



The Foundations of the Relationship between Religion and Politics in the Later Phase of Religious Intellectualism

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Abstract: The current known as religious intellectualism, with the claim of reforming religious thought, addressed the problem of the causes of decline and the compatibility of tradition and modernity in Iran's religious society. In its later phase following the Islamic Revolution in Iran, this intellectual current has pursued a distinct intellectual trajectory – marking a significant departure from its predecessors – based on the specific religio-theological foundations observed in the views of its later figures. This trajectory has been characterized in intellectual discourse as a movement toward a minimalist conception of religion. Given the status of this current in scientific and academic circles, and the necessity of evaluating the record of religious intellectualism with respect to its claim of reformist religious reflection, this article, through an examination of the views of prominent figures within this current, demonstrates that the religion-politics relations in religious intellectualist thought amount to a reconstruction of modern politics within the religious context of Iranian society.

Keywords: Religious Intellectualism, Religion, Politics, Religious Government.

Introduction

The current known as religious intellectualism emerged as one of the currents in Iran that sought to address the question of tradition and modernity, adopting an approach aimed at establishing an interactive, rather than confrontational, relationship between the two sides of this equation (tradition and modernity). In the later phase of the religious intellectualism movement in the post-Islamic Revolution period—that is, following the practical emergence of the Shi'i model of Islamic government—this current entered a new phase of intellectual reflection, represented by figures such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammad Mojtabeh Shabestari, Mohsen Kadivar, and Mostafa Malekian. This phase marked a significant departure from the earlier trajectory of the movement. The path of intellectual reflection pursued by this current during its later phase has, according to some interpretations, been characterized as a movement toward a minimalist conception of religion.

Given the status of discussions on religious intellectualism in scientific and academic circles, and since the claim of this current has been to pursue reformist thought in the field of religious studies in confronting the achievements of the modern world—specifically in the domain of social affairs, and particularly concerning politics, which is the subject of this article—it is necessary to examine the discussions of this later phase in order to arrive at a clear assessment of how this current's reformist intellectual reflection has, in the relationship between religion and social affairs (including politics, the focus of this article), assigned a certain place to religion and accorded a certain status to modern achievements within Iran's religious context.

This article has been written using a descriptive-analytical method. In accordance with its research question and objectives, this article offers a descriptive account of the views of its selected thinkers within the religious intellectualism movement, reporting their relevant perspectives on the subject as drawn from extant texts. However, the article does not confine itself to description; it further examines the interrelations among key concepts and, in its concluding section, derives inferences from theoretical data and critically analyzes the implications of these thinkers' religio-theological reflections for the domains of politics and social thought.

The study population consists of the collected written works of four prominent figures of later phase of the religious intellectualism movement (Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammad Mojtabeh Shabestari, Mohsen Kadivar, and Mostafa Malekian) from the 1990s onwards. Data was gathered through library and documentary research and then analyzed using conceptual

content analysis and philosophical reasoning within the framework of new theological discourse. In this process, first the key views and concepts of each thinker are described, and then the relationships among them and their implications for the realm of politics are explained in an analytical-inferential manner. The primary aim of this research is not to critique the theological foundations of this movement, but rather to evaluate its intellectual record concerning the relationship between religion and politics and to clarify this fundamental question: whether this movement has achieved a "third path" in confronting tradition and modernity, or whether in practice it has led to the reconstruction of modern politics within the religious context of Iranian society.

Drawing upon the available and published views of the figures within this current, this article demonstrates that the style of religious inquiry pursued by the current known as religious intellectualism has culminated in the theorization of a modern political system within the religious context of Iran's religious society.

