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The Shi'i Concept of Imamate and Leadership in Contemporary Iran: The Case of Religious Modernists

Adel Hashemi-Najafabadi

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Abstract: The Imamate is one of the most important pillars in Twelver Shi'ism. However, its meaning has been greatly debated by religious modernists in recent years. In this article, the Iranian religious modernists' position on the concept of the Imamate, in contrast to the traditional view, is expounded. In addition, this work presents the major critical remarks of the religious modernists on the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), as an implementation of the concept of Imamate, which is in practice in contemporary Iran.

Résumé : L'Imamat est l'un des piliers les plus importants dans le chiisme duodécimain. Toutefois, sa signification a été grandement débattu par les modernistes religieux dans ces dernières années. Dans cet article, la position des modernistes religieux iraniens sur le concept de l'Imamat, contrairement à la vision traditionnelle, est exposée. En outre, cet ouvrage présente les remarques principales critiques des modernistes religieux sur la théorie du velayat-e faqih (la tutelle du juriste), comme une mise en œuvre du concept de l'Imamat, qui est en pratique dans l'Iran contemporain.

Keywords

Imamate, infallible Imams, Shi'ism, *Velayat-e Faqih*, democracy, religious modernism

Mots clés

Imamat, infaillibles imams, chiisme, la tutelle du juriste, la démocratie, modernité religieuse

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Introduction

Having faith, seeing social problems, and feeling responsibility toward fixing them may provoke a questioning of what has gone wrong with religion in society. This is the issue that religious modernists aim to deal with in contemporary Iran. In order to answer the question, they usually try to target the fundamental principles of their religion to propose reform and reinterpretation. In the case of Iranian Shi'ism, given that the current Iranian government justifies political rule based on an interpretation of the theory of the Imamate, religious modernists focus on this cardinal issue of their faith. This article reviews the ideas of those contemporary Iranian intellectuals who in one form or another are related to the discourse of "religious modernism." The central focus of the present study is to depict their position on the issue of the Imamate and its implementation in the form of the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), as it has been practiced after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. It also aims to present their debates over the moral basis of legitimate political authority, and in particular of democracy within the framework of Twelver Shi'ism.

Three Different Schools of Thought in Twelver Shi'ism

Before discussing the main topic, it is useful to define what "religious modernism" stands for in this work in contrast with "traditionalism" and "fundamentalism" in Twelver Shi'ism. Although this article does not deal with the ideas of traditionalists and fundamentalists, some general definitional remarks are needed to differentiate their stance from those of religious modernists. Generally speaking, traditionalists, like Ayatollahs Vahid-Khorasani (b. 1921) and Sistani (b. 1930) of Iraq, adopt a quite apolitical approach with sporadic involvements in daily politics. On the other hand, fundamentalists (the conservative faction of the Islamic Republic) and some prominent Islamic scholars, as represented by Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi (b. 1934), actively engage in politics. In relation to the concept of the Imamate, each group has a particular position regarding social and political issues. Traditionalists consider politics as a dirty space during the Occultation¹ of Imam Mahdi (the last Shi'i Imam) and consequently avoid direct involvement in politics. In contrast, fundamentalists embrace an active role in the social and political arena and claim representation on behalf of Imam Mahdi, in order to shorten the Occultation.

For traditionalists, during the Occultation the theory of the Imamate cannot be fully implemented. This means that no one, including the most learned religious figures of the community, has authority over the society as a whole to establish an Islamic government, and to execute every part of *shari'a* law. In their view, the establishment of an Islamic state would be too big an adventure for the Shi'a, and would cost lives with inevitably disappointing results. Instead, it is the responsibility of the *ulama* (Islamic jurists), as the heir of the Imams, to defend the legacy of the Imams and try to hasten the return of the Hidden Imam by preserving Islam and strengthening the faith of the people. This could be understood as the acceptance of temporal powers, or the *de facto* separation of religion and state. Therefore, until the return of the Imam, it is up to people to choose their own political system. Based on this line of thought, during the Occultation of the Imam, not only are "the principles of democracy, such as political participation, competition,

accountability, and accessibility,” compatible with Shi’ism, but also democracy could be the best political order,² though with certain limits (Rahimi, 2007). In the absence of the Imam, the people are sovereign and the rule of law must be upheld, “provided secular laws d[o] not impugn Islamic law or infringe on Shi’a interests” (Nasr, 2006: 122).

Unlike traditionalists who focus on cultural and educational activities with a deliberate abstention from politics, fundamentalists seek drastic changes by establishing an Islamic state. For them, the Imamate has not ceased after the period of the twelve Imams; it is the duty of the *ulama* to actively participate in the social and political arena on behalf of the Hidden Imam in order to implement Islam as a total way of life. In this regard, while the moderate factions of fundamentalists in modern Iran generally prefer a supervisory role for the *ulama*, Ayatollah Khomeini’s theory of *Velayat-e Faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) aims to bring the state as a whole under control of a qualified jurist. In fact, *Velayat-e Faqih*, particularly in its absolutist version, is the continuation of the theory of the Imamate, and gives the governing jurist the same authority as the Prophet or the Imams in managing Islamic society. Putting the *Vali-e Faqih* (the governing jurist) in the position of the infallible Imams, however, gives the people a secondary and subordinate role instead of a primary and determinant one in the administration of society (Bahar, 1992).

