Revolutionary Council dominated by hardliners held the real power. In March 1979, Bazargan submitted his resignation, but Khomeini rejected his request, not least in order to stabilize the state. A month later, amidst increasing revolutionary chaos in Iran, Bazargan and the members of his cabinet escaped an assassination attempt. Frustrated over the hostage taking at the US embassy, Bazargan and his cabinet finally resigned in November 1979. In November 1982, he expressed his criticism about the situation in Iran to the then speaker of parliament, Ali-Akbar Rafsanjani:

The government has created an atmosphere of terror, fear, revenge and national disintegration. ... What has the ruling elite done in nearly four years, besides bringing death and destruction, packing the prisons and the cemeteries in every city, creating long queues, shortages, high prices, unemployment, poverty, homeless people, repetitious slogans and a dark future?<sup>21</sup>

Bazargan died in 1995, yet the idea that Islam can foster a liberal order continued to be put forward by a range of intellectuals, politicians and reformist clerics. The dual ambition of Iranian contemporary history -to gain independence from foreign dictates and to democratize governance in the country - continue to be expressed to this day.<sup>22</sup>

### Reformed Revolutionaries

The revolutionary momentum of 1979 established a central political dynamic in Iran: intellectuals and leaders, who were too 'loudly' pro-reformist and too overtly in favour of democracy, were silenced, incarcerated, purged or exiled. Mehdi Bazargan and Ayatollah Taleqani were among the lucky ones. They escaped assassination attempts and remained in their country without being incarcerated. The 'second' wave of reformists opposed to the authoritarian, post-revolutionary order in Iran was less fortunate. Liberal Islamic thinkers such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohsen Kadivar and Hasan Eshkevari have been forced into exile without recourse to any institutional resources in Iran. The trajectory of Soroush's

18. M. Taleqani. Taleqani's last sermon, in Kurzman (ed.), *Liberal Islam*, p. 47.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

20. On Iran's foreign policy see A. Adib-Moghaddam. Islamic Utopian Romanticism and the Foreign Policy Culture of Iran, *Middle East Critique*, 14(3), pp. 203-216. For the impact on the region see A. Adib-Moghaddam. (2006) *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A cultural genealogy* (London: Routledge).

21. Khomeini's grip appears at its tightest, *The New York Times*, 21 November 1982.

22. For recent views on the spectre of dissidence in Iran see L. Stone (ed.) (2014) *Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism: Spheres of belonging* (New York: Bloomsbury).

fate is emblematic of these devoured children of the revolution. Soroush was a member of the Cultural Revolution Council, which was responsible for reforming the universities in accordance with new revolutionary realities. In retrospect, he has tried to downplay the role of the Council in the purges of scholars, in particular in the Humanities and Social Sciences, and the closure of the universities to those ends. According to him, the 'purges did not start in universities at any rate, nor were they initiated or continued in universities by the Cultural Revolution Institute.'<sup>23</sup> Yet at the same time he concedes that 'the first things that happened on the morrow of the victory of the revolution [were] purges.' These were not decreed by the Cultural Revolution Institute of which he was a member, he claims, but primarily political in nature. 'Most of the political groups supported them', Soroush maintains,

it was only the Prime Minister [Bazargan] of the provisional government who objected ... And he managed, within the limits of his powers, to reduce the number of purges, although, of course, this earned him some curses from those clerics and political activists who didn't like him and who called him a colluder. As to the expulsion of academics, if the Revolution Council asked the University of Tehran's chancellor to participate in the purges and to expel professors - and he assented - it never put such a request, even implicitly, to the Cultural Revolution Institute and there was no suggestion of it in Imam Khomeini's letter to the institute either.<sup>24</sup>

Soroush clearly is trying to address the allegations that he was part of the problem and that his calls for reforms today are hypocritical. Certainly he was not known for opposing the purges when he was a member of the Cultural Revolution Council. At the same time he was a small cog in a big revolutionary machine and was simply not in the position to decide the fate of others. The legacy of Soroush likely will not be determined by his role during the revolution; rather his writings about democracy and secularism are likely to continue to appeal to future generations of Iranians, especially those with a religious background.