1. Conceptual Framework

Religion: Beyond the various definitions offered concerning religion—whether in terms of its origin, function, set of propositions, or other dimensions—what is intended here by religion is the body of truths and values that reach humanity through revelation, by means of the Quran and the Sunnah, for the guidance of human beings. This is regardless of whether their contents are also attainable through ordinary means, or whether human sense, reason, and intuition are barred from such teachings. Such a system will also possess its own rules and regulations. (Khosropanah, 2002: 40)

Intellectualism: In elucidating the concept of intellectualism, the term is sometimes interpreted as absolute enlightened thinking, and to explain it, notions such as having a social conscience, criticizing existing undesirable conditions, and reflecting on how to overcome present deficiencies have been proposed. However, the term generally denotes a concept arising from a specific historical and cultural current. Its introduction into Persian literature was influenced by the emergence of ideas inspired by the teachings of the European Enlightenment, particularly from France, which found their way into this land through the civilizational encounter between Iran and the West. On this basis, figures such as Morteza Motahhari cannot be classified within this category. Accordingly, as is common in the prevailing literature, where some analysts regard *religious intellectualism* as referring to figures such as Mehdi Bazargan and Ali Shari'ati in the first decade after the revolution, and

figures such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammad Mojtabeh Shabestari, Mohsen Kadivar, and Mostafa Malekian in the past three decades, this article adopts the latter conception of religious intellectualism.

By the "later phase" of religious intellectualism, this article means the period from the 1990s onward, during which we have witnessed the emergence and proliferation of religio-theological perspectives that are markedly different from those of the earlier period of this intellectual current. Although these perspectives—like those of figures such as Shari'ati and Bazargan—are inspired by the teachings of the modern West, they tend more explicitly toward a minimalist conception of religion in terms of the scope and presence of religion.

2. The Starting Point of Intellectual Reflection on Religion and Social Spheres

While different thinkers within a given intellectual movement may hold divergent perspectives on its central questions, one can typically trace common origins in the way they formulate the core problem. The initial formation of the project of religious intellectualism began with the encounter with the modern world and the enigma of how modernity engages with a legacy termed "*tradition*" in intellectual discourse.

From Soroush's perspective, "moving beyond the fruits of modernity—understood as the advancements of contemporary life—and in response to the question concerning the fundamental root of the remarkable transformations in human civilization today, we first encounter modern science. Since much of what we observe in the apparent fabric of contemporary human life is undoubtedly the progeny of modern science, a deeper analysis allows us to conclude that what separates the new world from the old and draws a precise demarcation between them is the presence or absence of modern science". (Soroush, 2001: 48)

Modern science, which has expanded its domain encompassing both the natural and social sciences, has, from this perspective, fundamentally transformed four essential aspects of human life: means, ends, concepts, and presuppositions (fundamental beliefs). (See: Soroush, 2003: 8-21) As the speaker puts it, "Our problem is that our understanding [of the world] belongs to the past world, but our understanding of humanity belongs to the new human being. When these two approaches are juxtaposed, they create incompatibility and contradiction, leading us to question." (Soroush, 2003: 58) Confronting the modern condition is an unavoidable encounter. Shabestari explains the dilemma of facing the new world for contemporary humanity as

stemming from the lack of authority within the modern condition. From this perspective, "the conflicted human of the modern age can neither fully accept modernity nor absolutely reject it. Absolute rejection is impossible because one lives within the very fabric of modernity, possesses modern awareness, and is oneself a new human being. The very type of their consciousness is that of the modern age; to reject modernity absolutely would be to deny oneself. This denial leads to alienation. Nor can one fully accept modernity, because within modernity all forms of authority are negated, and the individual is confronted with absolute choice. When all authority is negated and every choice is absolute, in what sense can one say, "I am a Muslim" or "I am a Christian"? " (Mojtahed Shabestari, 2003: 221)

Although Mostafa Malekian develops his intellectual project upon a distinct and specific foundation, he ultimately aligns with the two aforementioned thinkers. The context for proposing his project of "Spirituality" (*ma'naviyat*) was shaped by the emergence of the modern condition, and its fundamental questions arose from the consequences of this condition.

According to the "Spirituality" project, humanity's principal problem throughout history has been the suffering and hardship of worldly life. Consequently, the central aim of any program for human existence should be the attainment of tranquility and peace. In this framework, the basis for answering the question of religion's status in the modern world is established by acknowledging that religion _once a significant factor in alleviating human suffering in the pre-modern world_ has today lost its capacity to respond to modern humanity. The characteristics of the new human necessitate that religion be replaced with a project termed "Spirituality."

Religious intellectualism has consistently grappled with two pivotal questions. The first seeks the causes of decline and backwardness, while the second aims to determine the proper relationship between the inherited past (*tradition*) and the tenets of the modern age.

