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Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi

Institutions: Georgia State University

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Contentious Public Religion: Two Conceptions of Islam in Revolutionary Iran

Ali Shari'ati and Abdolkarim Soroush

Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi

Georgia State University

abstract: Theorists of secularization considered modernity an irreversible process of differentiation between mutually exclusive spheres of private vs public life. In contrast, proponents of a new paradigm argue that differentiation has strengthened religion in modern society through the establishment of religious market economies. Contrary to both views, the resurgence of religious movements in the last 20 years, particularly Islamist movements, has introduced a new form of *contentious public religion* that calls into question the interconnectedness of modernity with the privatization of religion. This article shows how the reintroduction of religion in the public sphere contributed to a new understanding of Islam and its relation to contemporary social life. Two distinct articulations of Islam before and after the Iranian revolution of 1979 are examined, those of Ali Shari'ati and Abdolkarim Soroush. Whereas Shari'ati transformed Islam into an ideology of social change, in his ideology critique, Soroush reinstated the enigmatic core of Islam through a hermeneutic distinction between religion and the knowledge of it. The article argues that what religion *is*, a theological question, is intimately linked to the sociological question what religion *does*.

keywords: Islam ♦ modernity ♦ public religion ♦
secularization

Introduction

This article compares two influential Muslim discourses of social change and religion before and after the Iranian revolution of 1979. I argue that although significantly different in their theological presuppositions, both Ali Shari'ati and Abdolkarim Soroush have offered social theologies which justify public religion without legitimizing a theocratic rule based upon the existing religious institutions. Shari'ati and Soroush illustrate the inadequacies of the secularization thesis with its emphasis on the integrative function of religion in providing a compensatory equilibrium in an institutionally differentiated modern society (Parsons, 1951). They offer, in different ways, a theory of *contentious public religion* in which they link what religion *is* (a theological question) with what it *does* (a sociological question).

Sociology was conceived in the 19th century as a discipline with a theory of progress which was unmistakably linked to colonialism and inherently comparative (Connell, 1997; Seidman, 1994; Callinicos, 1999). Sociologists constructed a theory of society as a moral science based on a philosophy of history without references to God. Comte coined the term sociology to identify a new social science that would replace religion as the basis for making moral judgments. Not only did the new scientists of society construct a godless narrative of linear progressive history, by doing so, they also tendered an enduring theory of secularization. They proposed that the spread of modernity would inevitably undermine the potency of religion, both as a system of personal beliefs and as an institution with authority to shape increasingly differentiated spheres of politics, economy, and culture. Two distinct universalizing moves made sociology into both a *descriptive* science of European societies, as well as a *prescriptive* ideology for the colonized world.

First, the new science of society was shaped by *and* surmounted *Christian* theology. But in order for sociology to assume a privileged position of speaking authoritatively about a general theory of progress, a new universal category of religion had to be invented. The fact that mosques or Buddhist temples never bore the same kind of social function as the Christian church remained marginal to the validity of secularization theory. Second, the distinction between private and public spheres proved to be one of the most significant foundational binaries of modernity. According to the theory of secularization, religion, once part of the public realm, must work its enchantment – if at all – only in a severely delimited sphere. It becomes 'privatized' by the means of which a declining number of people cope with the dislocations and restrictions of public life.

Although sociologists generally disagreed on the social consequences of differentiation for religion, none envisioned the recent rise of public

religions and religious social movements, and assigned it to a legitimate space in the private sphere. While some argued that religion would function as an integrative element of modern societies, others remained more skeptical of its continuing significance. Those who saw a more bleak future for religion, commonly regarded differentiation as an inevitable and irreversible process which generates mutually exclusive and distinct public vs private spheres. They argued that secularization in its three relatively independent dimensions – that of societal systems (laicization), religious organizations, and that of individual religiosity (Dobbelaere, 1981) – would supplant the authority of traditional religions. For example, according to Schluchter (1989), not only does the process of differentiation render religion irrelevant as a worldview for the interpretation of life, it also depoliticizes it and restrains it in the private sphere (Schluchter, 1989: 253–4).