The writing of Soroush is heavily laden with complex, philosophical concepts that are used in order to put forward an interpretive, hermeneutical approach to the corpus of Islam, i.e., the Quran, the *sunnah* and the *hadiths*. From his perspective, knowledge about Islam expands and contracts with reference to historical circumstances: 'The theory of the contraction and expansion of religious interpretation', Soroush claims, 'separates religion and religious knowledge, considers the latter as a branch of human knowledge, and regards our understanding of religion as evolving along with other branches of human knowledge.'<sup>25</sup> This distinction merits and requires constant reform and renewal through *ijtihad* [independent reasoning]. 'To treat religious knowledge, a branch of human knowledge, as incomplete, impure, insufficient, and culture-bound; to try to mend and darn its wears and tears is, in itself, an admirable and hallowed undertaking.'<sup>26</sup> Given that religious knowledge never really can be complete, it cannot be monopolized by one religious leader. 'The acceptance of the sovereignty of religion is far from putting one's own words in the Prophet's mouth and arrogating his seat to oneself.' Rather the contrary. For Soroush, it 'means a sincere attempt to understand his message through repeated consultation with the sacred text and the tradition. Scholars of religion have no other status or service than this.'<sup>27</sup>

23. A. Soroush, Sense and Nonsense: About the cultural revolution again, available at [http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/By\\_DrSoroush/sense&nonsense.html](http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/By_DrSoroush/sense&nonsense.html), accessed 11 February 2015.

24. Ibid.

25. A. Soroush. (2000) Islamic Revival and Reform: Theological Approaches, in M. Sadri and A. Sadri (eds & trans), *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: Essential writings of Abdolkarim Soroush* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 33.

26. Ibid, p. 32.

27. Ibid, p. 37.



Comparable to Bazargan and Ayatollah Taleqani, Soroush calls for a pluralistic understanding of Islam and a democratic order based on spiritual values. Within such an 'Islamic-democratic' polity, human rights would have to be cultivated and secured, given that 'a religion that is oblivious to human rights (including the need of humanity for freedom and justice) is not tenable in the modern world. In other words, religion needs to be right not only logically but also ethically.'<sup>28</sup> Soroush does not explicitly address the plight of non-believers within such a religiously inspired system, but in his writings and lectures he repeatedly alludes to the freedom of choice that any Islamic government must ensure:

To be sure, contemporary advocates of human rights can claim no monopoly on truth and justice; nevertheless, religious societies, precisely because of their religious nature, need to seriously engage in discussion of the issues they pose. Not only did our predecessors passionately debate such extra religious issues as the question of free choice and the question of the limits of God's rights to overburden the faithful with religious obligations, but also Islamic society felt a religious obligation to allow such debates to spread and prosper. By the same token, the extra religious debates of our day, which happen to concern human rights, must be viewed as worthy and useful exchanges of opinions in Islamic society. The partisans in these debates deserve a blessed respect, and the outcome of such discussions should be heeded and implemented by the governments. ... Observing human rights (such as justice, freedom, and so on) guarantees not only the democratic character of a government, but also its religious character.<sup>29</sup>