The point of divergence between this current and secular intellectualism lies in its professed disinclination to set aside religion in its Western form. In certain analyses, this disinclination is interpreted as a type of contextual exigency, stemming from the specific socio-historical conditions of Iran which religious intellectualism confronts.

"In the view of the religious intellectualism movement, tradition is plagued by ambiguity and impotence, lacking efficacy in the new world. Conversely, modernity, without harmonization and compatibility with religion, cannot become institutionalized within the psychological structure of

individuals and society, as it would remain imported, superficial, and misaligned with the accepted religion and traditions of society. The proposed solution of this current was that a necessary connection, harmony, and synthesis must be forged between these modern achievements and religion". (Amiri, 2010: 6)

There is no doubt that religious intellectualism recognized this contextual necessity. In this regard, Soroush states: "We live in a religious society, and religion will not be sacrificed even against our own will. Nor would it be good for religion to completely exit the stage. We must prune its excesses, unwarranted ambitions, and false claims, and restore religion to its proper place." (Soroush, 2002: 15)

However, alongside this necessity, the project of religious intellectualism is not predicated on spirituality departing from human life. In this view, the absolute dominion of modern rationality would bring about undesirable consequences for the life of modern humanity.

A significant point worthy of note in the approach of religious intellectualism is that it is construed as a movement for which the achievements of modernity constitute part of its concerns. It seeks, whether due to societal exigencies or personal affinity, to uphold the role of religion alongside the implementation of modern aspirations. From the perspective of such an analysis, "religious intellectuals are preoccupied with the prospect of modernity's entry and the establishment of democracy and related concepts. They have accepted the foundations of modernity and pursue a research program in which the modernization of society and religion is a priority. At the same time, they are apprehensive about the potential loss of religion's essence and deliberate on maintaining the ethical and religious character of a society such as Iran's." (Kazemi, 2006)

This represents a key point of distinction between the movement known as *religious intellectualism* and the *revivalist thought* of figures such as *Morteza Motahhari*. The revivalists pursue a research program whose outcome is the revitalization of religious thought and the demonstration of religion's efficacy in the contemporary world. What they do *not* pursue, however, is the project of modernizing society and religion. They are not concerned with establishing democracy or concepts like freedom (in its modern sense); rather, they are fundamentally engaged in extracting religion's responses to the new needs of contemporary humanity and view the relationship between religion and modernity from this perspective.

3. Foundations of the relationship between religion and politics

The starting point of religious intellectualism regarding the relationship between religion and politics is the distinction between religion itself and religious knowledge. Based on this premise, religious knowledge is presented as being influenced by human knowledge. The reasoning is that religion is silent; it is human beings who impart meaning to the texts of religion. Since human knowledge is in a state of flux and transformation, one's religious knowledge is likewise perpetually subject to change, harmonizing with human knowledge. This is a fundamental step towards resolving the problem of the conflict between religion and modernity from the perspective of religious intellectualism.

Abdolkarim Soroush took this step in his theory of "*The Contraction and Expansion of Religious Law*" (*Qabz-o-Bast-e Shari'at*), articulating its core as follows: "A correct or flawed understanding of religious law is entirely dependent upon and in need of human knowledge, and is in harmony with it. There exists a continuous exchange and dialogue between religious knowledge and non-religious knowledge (the principle of nourishment and harmony). If human knowledge undergoes contraction and expansion, our understanding of religious law will undergo contraction and expansion. Human knowledge (human understanding of nature and existence: science and philosophy) undergoes contraction and expansion (the principle of transformation)." (Soroush, 1994: 347)

Human questions are renewed in every age and era—that is, human beings, in step with the transformation of their epistemic data and their material needs, encounter new issues and questions. As a result, they also pose new questions to the sacred law (*shari'at*) and receive new answers from it. (Soroush, 1997b: 104)

Similarly, within the thought of Shabestari, the distinction between religion and religious knowledge, although pursued from a different perspective utilizing hermeneutical insights, ultimately arrives at a same conclusion: "Interpreting divine revelation—whether in the domain of exegetical science or in the process of jurisprudential inference (*ijtihad*)—is not possible without reliance upon the pre-understandings present in human sciences and knowledge." (Mojtahed Shabestari, 1996: 39)