The exponents of a new paradigm in the sociology of religion (Warner, 1993; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985; Iannaccone, 1991; Finke and Stark, 1988) have thoroughly illustrated the fallacies of the secularization thesis and theories of differentiation, particularly the notion of the disappearance of religion in urban life in the US. They have argued that religion maintains its significance in modern society, without benefiting from the coerced monopoly of religious symbols and institutions of premodern societies. Rather, the pluralism engendered by competing in the ‘market economy of religion’, leads to the emergence of new forms of religiosity and new religious organizations. Religion does not, they argue, survive despite differentiation, but because of it (Stark and Finke, 2000: 55–79). They argued that religion does not hamper rational thought or impede social mobility. Rather, the ‘benefits’ of religion easily outweigh its potential ‘costs’ for any rational individual actor who ‘chooses’ to participate in modern religious economy. The underlying issue in this new approach is stated simply by Stark and Finke (2000: 42–3):

Does it make sense to model religion as the behavior of rational, reasonably well informed actors who choose to ‘consume’ religious ‘commodities’ in the same way that they weigh the costs and benefits of consuming secular commodities? We believe it does and have made it the starting point of our work.

The new paradigm suffers from three distinct problems. First, the utilitarian frame within which these questions are raised does not allow the proponents of the new paradigm to transcend the functionalist presuppositions of differentiation theory. They remain concerned with the external manifestations of religion and the rationality of religious organizations. They draw a rigid distinction between the ‘private’ matters of faith and ‘public’ manifestations of religiosity. Their individual actor is also an

individualist and his or her public religious participation conveys just another means for maximizing rewards while minimizing personal costs. Furthermore, Stark and Finke (2000: 39) argue that even the selfless acts of devotion are explicable rationally if we move beyond a 'narrow, materialistic, and entirely egocentric definition of rewards'. But they do not illustrate how one can measure the non-materialistic benefits of religion in a crude cost-benefit analysis of the religious marketplace.

Second, they continue to utilize a universal conception of religion while they specifically address the social dimensions of Christianity, particularly in the US. As one critic of the new paradigm has argued, this rational choice approach presupposes liberal democracy and a secular individual freedom to choose from different 'brands' of religious convictions (Bruce, 1999). For most of the world, 'religion is not a personal preference; it is a social identity in which one is socialized, that is closely tied to other shared identities and that can only be changed at considerable personal cost' (Bruce, 2001: 260).

Third, the new paradigm theorists convincingly rejected Luhmann's (1984) secular functionalist view that religion has become fully contained in its own differentiated sphere. Furthermore, they have empirically disproved Luhmann's (1982) assertion that no 'civil religion' or 'religious revival' could satisfy the need for normative integration in a functionally differentiated modern society. But the question here is not whether religion can facilitate or hinder integration in a functionally differentiated society. Rather, a more important question is how religion *contests* these normative processes of differentiation which force religion to remain functionally outside the realm of the state and the economy. In other words, while the new paradigm describes the *integrative* role of religion in a pluralistic society, it does not allow conceptually and practically any space for *disruptive* contentions of religion, manifested in new religious social movements (Hannigan, 1993; Beckford, 1989; Smith, 1991). In the absence of the notion of a *contentious public religion* in the sociology of religion literature and new social movement theory,¹ leading social theorists regarded politicized religion and religious social movements as 'retreatist' (Offe, 1985: 827), 'nostalgic', 'anti-movements' (Touraine, 1981: 97–9, 1988: 24, respectively), 'regressive utopia' (Melucci, 1980: 222); and 'the return of the repressed' (Giddens, 1991: 207).

We cannot call into question secularization theory and the dogma of the privatization of religion without disputing the gendered reality of functional differentiation in modern society (Woodhead, 2001). Many feminists have noted women's social milieu is not organized around a private 'unencumbered' self. Rather, they emphasize the 'situatedness' of their experience and how their 'relational self' is already implicated in a web of social networks (Woodhead, 2001; Gilligan, 1982; Benhabib, 1992a).

Feminist movements and scholarship have established that the gendered notion of public vs private sphere was a necessary discursive condition for the emergence of capitalism and its patriarchal social and political institutions. The feminist critique of home vs work, personal vs political and private/female vs public/male offers a helpful theoretical frame for understanding the meaning of the modern privatization of religion. To say that religion is a private affair allocates a proper place for religion in social life outside the realm of politics. This of course has consequences for both private and public spheres. On the one hand through privatization, religion was feminized,² and on the other hand politics and economics became 'amoral' spaces, realms from which religious considerations had to be excluded.

Social studies of religion need a feminist moment. The feminist motto 'the personal is political', proved that the 'private' concerns of women ought to become matters of 'public' deliberation. Declaring a space 'private' imposes 'conversational restraints' on matters which ought to be included in 'public dialogue'. The 'separation between the public and the private . . . leads to the silencing of the concerns of certain excluded groups' (Benhabib, 1992b: 82). Therefore, the privatization of religion inevitably fosters the persistence of patriarchal religious institutions and hinders theological transformations of religion from within. In contrast to the rigidity of a Habermasian position, Benhabib highlighted the relational link between 'public issue of justice' and 'private conceptions of the good life', 'public interests' and 'private needs', and 'public matters of norms' and 'private matters of values' (Benhabib, 1992b: 88-9).