As indicated, Soroush is rather abstract, metaphysical, almost gnostic in his writings and lectures. Mohsen Kadivar, who emerged as one of the most influential reformist clerics in Iran, until he was harassed into exile in the United States in 2008, addresses the themes of democracy and liberalism, including the rights of non-believers, in rather more explicit terms, quite comparable to the affirmation of freedom and democracy by Bazargan and Ayatollah Taleqani. In this vein, Kadivar suggests that 'freedom of religion and belief means an individual's right to freely choose any and all ideologies and religions he likes.'<sup>30</sup> In addition, this refers to the 'freedom and the right to think to have beliefs and values, to express one's religion and opinions, to partake in religious rites and practices ... and to be able to freely critique one's religion.'<sup>31</sup> According to Kadivar, even non-believers (*kuffar*) should not be punished for their beliefs: 'The persecution of a heathen is unjustified in Islam. Through renewed *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and based on the correct principles of the Quran and the *hadith*, freedom of religion and belief can be achieved through Islam.'<sup>32</sup> Comparable to Bazargan, who refers to God-given parameters framing a free society,<sup>33</sup> Kadivar indicates that Islam represents 'the correct and just religion' and warns of 'divine punishment at the end of time',<sup>34</sup> but he maintains that Islam secures the 'right of choice in beliefs and in actions in all areas so long as these beliefs and actions do not deprive others of their rights or do not disturb public peace and order.' While it is legitimate and salutary to invite others to embrace Islam (*dawa*), Kadivar reiterates that the Quran explicitly states that there is no compulsion in religion. It must follow quite rationally that,

non-Muslims living inside or outside Muslim lands have peace and security so long as they do not wage war on Islam. Whether or not they believe in one of the sanctioned religions or in falsehood, no Muslim has the right to disrupt their peace simply because their beliefs are different. This assertion is substantiated by

28. A. Soroush, 'The Idea of Democratic Religious Government', in Sadri and Sadri (eds, trans), *Reason, Freedom and Democracy*, p. 128.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

30. M. Kadivar, 'Freedom of religion and belief in Islam', in M. Kamrava (ed.) (2006) *The new voices of Islam: Reforming Politics and Modernity* (London: I. B. Tauris), p. 119.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

33. Bazargan, 'Religion and Liberty', in Kurzman (ed.), *Liberal Islam*, p. 83.

34. Kadivar, 'Freedom of religion', p. 120.

the eternally valid verses of the Quran ... To sum up, even though most of the interpretations of Islam that are prevalent today augur poorly for freedom of religion and belief, a more correct interpretation, based on the sacred text and valid traditions, finds Islam highly supportive of freedom of thought and religion and easily in accord with the principles of human rights.<sup>35</sup>

### Ways Forward: The Question of Islamic Secularism

The common thread is apparent here. The set of thinkers covered in this article reinvent Islam as a *via media* between the authoritarian status quo in Iran (and the Arab world) and a liberal order that would ensure democracy, freedom of belief and religion and ultimately a liberated society. Islam is reconceptualized as inherently pluralistic, just, accommodating, non-doctrinal and essentially democratic. Islam is mercy, Taleqani argued. Islam demands human rights, Soroush suggests. Islam means freedom, Bazargan maintained. Islam liberates the mind, Kadivar accentuates. Equally, Hasan Eshkevari, another staunch supporter of the Iranian reform movement, is convinced that Islam 'regardless of how it may be interpreted, cannot endorse the killing of innocent people under any circumstances. There is no Islamic text that backs up such an action.'<sup>36</sup>

In all these theories of Islam, freedom comes first and religious ordinances are relegated to individual choice. Islam, in this hermeneutical re-evaluation, essentially is secularized. At the same time, even this secular Islam retains its identitarian precepts and an underlying sense of superiority. While accentuating the role of Islam in liberating and democratising society, there continues to be a hierarchy, on top of which we find the enlightened Muslim who speaks in an Iranian-Shia accent with European undertones. Islam, now cleansed from authoritarianism and reimagined as the reincarnation of liberty, continues to be prioritized and idealized. Despite his emphasis on freedom of choice, Kadivar maintains that Islam is the 'correct and just religion', that there are 'false religious and doctrinal beliefs' and that the Qur'an warns 'those who turn their back on the Just Religion of divine punishment at the end of time.'<sup>37</sup> Soroush shares a similar conviction in the superiority and necessity of an Islamic order when he implies that 'democratic religious regimes need not wash their hands of religiosity nor turn their backs on God's approval.'<sup>38</sup> The approval of God continues to be central and 'entails religious awareness that is leavened by a more authentic and humane understanding of religiosity and that endeavours to guide the people in accordance with these ideals.'<sup>39</sup> In this view, the non-religious rest continues to be pasted into a religious core defined by guiding authorities. Bazargan is equally ambiguous when he says that 'God has given us freedom of opinion and action within certain parameters, but He has given us plenty of warning ... that rebellion, *disbelief*, and injustice will have dire results ... both in this life and in the hereafter.'<sup>40</sup> The object continues to be Allah and the right path continues to be signposted by the *surahs* of the Quran (and the *hadiths*): 'God bestows both freedom and guidance concerning the consequences of actions. His mercy is infinite and His vengeance great.'<sup>41</sup> For all these believers there seems to be a correct world-view, the right choice,