It is evident that these pre-understandings, being rooted in human knowledge, are perpetually renewed from one epoch to another. The crucial point here is that, from this viewpoint, the consequence of transitioning from one era to another is not merely the emergence of new questions; rather, a transformation in the very foundations also occurs. Soroush reminds us of this

point in explaining the difference between a religious intellectual and a religious scholar, stating: "The understanding of religion is not renewed solely through encountering the problems and exigencies of life in the new age. The new world does not merely confront us with new scientific problems; it also nourishes us with new foundations. Therefore, the modernization of religion does not only mean solving newly-arising problems, but also entails the harmonization of religious understanding with the other understandings, knowledge systems, and foundational premises of the age." (Soroush, 1994: 203)

Among the consequences of distinguishing between religion and religious knowledge is the negation of any official interpretation of religion. From this perspective, the religious seminary sciences—or more precisely, the doctrines of the seminarians—are also, in fact, a form of human knowledge and are therefore open to questioning and scrutiny. (See: Soroush, 1996: 32). From this perspective, in a religious society, the matter of religion is too vast to be entrusted solely to official interpreters; no religious edict (*fatwa*) is beyond question, and no understanding of religion can be considered the best or final understanding. (Soroush, 1996: 155)

Fundamentally, religious intellectualism has delineated a boundary between religion itself and the understanding of religion, thereby rendering religious pluralism both possible and inevitable. In his explanation of religious democracy and the necessity of transforming the value system to achieve it, Shabestari notes: "This reconstruction cannot be accomplished without accepting the plurality of religious interpretations. The plurality of religious interpretations is among the real pluralities of a democratic society, and the negation of pluralities in a society is precisely the negation of democracy itself." (Mojtahed Shabestari, 2004: 149)

In his work *Straight Paths* (*Serāt-hā-ye Mostaqim*), Soroush discusses religious pluralism and draws a significant conclusion from it: "The pluralism of understanding religious texts carries a clear implication: there exists no official or single interpretation of religion, and consequently, no official authority or interpreter thereof. From such a religion, one cannot expect much, nor can one make many promises in its name, nor can one perform many actions in its name" (Soroush, 1997a: 4)

Building upon the aforementioned points as a fundamental step in explicating the relationship between religion and politics, the religious intellectualism movement takes another step. This step brings the conception of a political system into closer affinity with the human knowledge of the age—that is, modern knowledge. This is none other than the division of the

codified body of religion into essential (*zāti*) and accidental (*arazi*) elements, which leads to a minimalist conception of religion. From this perspective, "Many of the rulings from the era of the Prophet of Islam, whether found in the Noble Quran or in the hadiths, are rulings pertaining to secondary, accidental, and contingent purposes and values. This duality between purposes and values and their corresponding rulings was not known to the audience of the Prophet of Islam, and they did not make this distinction." (Mojtahed Shabestari, 2000: 268)

According to Shabestari, "The Quran and the Sunnah are sources for giving meaning to the lives of humans who construct their own civilization. The Quran and the Sunnah give meaning to life; they are not a substitute for it... The role of the Quran, the Sunnah, and other religious sources is to prevent humans from falling into meaninglessness." (Mojtahed Shabestari, 2000: 103-104) Soroush, too, divides religion into two parts—the essential (*zāṭīyāt*) and the accidental (*‘arazīyāt*)—and regards the essential as that which must be attained in every age. The accidental, however, is a means to attaining the essential and is therefore temporary and not applicable to all times. (Soroush, 2006: 20-46)