In defense of the theory of secularization, Schluchter (1989) once raised two piercing questions about the role of religion in modern society. First, he asked: 'Is there a legitimate religious resistance to secular world views that is more than a refusal to accept the consequences of the Enlightenment?' Second: 'Is there a legitimate religious resistance to depoliticization, a resistance that is more than a clinging to inherited privileges?' (Schluchter, 1989: 254).

By examining two distinct articulations of Islam before and after the Iranian revolution of 1979, I demonstrate that the two leading lay Iranian theologians articulated a public Islam which was neither a mere refutation of the Enlightenment, nor was it an ideology to justify any inherited institutional privilege. Indeed, the cases of Ali Shari`ati and Abdolkarim Soroush, although distinct in their historical and political contexts, demonstrate that religion has a significant role to play in social change and this role may only be realized if it becomes the subject of a public discourse.

The significance of Islam and the religious leadership of the revolution has been attributed to the Shah's suppression of secular, left alternatives

(Abrahamian, 1982; Keddie, 1981; Parsa, 2000). However, not only did the mobilization of religious organizational resources and the appropriation of Islamic cultural symbols make the revolutionary movement possible, but also the rearticulation of Islam as a *contentious public religion* offered the medium for an effective public expression of discontent. No single individual was more responsible for such an articulation of Islam than Ali Shari`ati. His construction of Islam as ideology made Islam as religion the subject of a wide contested public debate in postrevolutionary Iran. Once part of the public discourse, the postrevolutionary regime failed to maintain its exclusive hierarchical access to the meaning of Islam and its relevance to various aspects of social life. Although the Islamic Republic appropriated the notion of Islam as ideology and created a 'state-religion', a new generation of Muslim intellectuals and lay theologians called for a democratic hermeneutics for the wider participation of the public in defining what religion *is* and what its social roles are. The leading spokesperson of this new generation is Abdolkarim Soroush.

Both Shari`ati and Soroush are products of a mixed Islamic and western education. Shari`ati was educated in rural Khorasan, Mashad, and Paris; and Soroush attended a religious school in Tehran and continued his higher education in London. They were enthralled by French and British political traditions, respectively. The former became a religious sociologist whose agenda was to restore the emancipatory core of Islam, and the latter became a Muslim social philosopher who advocates a pluralist, open society. Whereas Shari`ati brings religion back to the center of his liberation ideology, Soroush argues that religion loses its mystified core if it becomes ideological.

Both Shari`ati and Soroush share a distinctive premise. They both redefine Islam in a new public sphere in which religion is conceived in emergent forms of belief and knowledge, rather than in a privatized realm in which it adapts itself to the realities of modern life and offers legitimacy for its existing social orders. Both borrow from multiple sources to construct idiosyncratic discourses of Islam which are culturally specific and theoretically diverse. Shari`ati borrows from Fanon and Imam (religious leader) Hossein, Soroush finds Popper's philosophy in Rumi's poetry. Their discourses are not a simple syntheses, they are cultural and historical translations. For example, when Shari`ati translated Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* into the Qur'anic term *mostaz`afin* (the disinherited) he reinvented both Fanon and the Qur'an and made both of them his own.

Ali Shari'ati's Counter-Hegemonic Liberation Theology

Revolution is a volcanic eruption of a negation, defined in terms of rejection, rather than the embrace, of a social order. A 'master frame' which affirmatively defines revolutionary objectives is conceived retrospectively. Only after a revolution is stripped of its contingencies, would it appear to be a whiggish inevitability; thus Collingwood's famous assertion that all history is the history of the present. The establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran remade the *Iranian* revolution into an *Islamic* one. The victorious militant clergy transformed Islam as the *idiom* of the insurgency into Islam as the *objective* of the revolution. I stress, however, that regarding Islam as an idiom of insurgency does not disparage its significance as a religion. Rather, it is Islam as a religion which allows its reconstruction as a revolutionary *ideology*.