35. Kadivar, 'Freedom of religion' in Kamrava (ed.), *The new voices*, p. 142.

36. H. Y. Eshkevari, 'God's Uprooted Warriors', Available at <http://yousefieshkevari.com/?p=2103>, accessed 12 January 2015.

37. Kadivar, 'Freedom of religion', *The new voices*, p. 120.

38. Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy*, p. 128.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

40. Bazargan, Religion and Liberty, in Kurzman (ed.), *Liberal Islam*, p. 83, emphasis added.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

an ideal order. It is implicit that it should be Islamic and even a rather arrogant expectation that in the end it will be.

The problem seems to be that these proclamations are made in the name of Islam, not humanity. There remains then a problematic, almost patronising aftertaste even in what I have called 'secular Islam,' exactly because lofty ideals such as freedom, democracy, etc. are claimed to be the purview of one religious community. There is not enough syntactical and narrative emphasis on the universality of these norms and the global struggles that brought them about. In essence we are all humans (*bashar*), as Shariati pointed out before the revolution in his opposition against the shah. Becoming human (*insan*) is a universal project shared by *humankind*, which is why Shariati's prose repeatedly is littered with references to Nietzsche, Sartre, Buddha, Iqbal, or the Indian philosopher (and statesman) Sarvepalli Radhakishnan (1888-1975), and why he stresses that it is science that can help *humankind* 'to completely free themselves.'<sup>42</sup> Compared to the cosmopolitan style of Shariati, the narratives of the secular Islamists covered in this article seem rather provincial, despite nods to Popper, Rumi and others. At base, secular Islam remains an identitarian project that does not sufficiently connect the Muslim 'self' to the rest of humanity. Bahais, Christians, Jews, Heathens, Hindus, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, etc. continue to linger on the side roads of the Islamic highway. In such an idealized Islamic democratic order, judicial equality could be ensured, but true cultural egalitarianism remains confined. Muslims continue to be imagined at the top of a hierarchy that differentiates between human beings on the basis of their religious convictions. In order to refine the secular Islamic viewpoint, it would have to start with a universal understanding of history, and to be represented from the perspective of minorities within the Islamic realm.

Why is it that Islam has to appear with such vehement force in the first place? The term appears at every twist and turn of the narratives covered in this article. It is almost obsessive, certainly syntactically repetitive and even redundant. Obviously, it has a lot to do with context. Iran is an Islamic Republic and there exists an authoritarian state that rules in the name of Islam. All of the thinkers covered in my analysis are at odds with the state, so they have to address and challenge its 'Islamicity.' Exactly because of this, however, a central paradox ensues: In order to reinvent a liberal Islam that could do battle with a doctrinaire one, Islam has to be stretched so widely that it remains rather heavy with religion, even after its secular diet. When Glasnost met orthodox Soviet communism, it was still sold as Leninist ideology by Gorbachev. Comparably, secular Islam continues to confine itself within the original revolutionary project, for instance by reimagining Khomeini as a reformer or Mohammad as a democrat. It is preaching to the converted, but its syntax does not appeal to the non-believer who wasn't part of the Islamic universe in the first place.