Given that the critique of the religious intellectualism movement in this section is primarily directed at the jurisprudential knowledge of the religious seminaries, Mohsen Kadivar elaborates the division between the essential and the accidental in a more detailed manner. In his view, "matters of faith and belief, ethical values, jurisprudential rulings concerning acts of worship (*‘ibādāt*), and certain principles within transactional jurisprudence (*mu‘āmalāt*) constitute the core components of religion, all of which are trans-temporal, trans-spatial, and permanent. However, within transactional jurisprudence—that is, non-ritual rulings—the factor of the exigencies of time and place is profoundly significant. All penal, criminal, civil, international, and constitutional rulings, some of which have roots in the Quran and the Sunnah, are considered part of transactional jurisprudence... On the other hand, one cannot deny that human affairs, especially in the social sphere and the prevailing custom (*‘urf*) of human societies, have undergone radical transformation. Many matters that were considered just, rational, and normative in past centuries are today deemed unjust, abnormal, and contrary to the conduct of reasonable people (*sīre-ye ‘oqalā*)." (Kadivar, 2003: 427) The important point in this discussion is that if a ruling loses its validity due to its contradiction with justice or the prevailing conduct of reasonable people of the time—which is itself based on human knowledge—then the authority to legislate a replacement law for that position lies not with the Guardian Jurist

(*Vali-ye Faqih*), but with collective reason, or in effect, the human knowledge of that age. (See: Kadivar, 2003: 429)

The reality, according to the religious intellectualism perspective, is that the perfection of religion—meaning that which God intended to send as religion for humanity—was sent perfectly, and the Prophet conveyed it completely to the people. (Mojtahed Shabestari, 1996: 234) Based on this view, it is mistaken to imagine that Islam has established eternal systems and laws concerning politics. "Muslims are duty-bound, in every age, to determine the justice of that age and its negative and positive instances through rational discourse, and to make it the foundation of their social and political organization. This task is not in opposition to obeying God's commands and prohibitions in organizing society, politics, and governance; rather, it is precisely the requirement of God's commands and prohibitions concerning political affairs—namely, commitment to justice and avoidance of oppression." (Mojtahed Shabestari, 2000: 179)

Beyond this, such expectations—that is, seeking the ordering of worldly affairs and the administration of society from religion—are not tenable, and their proof requires evidence that has not been adduced. (Kadivar, 2003: 426) In fact, since religion is distinct from religious knowledge, and given that from this current's perspective the scope and domain of religion is a minimalist domain, modern humanity inevitably has no choice but to take human sciences—and consequently, the outputs of collective reason—as its criterion. It is in this manner that the reformist approach of religious intellectualism arrives at democratic foundations.

Shabestari, drawing upon the understanding formulated within the hermeneutical framework and based on the role he articulated for religion, states his conclusion more explicitly: "The new social life—the axis of which is comprehensive human development and to which Muslims have been compelled to subscribe since the early twentieth century—cannot be governed by the jurisprudential categories of the forbidden (*harām*) and the permitted (*halāl*). This new social life, as its distinctive and enumerated characteristics indicate, can only be managed through scientific management and long-term planning, of which democracy is among the consequences and requisites. The jurisprudential categories of the forbidden and the permitted can only come into play within a limited sphere of this new social life." (Mojtahed Shabestari, 2000: 18-19)

In the thought of religious intellectualism, the conventional discipline of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) has lost its rational basis in major political affairs. In this domain, one must turn to God's general commands and prohibitions—

such as justice and the preservation of the five essential purposes of Sharia (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*)—and through commitment and adherence to these, interpret justice in relation to the concrete social, political, economic, and cultural realities of Islamic societies, establishing a just social, political, and economic system upon that interpretation. (Mojtahed Shabestari, 2000: 182) Thus, the design of social systems, including the political system, is carried out based on the methods of modern science. This perspective reproduces a self-grounded reason. Someone like Soroush links this to the discourse on the rational goodness and badness (*ḥosn-o-qobḥ-e aqlī*) of actions, stating: "Secularism declares certain regions to be independent of God's will and the ruling of sacred law. I place emphasis on the theory of rational goodness and badness, which holds that values have an independent sphere. In these spheres, one can be secular." (Soroush, 2002: 14)

In effect, the division of religion into essence (*gohar*) and accident (*araz*) entrusts everything that was once considered religious doctrine and a part of religion to the domain of human reflection. Consequently, all the emphasis placed today on the political, social, and civilizational systems of religion is in fact directed at something that is not essentially religious, having entered religion only accidentally; therefore, it has many worldly rivals. (Soroush, 1999)