Shari'ati was born in 1933 in Mazinan, a small province in eastern Iran, and died 19 June 1977 of a heart attack in London. He received his Doctorate in 1963 from Sorbonne's Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines. The vast scholarly literature on the Iranian revolution commonly depicts Shari'ati as the ideologue *par excellence* of the Iranian revolution (Keddie, 1981; Abrahamian, 1982; Fischer, 1980; Sachedina, 1983; Arjomand, 1988; Dabashi, 1993). Although Shari'ati's own intentions might have been quite different from the way his ideology was appropriated by the revolutionary movement (Rahnema, 1998), his influence remains significant decades after his death.

Shari'ati's construction of the term 'ideology' in this context reflected a conscious strategy of politicizing religion. Shari'ati conceived his discourse both as a counter-hegemonic articulation against the Islam of the clergy as well as an alternative to the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary movement in Iran. On the one hand, he believed that the clergy had degraded Islam into a culture of stagnation (Shari'ati, 1977: 209). So long as Islam remained confined in seminaries, according to Shari'ati, it could not transform into a *Weltanschauung* and realize its emancipatory potential (Shari'ati, 1981a: 4–15). On the other, he believed that Iranian Marxist-Leninists had failed to appreciate local cultural resources in their conception of an ideology of emancipation.

Iranian Marxists chastised any movement which did not conform to its crude scheme of historical materialism. They viewed ideology – cultural values, ethics, religion, false consciousness – as systems of illusory ideas. Ideological thinkers such as Shari'ati were considered to be not only theoretically, but also practically, misleading and misled (Dustdar, 1978). The attitude of Iranian Marxists toward the revolutionary movement was also formed by a Leninist understanding of the state

as 'a product and a manifestation of the *irreconcilability* of class antagonisms' (Lenin, 1974: 526). According to this view, the state maintained its power and authority primarily through coercion. Therefore, they regarded decapitating the head of this machine of oppression as the first step toward the emancipation of the working class. However, while he acknowledged its 'external means', in a Weberian fashion, Shari'ati was more concerned with the 'inner justifications' of oppression. Contrary to the Marxist-Leninists' position, who were preoccupied with the question of state repressive coercion, Shari'ati's predicament was the question of mass consent and, in an Althusserian way, the ideological state apparatus.³

It was this preoccupation with the question of legitimacy and mass consent that led Shari'ati to formulate his theory of *Islam as ideology*. According to this formulation, structures of domination rested upon a triangle of economic power, political oppression and inner ideological/cultural justification. To depict three pillars of the 'trinity of oppression' in Iran, Shari'ati used the terms *Zar-zur-tazvir* (gold-coercion-deception) or *tigh-tala-tasbih* (sword-gold-rosary). Although occasionally Shari'ati compromised the content of his discourse for its poetics, he believed that his rhyming allegory greatly deepened its influence.

In Shari'ati's scheme, the *ruhaniyyat* (the clerical establishment) represented the most important institution which legitimized social oppression in Iran, a position it had occupied since Shi'ism became the official religion of the court under the Safavid dynasty (1501–1736 AD). Therefore, in addition to the political means of coercion, repressive monarchy in Iran was maintained by the 'inner justification' of what Shari'ati dubbed the 'Safavid Shi'ism' advocated by the *ruhaniyyat*.

According to Shari'ati, Safavid Shi'ism was exclusively engaged with 'spiritual and metaphysical phenomenon'. Its official exponents emptied religion from its 'progressive and this-worldly essence'. He lambasted the *ruhaniyyat* for turning Islam into a culture of 'submission' and 'blind imitation' (Shari'ati, 1971: 200–50). They withdrew religion from its public responsibilities, depoliticized it except for legitimizing the existing social order, and 'transformed [it] into individual piety, asceticism, and an absolute worship of the hereafter' (Shari'ati, 1971: 111).

Shari'ati was profoundly influenced by the anti-colonial and liberation movements of the 1960s, especially that of Algeria and its reflection in the French intellectual scene of which he was a part. But his contribution lies neither in his sophisticated knowledge of western sociological theories, nor in his thorough re-examination of Islamic theology. Shari'ati took upon himself the task of rewriting the whole 'distorted' history of Shi'ism, to reclaim its original progressive core, and to restore the 'Alavi Shi'ism' – the Shi'ism of Imam Ali, the true Islam of the 'disinherited'. Shari'ati's Alavi Shi'ism was an ideology which advocated a worldview and a

particular consciousness through which human beings become aware of their social location, class position, national condition and historical and civilizational direction. 'Ideology', he contended, 'gives meaning to the individual's historical experience upon which [his/her]⁴ ideals and values are constructed' (Shari'ati, 1981a: 28-9). In his view, ideology embodied the contradiction between existing (*is*) and ideal (*ought*) conditions (Shari'ati, 1982a: 45-8).