In this sense secular Islam lags behind the thought of classical Muslim philosophers, in particular Ibn Sina (Avicenna), who appears as a reference point in the writings of Soroush and Kadivar but remains insufficiently conceptualized. Indeed, in the writings of these philosophers, the notion of a superior Islamic way is almost entirely absent. Islam emerges as an *a priori*, an entirely abstract nodal point that was yet to be conquered intellectually. We therefore must distinguish between this 'a priori Islam' of the classical philosophers and the rather more 'concrete Islam' of the so-called 'Islamic revivalists' from the nineteenth century onwards. *A priori* Islam disperses with political utilitarianism and the politics of identity, it cannot afford a fundamentalist or literalist reading of the Quran, it is not ideological and it does not Islamize reality. It does not refer to a multiplicity of syntheses, every

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42. A. Shariati, *Humanity and Islam*, in Kurzman (ed.), *Liberal Islam*, p. 193.

one of which constitutes an individual discourse articulated toward some concrete notion of Islam's meaning. Islam is there, a desired object, yet it is *a priori* to our existence, it is not a concrete definition of a place into which we easily can venture. (Islamic ontology, the Islam we think we can see, is not that of a totality, but rather that of an engineered totalisation that changes in accordance with the determinations of history and time. Thus, the ontology of any Islamic field must be entirely dependent on the process of human construction). The classical philosophers were central to illuminating this *a priori* existence of Islam that does not yield a significant boundary between self and other. In their writings the ontology of Islam is stretched so thin, resembling an infinite horizontal line, that the points of contact with adjacent discursivities are exponentially multiplied.

In Ibn Sina's seminal *Daneshnamaha-ye alai* ([Treatises on knowledge], philosophy takes on a forward-looking modality. In his *Uyun al-hikmah*, IbnSina writes that *al-hikmah*, (which he uses as being the same as philosophy) is the perfection of the human soul through conceptualisation [*tasawwur*] of things and judgment [*tasdiq*] of theoretical and practical realities to the measure of human ability.<sup>43</sup> He went on in his later writings to distinguish between Peripatetic philosophy and what he called 'Oriental philosophy' (*al-hikmat al-mashriqi'yah*) which was not based on ratiocination alone, but included revealed knowledge (it also set the stage for the influential treatises of Sohravardi, and here especially his *kitabhikmat al-ishraq*). There is a particularly striking poem by Ibn Sina about the fate of the human soul (note it is not exclusive to Muslims), which exemplifies this emphasis on congruence between rational analysis and spiritual opportunity that was central to the canons of the classical philosophers of Islam.

Until when the hour of its homeward flight draws near,

And 'tis time for it to return to its ampler sphere,

It carols with joy, for the veil is raised, and it spies

Such things as cannot be witnessed by waking eyes.

On a lofty height doth it warble its songs of praise

(for even the lowliest being doth knowledge raise).

And so it returneth, aware of all hidden things

In the universe, while no stain to its garment clings.<sup>44</sup>

The ultimate object here is the perfection of the intellectual faculties of the individual, who does not carry an exclusive identity, who is only presumed in his or her physical constitution. There is no realm of knowledge that is exclusive to Muslims in the writings of Ibn Sina, no discernible schematic dichotomy that permeates his narratives. He searches for a supreme truth, not a supreme civilisation or race. He and many of his contemporaries managed to create the archives of classical philosophy without the emergence of a discourse that would legitimate subjugation of the other, without a call to arms and without proclamations of righteousness. Yet, the Islamic secularists that I have covered above share with their ideological, Islamist counterparts the conviction of superiority despite the nascent philosophical and critical content of their ideas. They continue to adhere to the viewpoint

43. I. Sina. (1954) *Fontessapientiae (uyun al-hikmah)*, A. Badawied (Cairo: No publisher), p. 16.

44. Quoted in R. Walzer. (1962) *Greek into Arabic: Essays on Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 26.

that Muslims hold the holy grail of truth and that they are obliged to invite and persuade others to understand it. This is certainly not their ambition, but Islam, even in this liberal garb, easily could be turned into another form of hegemony. In such a dystopian world, war and aggression would not be justified in terms of killing the infidels but of civilising them.

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