The consequence of such an approach is the elimination of the process of jurisprudential inference (*ijtihād*), which thinkers such as Morteza Motahhari had introduced as the means for adapting religion to various spheres of life across all times and places. On this basis, religious intellectualism assumed a confrontational stance toward the institution of the clergy and the process of *ijtihād* in the sense upheld by the leaders of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. Soroush states: "What religious intellectualism lacks in this society is a new fiqh. If such a thing is secured, we will attain a minimalist religiosity compatible with the new world... We need a new framework concerning the practical duties of Muslims that would render them independent of recourse to the clergy. If this is accomplished, then we can be assured that the project of religious intellectualism has reached its perfection." (Soroush, 2002: 15)

It was previously noted that within the project of religious intellectualism, the acceptance of this approach necessitates embracing the plurality of understandings and interpretations of religion. The noteworthy point is that this pluralism is not confined to the intra-religious sphere; rather, it extends its scope beyond the boundaries of religion into the inter-religious domain. Soroush maintains: "Religious pluralism is an epistemological and

theological theory concerning the truthfulness of religions and the righteousness of religious adherents. It holds that the multiplicity that has emerged in the realm of religiosity—and which appears ineradicable and irremovable—is a natural phenomenon that unveils the truthfulness of many religions and the righteousness of many believers. It is a necessary consequence of the human perceptual apparatus, the multi-faceted structure of reality, and is consistent with divine guidance and the human quest for felicity." (Hashemi, 2008: 191-192, citing Soroush)

It is evident that by extending the scope of pluralism from within a single religion to the inter-religious domain, reflection upon social systems becomes more than ever indebted to human sciences and rationalities—in a word, to collective reason. However, the intellectual reflection of religious intellectualism has not halted even at this point; it has also advanced highly noteworthy claims concerning the very principle of revelation and the sacred scripture. One point is that from the perspective of such views, "meanings were revealed to the Prophet, not the words of the sacred scripture. Between the original meanings and the present meanings of the words inscribed in the sacred scripture, there exists a gap—an intervening space—that can serve as a terrain for intellectual activity" (Fayyaz, 2002) According to this particular perspective, religion is the spiritual and social experience of the Prophet, and the Word of God is the very word of the Prophet. Here, revelation is dependent upon the Prophet and develops gradually in accordance with his personality. The Prophet progressively becomes "more prophetic," and revelation progressively becomes richer. The Prophet's personality is the locus, the originator, the agent, and the recipient of revelation. The Quran could have been much more than it is, provided that the Prophet had lived longer. Likewise, if the Prophet had encountered different circumstances, a different Quran would have been produced. (Sadeqi, 2003: 244)

Another dimension concerning the sacred scripture is that, even if the words themselves were revealed to the Prophet, these words are historical and possess a historical meaning! Thus, between the historical meaning of these words at the time of revelation and their present meaning, a gap—an intervening space—emerges, which provides a suitable environment for intellectual activity. Now, if we take into account the theory of the fallibility of the prophets (*'iṣmat*), as articulated by religious intellectuals, the depth of this theory becomes even more apparent: namely, the error of the prophets concerning the words and meanings of the sacred scripture (Fayyaz, 2002).

Mostafa Malekian, regarded as one of the prominent figures of the current known as religious intellectualism, aims within the framework of his "Spirituality" (*ma'naviyat*) project to establish spirituality as an alternative to religion in the modern world, based on a particular view concerning the role and place of religion and its comparison with the needs and expectations of modern humanity. According to Malekian, "The experience of every individual throughout their life, as well as the historical experience of humankind, has shown that humanity has never been and is not free from pain and suffering." (Malekian, 2003: 313)

Having articulated the primary problem and preoccupation of humanity, Malekian turns his attention to religion and, concerning the relationship between religion and this human predicament—or more precisely, regarding what he conceives as the place of religion—writes: "It can be said that our expectation of religion is that it gives meaning to our sufferings and, more broadly, to our lives, and by giving meaning to our sufferings, in a sense delivers us from them and brings us to a desirable state." (Malekian, 2002: 285).

However, in today's world, from Malekian's perspective, even if religion was once capable of responding to this human need, it is no longer able to do so due to factors that Malekian, according to his own specific viewpoint, identifies as: heavy metaphysics, the unprovability of the metaphysics of religions, contradictions in religious texts, the lack of authority of revelation, its authoritative (*ta'abbodī*) nature, and so on. Consequently, he seeks to replace that which has suffered a serious weakness in the modern world and is unacceptable to modern humanity—namely, religion—with something called "Spirituality."