The distinction between the (Alavi) Islam of 'movement' (*nehzat*) and the (Safavid) institutionalized Islam (*nahad*) was the core of Shari'ati's Islamic hermeneutics. Shari'ati's Islam was Shi'ism in a movement for constant reproduction of itself, rather than an institution of 'mourners' and 'dead rituals'. He was inspired by the St Pauls and Aarons of Islam, rather than by its St Augustines and Maimonides, by those who choose Islam consciously and deliberately, by those whose Islam was realized in exile, prisons and combat, rather than in seminary quarters.

Shari'ati's historiography (his *Islamology*), his conception of Safavid Shi'ism and his insistence on the cultural/ideological basis of domination could be regarded as a Gramscian moment in contemporary Iranian politics. Although it is unlikely that he was aware of Gramsci's notions of hegemony and ideology, Shari'ati shifted the question of oppression in Iran from domination (i.e. coercion) to leading (i.e. coercion and consent). Similar to Gramsci's assertion that relations of dominance are manifested in the institutions of civil society, Shari'ati argued that 'an institutionalized movement disappears in the web of the existing social institutions, i.e., state; family; language; banks and insurance; retirement plans; saving accounts; and even lottery tickets' (Shari'ati, 1971: 39). In this context, Shari'ati believed that so long as religion remains disengaged with public issues of justice, it would remain as another repressive institution of civil society. Gramsci drew a dialectical relation between 'the ethical-political aspect of politics or theory of hegemony and consent' and 'the aspect of force and economics'. In the same vein, Shari'ati's 'trinity of oppression' depicted how the institutionalized religion ideologically justified the political order and economic power of dominant classes.

The Islamic ideal, according to Shari'ati, was the establishment of a society based on the worldview of *tawhid* (the oneness of God). However, instead of a mere demarcation of Islam as another monotheistic religion, he considered *tawhid* to be a *Weltanschauung* which promoted the establishment of a social relation based on the unity of Man, Nature and God (Shari'ati, 1979a: 82-7). By politicizing *tawhid*, the core principle of Islamic theology, he called into question the authority of the *ruhaniyyat* as the official exponent of the religious text. According to Shari'ati, the legitimate *imam* is the one who represents Islam in light of modern contingencies (Sachedina, 1983). Therefore, he strove to create a new Muslim

leadership whose followers were not the bearers of the old traditions, but the young and the educated.

In the latter sense, Shari'ati's project was immensely successful. He never established a political party, but he considered his widely popular lectures to be an extensive work of intellectual organization. His lecture series from 1967 to 1972 at Hosseiniyeh Ershad in Tehran was his most organized attempt to articulate his counter-hegemonic version of Islam. His lectures became the meeting ground of a new generation of young, otherwise Marxist, Muslim intelligentsia. Shari'ati's agenda was to elevate the commonsense understanding of Islam as the traditional wisdom of ages to a dynamic ideology of social change based on an allegorical comprehension of the Qur'an informed by his own philosophy of history.

Shari'ati took upon himself to re-establish a public religion outside the traditional clerical institutions through which a progressive ideology of social change can be articulated. But in his visionary *ideological society*, he promoted the transformation of his socially engaged Islam into an ideology accessible only to a *nomenklatura* of revolutionary vanguards. Although the Islamic Republic was not established based on Shari'ati's political doctrine, in many respects it materialized his idea of politicizing religion and his Rousseauian project of 'reconstituting' the society based on perceived Islamic principles of justice and the invention of a *homo islamicus*, crafted after the image of the *imam*.

Abdolkarim Soroush and the Critique of Islam as (State) Ideology

The Islamic Republic reversed the revolutionary fervor of the masses and reoriented their anti-establishment proclivities toward an organized support for the state (Zubaida, 1989). Modeled after the 1966–8 Chinese experience, one of the early projects of Islamization of society under the Islamic Republic was the Cultural Revolution of 1980. The main purpose of this revolution was the consolidation of power through closing the oppositions' bases on university campuses. Soon after its inauguration, the Cultural Revolution became the vehicle by means of which the whole society was to be Islamically reconstituted. New laws were enacted to enforce state-sanctioned civic codes and to circumvent postrevolution political freedoms.

