

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

September 24, 2015

Naser Ghobadzadeh, *Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State*, Oxford University Press, 2014, 288 pp., \$74.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9780199391172.

How to present Islam as a faith that can speak to the concern of contemporary Muslims has long been a central question for Iranian religious reformers. One important dimension of this preoccupation is the political role of religion, in other words its place in the public sphere. Naser Ghobadzadeh's *Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State* is a book where this preoccupation unfolds in the narrative of a large number of reformists, from Ali Shariati and Mehdi Bazargan, in the pre-revolution period, to Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohsen Kadivar, Mohammad Mojtabeh Shabestari, Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, and a few others, in the post-revolution era. But, what does *Religious Secularity*, the title of the book, mean? After all aren't religious and secular two mutually exclusive concepts? And if so, isn't the title an oxymoron? If one searches for the response to this question within the framework of secularization theory and its mother paradigm of modernization, then one would be hard pressed to find any other answer than an emphatic *yes*. The paradigm's binary approach to notions of religious/secular and traditional/modern would not provide for anything else.

In the last few decades, however, this dichotomous view has been increasingly questioned mainly due to the assertive entrance of many religious organizations into public spaces, not only in Iran but in the heart of the modern West as well—i.e., Europe and the United States. Then how should one understand the relationship between religion and the secular, and/or modern democracy and public religion? Since the early 1990s a new literature, spearheaded by José Casanova's *Public Religions in the Modern World*,¹ has developed whose primary intent is to address these questions. This body of literature has had great success in providing persuasive alternative discourses to the once hegemonic paradigm of modernization. In the specific case of Islam, however, this emergent scholarship has faced greater challenges; nevertheless, the body of works whose goal is to redefine secularism and to invalidate “the myth of the incompatibility of Islam and secularism” (21) is growing. Naser Ghobadzadeh's book is firmly grounded in this genre and therefore the choice of the title *Religious Secularity* is neither odd nor surprising.

Through an elaboration on the Iranian religious reformist discourse, Ghobadzadeh attempts to push a central tenet of the literature further: the compatibility of religion (in this

¹ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

case Islam) with democracy and/or secularity. He argues that Islam is not only compatible with democracy and modernity but that the emerging model of secularity in the Muslim world indeed has its roots in religion. In other words, he contends that Islam, as it has been interpreted by reformists, can and should be considered a *promoter/enabler* of a democratic secular state rather than a religion that merely and passively tolerates this modern phenomenon.

Ghobadzadeh's contention rests on the reformist critique of the Islamic Republic. At the heart of this critique is the argument that since the Islamic Republic has attributed its behavior (its use of oppressive measures and its ineffective socio-economic policies) to religion, it has put Islam in peril. In order to save religion it is essential to separate the two realms, best done through the establishment of a democratic secular state, so that the shortcomings of the latter do not reflect on the former. The reformist discourse does not, however, see religion as merely a private and other-worldly phenomenon, and advocates its involvement with, and contribution to, civil society.

Religious Secularity consists of six chapters plus an introduction and a conclusion. The introductory chapter situates the book within the broader literature and provides the conceptual framework for the rest of the book. Ghobadzadeh follows B.G. Scharffs' distinction between the two terms "secularity" and "secularism," according to whom the former is "an approach to religion-state relations that avoids identification of the state with any particular religion or ideology...and that endeavors to provide a neutral framework capable of accommodating a broad range of religions and beliefs."² To emphasize his view of religion as belonging to the public sphere however, the author hastens to add that "secularity does not advocate the total elimination of religion from political practice; rather, it narrowly promotes the institutional separation of religion and state" (9).

The first chapter of the book, "Shiite Discourses on Sovereignty," focuses on the question of divine versus popular sovereignty, and elaborates on the challenges that reformists have presented to the supporters of divine sovereignty. Chapter 2, entitled "Seeding Secularity," sheds light on the damaging effects of the Islamic Republic's use of religion in the service of its leaders' political ambitions, particularly since the end of the 1980s and the introduction of expedient jurisprudence (*fiqh-ul maslaha*) into the policy making arena. In Chapter 3, "Religious Rationale for Separation," Ghobadzadeh continues his examination of the theme of the opportunistic use of religion by the state, and the reformists' insistence on the separation of the two through their argument that religion and state have two distinct natures and thus have to play distinct and separate roles.

Reminding readers about the absence of the clergy's direct political governance in traditional Shiite politico-religious discourse, in Chapter 4 the author explicates the inventiveness and peculiarity of the notion of the rule of the Islamic jurist (*velayat-e faqih*). Then in Chapter 5, "Clerics against Clericalism," Ghobadzadeh diverts his gaze from the reformists towards the views of traditional high clergy in order to stress his main point that Islam is, in fact, a progenitor of secularism. Several politically quietist grand ayatollahs, including Abolghasem Khoei, Safi Golpayegani, Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari and Hassan Qomi, found religious political governance an alien concept in Islam and either passively or actively resisted the religious state. The chapter also explores the ideas of Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, a man who, despite his support for the religious state,

² B.G. Scharffs, "Four Views of the Citadel: The Consequential Distinction Between Secularity and Secularism," *Religion and Human Rights*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2011), 110 (cited on page 9 of the book under review).

eventually became an ardent critic of the misuse of Islam by the authoritarian captains of the Islamic Republic.

What separates Chapter 6 from others is the partial shift from a hermeneutic approach to an institutional one. Here we see how traditional Shii institutions create a challenge for the proponents of Islamism. The most glaring indicator of this challenge is the conflict between the centralized office of the *velayat-e faqih* with the decentralized nature of the office of *marja'iat* (the source of emulation). This is an important argument that needs to be repeated and highlighted more often in the literature on Islam, pluralism, and democracy.

Ghobadzadeh's prose is clear and thankfully free of cumbersome jargon. But he could have written in a more concise manner since the frequent repetition of the main points detracts from the overall effectiveness of the book. The author's treatment of the reformist narrative is quite extensive. He provides a generous space for an array of reformist positions and voices—both clerical and non-clerical—on the problematic of public religion, successfully brings to fore their religiously informed support for secularity, and therefore contributes to the literature that challenges the dichotomous approach to religion and secularity. The quantity of discursive evidence that Ghobadzadeh presents cannot be ignored—even by those who disagree with his central contention—and this is where the true strength of the book lies. It is in this strength, however, that one also detects the weakness of the book. The ample attention given to the intellectual debate brings into high relief the sketchy treatment of the lived experiences of those who created the reformist discourse. Take the example of Ayatollah Montazeri, a high clergy whose life and ideas were inspiration for many of the younger generation of reformists. His transformation from an ardent spokesman for a centralized and authoritarian office of the *velayat-e faqih* to an advocate of popular sovereignty and democracy is one crucial piece of evidence in support of the key claim of the book; i.e., the religious root of secularity in Iran. Understanding the curious evolution of Montazeri's thought on politics and religion requires some engagement with the context within which he operated—namely, his lived experiences within the Islamic Republic. The same can be said about many others. A more parsimonious treatment of the *discourse* could have provided the opportunity to do so. One should be fair to the author and acknowledge that he warns us from the very beginning that his focus is on the *words* and not the *deeds* of the reformers, but words come to life if they relate, at least partially, to the actual life experiences of their authors.

Sussan Siavoshi
 Una Chapman Cox Distinguished Professor of Political Science
 Trinity University

© 2015: Sussan Siavoshi

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Siavoshi, Sussan, Review of *Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State*, *SCTIW Review*, September 24, 2015. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/747>.

ISSN: 2374-9288