The spirituality that Malekian speaks of is grounded in a rationality free from authoritative adherence (*ta'abbod*). Yet, in his view, "the spiritual person is a believer. For one cannot be a human being and not be a believer." (Malekian, 2003: 395) "The spiritual person believes in that proposition which provides him with positive psychological effects and consequences." (Malekian, 2003: 397).

The spirituality intended by Malekian is devoid of heavy metaphysics and, moreover, is a secular spirituality, seeking this-worldly salvation. The spiritual person seeks, through becoming spiritual, to attain certain things right here and now. He seeks inner peace now; he seeks inner joy now; he seeks hope and finding a meaning for life now. And if there is a life after death, the spiritual person will, according to his own belief, also have a desirable life there. (Malekian, 2003: 316-317).

In this spirituality under discussion, commitment to any particular religion is not intended. In this spirituality, the goal of human beings is to attain inner satisfaction, which itself consists of three components: peace, joy, and hope. (See: Malekian, 2003: 307) One can attain these three components within any religion or creed, and likewise, the converse meaning is that one may fail to attain these three components within any religion or creed. Therefore, there exists a kind of indifference among religions and creeds with respect to these three components. The explicit meaning of this statement is that there is no necessity to accept any particular religion nor to abandon any particular religion in order to attain these components. (Malekian, 2003: 309) Thus, the current known as religious intellectualism—if in the past it sought a maximalist conception of religion—has in the last decades endeavored to reduce the role and function of religion to the minimum possible. According to some analyses, "religious intellectualism before the Islamic revolution in Iran and after the revolution differs with respect to the domain of religion. The religious intellectualism of the 1960s and 1970s, whose prominent representative in the first instance was Mehdi Bazargan and which was later expanded by Dr. Shari'ati, was a maximalist, ideologized religious intellectualism. This meant that it sought to extract scientific concepts and new needs from religion, held an ideological view of the world, and presented a maximalist religion. The religious intellectualism of the second decade after the revolution is an anti-ideological religious intellectualism that advocates for a minimalist conception of religion." (Khosropanah, 2008)

As is evident in the views of Soroush and Mojtaba Shabestari, religion comprises a volume of accidental elements (*arazīyāt*) which, due to their historicity (in their view), are avoidable. On the other hand, the silence of religion provides a ground upon which religion in today's modern world can be reconstructed through a different understanding, leaving no conflict between it and modernity. In particular, that which constitutes the essence of religion (justice, or mystical experience, or any other possible conception) is attended to, while its accidental elements—or in other words, the discipline of jurisprudence (*fiqh*)—are not recommendable for today's world. This minimalism reaches a point in the works of Mostafa Malekian where religion not only loses its necessity but also confronts the imperative of being replaced by projects such as spirituality (according to Malekian's definition). In Malekian's thought, common interpretation and collective rationality are also connected to the subject of religion in another manner. From Malekian's perspective, a religious government can be established when three conditions are met:

1. "All or the majority of the people in a society accept that religious propositions and beliefs are not actually verifiable in practice;
 2. They accept that these propositions—while not actually verifiable in practice—must nevertheless serve as the basis for their decision-making;
 3. The propositions that the people wish to serve as the basis for decision-making in their collective life must accord with the interpretation that they themselves have of those propositions and desire." (Malekian, 2003: 257-258)
- Thus, the notion of religious government also undergoes a subtle semantic evolution. It comes to mean that a religious government is one that emerges from a religious society—in other words, that the religious majority of a society necessitates that the government formed should align with religious aspirations. Soroush explicitly articulates this understanding, stating:

"As I understand it, a religious government is no different from a non-religious government in its manner of management and the nature of administering affairs. Governments are not primarily and essentially divided into religious and non-religious. Rather, governments are divided into democratic and non-democratic. It is only after becoming democratic or non-democratic that they acquire a religious or non-religious coloration... In democratic religious governments, being religious means nothing other than that the inhabitants of a religious society choose certain people to manage their affairs and ask them to fulfill the primary needs of the people and to bring order and regularity to the affairs of society." (Soroush, 2000)