After the closure of the universities, Ayatollah Khomeini appointed Abdolkarim Soroush, a young, rather unknown lay theologian-philosopher, to the Cultural Revolution Council. Born in 1945 in Tehran, Soroush attended Alavi high school, an alternative school which, in addition to the state-mandated education in math and sciences, offered a rigorous curriculum of Islamic law and exegesis. He graduated from Tehran

University in 1969 in pharmacology. He continued his education in history and philosophy of science at Chelsea College in London, and was influenced by Popperian students of logical positivism and analytical philosophy. The exposure to different approaches to the philosophy of science, particularly post-positivism proved to be crucial to Soroush's later intellectual development.

Soroush's credentials for his highly controversial and politically sensitive post in the Cultural Revolution Council was the impressive body of work he had produced while in London. His early writings were primarily developed as a critique of Marxism and its Iranian proponents (Soroush, 1977, 1978, 1979a, 1979b). His critique of Marxism primarily addressed the issue of the 'infallibility' of the materialist conception of history and its teleological view of the inevitability of socialism. In the same Popperian vein, Soroush chastised Marxism for its anthropomorphism and its dogmatic historical determinism. He echoed Popper's assertion that at the core of Marxist 'scientific philosophy' lies an irrepressible urge toward 'holistic utopian engineering' (Popper, 1964: 74).

Paradoxically, however, Soroush, who defended the notion of an 'Open Society' against the ideological totalitarianism of communism, and believed in the epistemological pluralism advanced by the Muslim theosophist Mulla Sadra (1571–1627), supported the regime's crackdown on student organizations and the shutting down of the country's universities. This contradiction contributed to the formation of Soroush's own hermeneutics, the central feature of which was the so-called 'deideologization' of Islam through a distinction between religion and religious knowledge.

Critique of Islam as Ideology

Soroush (1994a) criticized Shari'ati's articulation of Islam as ideology as a narrow comprehension of religion. While he praised his new theological intervention in constructing a socially engaged and dynamic public religion, he argued that in doing so Shari'ati demystified religion and transformed it into a mere manifesto for social change. Although formally composed as a critique of Shari'ati's discourse, the underlying theme of Soroush's arguments was his rejection of the ideological society established by the Islamic Republic. It is for that reason that he has been repeatedly the target of political and physical attacks by government officials and *hezbollah* mobs, and was finally forced to leave the country, residing in the US as a visiting professor of religion at Harvard University.

Soroush argued that although useful as a discursive tool against oppression, Islam as ideology and its prescribed establishment of an *ideological society* were a plague the eradication of which was a necessary requirement of constituting a free society. The central point of Soroush's

distinction between ideology and religion was the negation of a privileged access to the essence of Islam. Access to the essence of religion was neither conceivable nor desirable, for it only resulted in the creation of a privileged religious *nomenklatura*. He argued, whereas ideology encourages canonized dogmatism, religion ought to remain enigmatic, allegorical and open to competing interpretations. Whereas ideology demanded certainty provided by its formal exponents, religion was mysterious and ought to remain without officially sanctioned dogma. He warned that ideological societies were the breathing ground for the growth of totalitarianism (Soroush, 1994a: 135–54).

In contrast to 'ideological' representations, in which the doctrine of the finality of Islam is interpreted as a sign of its rigid totality, Soroush contended that the finality of Islam signified its indeterminate fluidity. That is to say, every generation would experience Islam's revelations anew. 'Thus', he remarked, 'revelation continuously descends upon us, in the same way that it hailed Arabs [during the time of the Prophet], as if the Prophet were chosen today. The secret of the finality of Islam lies in the continuity of the revelation' (Soroush, 1994a: 78). Accordingly, Soroush transformed the *shari'ah* (Islamic canon law) from a preconceived dogma into a perpetually rearticulated and contested text.

The Theory of 'The Silent Shari'ah'

Soroush argued, that rather than being a manifesto, the *shari'ah* is silent, it is given voice by its exponents (Soroush, 1995: 34). The *shari'ah* does not put forward immutable answers to predicaments of each historical moment. 'The silence of the *shari'ah*', he asserted, 'does not empty it from any meaning, rather, it impedes any particular group from claiming access to its essence based upon which they allow themselves to prohibit and condemn other understandings of religion' (Soroush, 1995: 34). The *shari'ah* is not an a priori knowledge. Therefore, one cannot presuppose any particular meaning of the *shari'ah* and then consider the changes in these presuppositions to be problematic (Soroush, 1995: 186). Soroush considered the religious text to be *hungry for* rather than *impregnated with* meaning. Meaning is given to religion rather than extracted from it (Soroush, 1994b).

Whereas the predicament of all Islamic revivalist currents was to distinguish between what was permanently sacred and unchanging and what was situational and changing in the Islamic text, Soroush's hermeneutics distinguishes religion, 'as intended by God', from the temporal human knowledge of it. As he wrote, 'what remains constant is religion [itself] and what changes is religious knowledge' (Soroush, 1995: 52). 'The true intention of God' is inexplicable through human means. Any idea that represents itself as the divine commandment of God has profound

negative social and political implications (Soroush, 1992). Therefore all knowledges of religion, either the so-called permanent parts or changing components, are mundane and conditioned by sociocultural particularities. In effect, Soroush (1992) argued that any claim to the *truth* of Islam transforms it from a religion to an ideology.

Whereas Shari'ati believed that selected vanguard intellectuals were capable of comprehending the truth of Islam, Soroush introduced an epistemological pluralism in the context of which any absolute truth-claim was suspect. In this light, he rebuked the foundation of the revivalist (reformist or revolutionary) project of reconciling what was eternal with what was ephemeral, what is text and what is context. For in these dichotomies, the essence of religion, as intended by God, was presupposed and the responsibility of the reformist thinker was to utilize and reappropriate it in his or her particular context.

Therefore, the ideological and the revivalist projects to make religion contemporary were based on an epistemological fallacy, one could not *make* religion contemporary, religion, as it is comprehended by human beings, *is* contemporaneous: 'The modernity of religious knowledge is a description rather than a prescription' (Soroush, 1995: 487). For Soroush, our cognitive abilities are bounded by time and place and humanity only grasps the (social-temporal) *existence* of religion, not its (divine-absolute) *essence* (Soroush, 1994a: 199–231).

Soroush based his hermeneutics on the temporality of religious knowledge. In effect: (1) God has revealed religion so it could enter the domains of human cultures and subjectivity within which it is comprehended and observed. The moment religion enters human subjectivity it inevitably becomes particular, and culturally and historically contingent. (2) Religious knowledge corresponds to other mundane knowledges. It is related to and inspired by non-religious knowledges. (3) Religious knowledge is progressive. Its progress depends on changes in human understanding of the physical world (i.e. science) and on new shared values of human societies (i.e. sociopolitical rights, rights of women, etc.).

In his earlier works, Soroush was influenced by analytical philosophy and a post-positivist logical skepticism. Later, he adopted a more hermeneutic approach to the meaning of the sacred text. Whereas earlier he put forward epistemological questions about the limits and truthfulness of knowledge claims, later, in two important books *Straight Paths* (1998) and *Expansion of the Prophetic Experience* (1999), he emphasized the reflexivity and plurality of human understanding. In his plural usage of the Qur'anic phrase 'Straight Paths', Soroush offered a radical break with both modernist as well as orthodox traditions in Islamic theology.

The ambiguity in Soroush's writings on the question of reason and the hermeneutics of the text was a reflection of two distinct contextual

moments. First, the particular political context of his discourse forces him to defend a supra-historical conception of reason against the onslaught of basic institutions of civil society in contemporary Iran. That is more evident in his political writings where he defines the general goal of democracy as the establishment of procedures that would guarantee the realization of impartial points of view through a free engagement of rational experts (Soroush, 2000a). According to Soroush, public deliberation of the meaning of religion and its social implications should only occur through the free exercise of public reason, as in John Rawls (1993), or under the conditions of an undistorted communication, as in Habermas (1996).

Second, Soroush's thesis was shaped by multiple and at times contradictory sources, both in western philosophy and the Muslim Gnostic traditions. Although Soroush was profoundly influenced by Karl Popper's neopositivism (Boroujerdi, 1996), particularly in his critique of Marxism, his epistemological pluralism was more informed by Quine and Duhem's anti-reductionist, anti-foundational thesis. Unlike Popper's individualistic *falsification* principle, Quine and Duhem proposed that given the known and unknown auxiliary assumptions, all forms of knowledge are inevitably collective and thus based on series of tacit as well as explicit presuppositions. In a recent interview, Soroush acknowledged the influence of Quine and Duhem in the formation of his theory of religious knowledge (Soroush, 2000b: 16). But he never resolved the predicament of the collectivity of knowledge and the means by which the boundaries of this collective are drawn.

Soroush's critique of Islam as (state) ideology calls into question the Islamic Republic's absolutist claim of religious legitimacy. His hermeneutics inevitably threatens the sacred essence of the ideological legitimacy of the Islamic regime and makes it the subject of competing interpretations of the religious text. He does not advocate the 'privatization' of religion, as it is evident in his theory of the 'religious democratic state' (Soroush, 1994a: 217-83). But unlike Shari'ati, for Soroush the religiosity of the state is not defined by a canonized rendition put forward by a Muslim polity. The state is religious and democratic insofar as it reflects and realizes the general values and goals of the society. Therefore, rather than being defined by the members of the polity, the religious values of the state ought to be debated and articulated in the public sphere of civil society.