Shabestari also defines religious democracy in the following manner: it is desirable that the people do not regard choosing a government through democratic means as contrary to religion, but rather consider it religiously desirable, accept democratic values as compatible with religion rather than rejected by it, and align their social value system accordingly... In this case, one can say that these people regard democracy as desirable in the eyes of religion, not as rejected by it, and there is no obstacle to calling this democracy—during this transitional period—religious democracy; only in the sense that these religious people do not see their religion as an obstacle to democracy, but rather as an affirmation of it. (Mojtahed Shabestari, 2004: 178)

In Malekian's thought, there is a move beyond the self-grounded understanding and rationality that reinterprets the accidental elements of religion on the basis of a new understanding. This means that religion in the past world had a function in alleviating human pain and suffering—a function that remains needed in the modern era as well. On the other hand, modern humanity cannot satisfy its need through a traditional understanding of religion, and religion in its traditional interpretation has lost its old-world

function. The filling of this void is accomplished through a spirituality defined according to the characteristics of modern humanity. (See: Malekian, 2003: 267-343)

Within the project of religious intellectualism, beyond the significant role of collective understanding in the reinterpretation of the accidental elements of religion, the ultimate aim of the political system also culminates in a negative domain. From this perspective, governments have no task or duty beyond attending to the primary needs of the people—and they ought not to have any more than that. Whether a religious government or a non-religious government, what it must first and foremost take into consideration is to provide for primary needs, namely: housing, food, clothing, healthcare, and the like; to remove the chain of material necessities from the hands and feet of the people, so that the people themselves may strive and exert themselves, seeking to fulfill their secondary needs (religion, science, art, etc.) and create a culture appropriate to their own capabilities and capacities. (Soroush, 2000) Based on the foregoing discussion, and in light of the trajectory that the thinkers examined in this article have followed in their religio-theological studies, as well as the implications of their perspectives for social and political thought, some scholars have preferred to use the term "modern Scholars of Religious Thought" rather than "religious intellectuals" for this group of thinkers (Hashemi, 2008).

Conclusion

This article adopted a conception of intellectualism characterized by its inspiration from modern Western teachings and the Enlightenment era. From this perspective, it examined a particular segment of the current known as religious intellectualism—namely, those figures who, from the 1990s onward, presented a new image of religious intellectualism and succeeded in influencing academic and scholarly circles with their views.

Although this article has referred to the religio-theological foundations of the current known as religious intellectualism, its primary aim has not been to critique these foundations. Rather, this article has sought to clarify whether the intellectual current known as religious intellectualism—given its later intellectual trajectory—has succeeded in attaining a third way in the challenge between tradition and modernity, or whether, in its attempt to enter the domain of social affairs and, more specifically, politics, it has in practice reconstructed modernity within the religious context of Iranian society.

This current, which entered the field of religious studies with a reformist claim and an interactive approach to the relationship between tradition and modernity, was inevitably shaped by its connection to the teachings of the modern world. By distinguishing between religion and religious knowledge—which, from this current's perspective, is identical to human knowledge—on the one hand, and by dividing religion into the domain of essential (*zāṭīyāt*) and accidental (*ʿarazīyāt*) elements, assigning a minimalist share to the former, on the other hand, this current removed the reinterpretation and intellectual reflection upon the religious text from the jurisprudential-hermeneutical approach (*ijtihādī*) and entrusted it to the human sciences of the modern world. Through the plurality of understandings and multiple, yet legitimate, interpretations, it abandoned such reflection to democratic processes. Along this path, it did not even spare the very essence of religion from being regarded as a human experience subject to expansion. Thus, the legislation of rulings in the domain of accidental elements—which encompass a large portion of religious rulings—was placed upon the conduct of reasonable people and, in particular, upon modern human knowledge in the fields of the humanities. No meaning remained for religious government other than that it is a government arising from a democratic process within a society populated by believers. The function of that same religion was likewise limited to providing for the primary needs of society's members, so that they might engage in spontaneous activity among themselves.

This reconstruction of modernity by the figures of the later phase of the current known as religious intellectualism leads us to designate them as "modern Scholars of Religious Thought" rather than "religious intellectuals."

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