Conclusion

I began this article by emphasizing the increasing significance of religion in the public sphere. This increase both at the institutional level as well as personal religious conviction has challenged the main analytic and ideological premises of the secularization thesis – that modernity

promotes secularization, and secularity advances modernization. Although in the last decade a new paradigm has emerged, a utilitarian, functionalist view continues to dominate social studies of religion, a view which recognizes the persistence of religion – its institutions and its symbolic explanatory powers – but continues to regard it solely as an integrative means of social control and equilibrium. A new sociology of religion needs to reconceptualize the notions of public and private spheres and revisit this foundational dichotomy of modernity from a gendered global perspective.

By examining the works of Ali Shari`ati and Abdolkarim Soroush, I have intended to show how a reintroduction of religion in the public sphere contributed to a new understanding of Islam. In effect, I have argued that what religion *is*, a theological question, is intimately linked to the sociological question, what religion *does*. This requires that sociologists take religion seriously.

Both Shari`ati's and Soroush's conceptions of Islam were formulated as a response to political tyranny, one of the Pahlavi monarchy and the other the Islamic Republic, respectively. Shari`ati argued that a non-political articulation of Islam allowed the ideological hegemony of a secular tyrannical state, while leaving the 'private' institution of religion in the hands of the traditional clergy. Experiencing the negative consequences of politicized Islam, Soroush warned against its totalitarian potentials. Whereas Shari`ati adhered to revolutionary means of demolishing the past and reconstituting the whole society based upon his Shi`ism of the disinherited, Soroush is suspicious of all teleological views of history and advocates the pluralistic 'let a thousand flowers bloom'. Whereas Shari`ati positioned himself as the bearer of the *true* Islam, which has emerged through the negation of all previous historical distortions, Soroush considers the truth of religion to be ineffable, hence his distinction between religious knowledge and religion itself.

The most striking similarity between these two theorists is their elitist perception of knowledge and social change. They are both suspicious of lived experiences as a source of understanding. For Shari`ati, the truth is in the possession of the vanguard elite, who are responsible for guiding society towards the 'class-less *tawhidi* society', and to raze obstacles erected by backward masses. For Soroush, since science conditions our understanding of self, society, nature and even religion, only those with access to this privileged form of knowledge should be the arbiters of the relative truth. The absolute truth, he believes, is incommunicable. The 'truth' for masses without expert knowledge, Soroush argues, is only a popular idealism, a distortion of reality.

The significance of Soroush's discourse lies in the fact that it is an attempt to democratize the state without diminishing the public role of

Islam in Iranian society. He believes that the privatization of Islam is not inherent in a secularist political project. Rather, a more democratic Iranian society would be one which maintains the social and political role of Islam, while at the same time permitting and encouraging the scrutiny of all forms of religious knowledge in the public sphere. Soroush inaugurated a debate on the totalitarian consequences of religion as state ideology which has shaped the political discourse of reform in Iran in the last decade.

Notes

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1. This is not to say the mobilizing power of religious institutions and utilizing religious networks are not discussed in these literatures. There are numerous examples of such discussions in resource mobilization and political opportunity perspectives in social movement theories.
2. Ann Douglas (1977) described the historical process of the privatization of religion which took place in the first half of 19th-century America as a process of 'feminization'. The notion of the feminization of religion does not suggest that religion opened a realm of influence for women. Quite to the contrary, by declaring religion 'private', religious institutions in modern society were able to maintain their patriarchal hierarchy without public scrutiny. For a critique of patriarchy in religious institutions see Daly (1985) and Ruether (1983).
3. While Shari'ati was familiar with Sartre's existential Marxism, there is no evidence that he enjoyed the same familiarity with Althusser's Gramscian conception of ideological state apparatus (ISA).
4. Because Farsi pronouns are genderless, in these translations I have employed the English designation 'his or her' to address the third person singular possessive pronoun.

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Biographical Note: Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Georgia State University. His research concerns issues of globalization and Islamic social movements. He is also the author of a forthcoming book *Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris).

Address: Department of Sociology, Georgia State University, 38 Peachtree Center Street, Suite 1041, Atlanta, GA 30303, USA. [email: bghamari@gsu.edu]