In contrast with the above-mentioned schools of thought, a newer trend in Shi’ism is religious modernism, which is the main concern of this article. First, religious modernism, as discussed here, does not necessarily correspond with the thought of political reformists in contemporary Iran. My focus is on those who try to justify their intellectual stance by reference to the teachings of Islam. Hence, pure secular viewpoints are deliberately ignored in the following sections. Secondly, “religious modernism” is a broad term which covers quite different views with some common ground. Therefore, the scholars who are mentioned here may have different approaches in dealing with the issue of the Imamate. Furthermore, it is impossible to fit all groups and individuals into these three categories (i.e. traditionalists, fundamentalists and religious modernists) as there are some thinkers, such as the late Ayatollah Montazeri, who lie somewhere between them. Some who are mentioned in this work may have links to the other two schools of thought.

One of the main differences between the discourses of fundamentalism and religious modernism is that while the former seeks to establish systems of social development based on pure Islamic culture and teachings, the latter seeks to reconcile Islam with modernity. Religious modernists advocate reform in religion itself and also seek “the reconstruction of social and religious institutions” (Yousefi-Eshkevari, 2006a: 157). The primary concerns of religious modernism, particularly during the last century, have been to reduce the rigidity of Islamic teachings, to lessen the resistance of Muslims against Western civilization, and to integrate part of the new generations of Muslims into the currents of modernity (Sobhani, 1385/2007). In this sense, religious modernists emphasize the concept of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) not on minor issues of Islamic law, but on fundamental principles of Islamic thought and theology, such as the Prophecy and the Imamate (Soroush, 1385/2006).

Contemporary religious modernists seek reforms in Islamic thought to reconcile it with the modern concepts of human rights and democracy. In order to do so, religious

modernists generally believe in pluralism and apply it to religious epistemology by maintaining that “interpretations of religious knowledge can change over time” (Soroush, 2003). Hence, religious modernists consider revelation and Qur’anic values and decrees in their historical context and seek to make them contemporary by using reason and collective human experience (Sobhani, 1385/2007).³

Religious modernists generally deny any form of “intermediary between God and people” as well as “official, custodial religious establishment” (Yousefi-Eshkevari, 2006a: 161). In addition, they are opposed to “state religion” and so, unlike fundamentalists, they emphasize the independence of religion from state. In other words, religious modernists unconditionally sanction freedom of religion and belief “within the framework of the democratic laws and regulations of society” (Yousefi-Eshkevari, 2006a: 162). To sum up this section, religious modernism can be distinguished by the following characteristics:

- i. Calling for Islamic Humanism and so-called Islamic Protestantism
- ii. Emphasizing *ijtihad* in fundamental principles of religion
- iii. Believing in democracy, pluralism, and human rights
- iv. Believing in the independence of religion from state
- v. Emphasizing the historic and plural nature of religious knowledge.

Historical Background

Religious modernism in contemporary Iran, as a school of thought in contrast with both traditionalism and fundamentalism, has its roots in the writings and activities of the Islamic reformists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including Jamal al-Din Afghani (1838–1897), Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), and Ali Abdel-Raziq (1888–1966). Among them, Iqbal has had a significant influence on Iranian intellectualism. In fact, his book *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1930), in which he called for a radical reinterpretation of Islamic thought, has been widely debated among religious modernists (Masud et al., 2009: 249–255).

Abdel Raziq has also been particularly important in the debate over the Islamic view of governance. Following the abolition of the Sunni Caliphate system (1924), in his famous work *al-Islam va Usul al-Hukm (Islam and the Fundamentals of Governance)*, Abdel-Raziq discussed two points. First, “political authority and government, however indispensable for implementing Islamic ideals, do not belong to the essence of Islam and specifically do not constitute any of its cardinal principles.” Second, “Islam, if properly understood, leaves the Muslims free to choose whatever form of government they find suitable to ensure their welfare” (Enayat, 2005: 64). Hence, by denying that “in Islam, religion and politics form a unified whole,” Abdel Raziq has been regarded as the intellectual father of Islamic secularism (Enayat, 2005: 64).

In the context of Shi’ism, in particular, three Iranian reformers are noteworthy as the forerunners of religious criticism and revival in Shi’i religious thought: Ahmad Kasravi (1890–1946), who was assassinated by a fundamentalist group, *Fada’iyan-e Islam* (Devotees of Islam), Ayatollah Shari’at-Sangelaji (1890–1944), “known as the Great

Reformer (*mosleh-e kabir*) by his followers” (Arjomand, 1984: 205), and Ali Akbar Hakamizadeh (d. 1988).

They all argued for purifying and reformulation of religious thought⁴ (Rajaei, 2007: 49). They particularly criticized the traditional concept of the Imamate and religious leadership propagated by the *ulama*. These intellectuals “denounced as superstitious many of the traditional Shi’ite beliefs and practices such as the belief in miracles and in the Imam’s power of intercession, and the practice of pilgrimage to the shrines of the Imams and their putative descendants, the *ta’ziyeh* and *rawzeh-khani* [Shi’i mourning rituals]” (Arjomand, 1984: 205). Hakamizadeh’s *Asrar-e Hezar-saleh* (The Secrets of a Thousand Years), with the aim of “refuting and mocking many of the tenets of Shi’ism in Iran,” motivated the young Ayatollah Khomeini to write *Kashf-e Asrar* (Revealing the Secrets) in 1942, to defend Shi’ism against the criticisms of these reformers (Rajaei, 2007: 65).

To sum up, the above-mentioned intellectuals and the ideas they promoted had a profound influence on many of the religious intellectuals of the second half of the twentieth century in Iran (Rajaei, 2007: 49). With regard to the issue of the Imamate and leadership, which is the main concern of the present work, the result of this theoretical development was the emergence of a primarily temporal interpretation of the concept of the Imamate, which will be discussed in the following sections.

Religious Modernism in Contemporary Iran

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was shaped by the efforts of different religious thinkers and reformers. Among the influential figures in this process, there were some liberal-minded religious intellectuals such as Mehdi Bazargan (1907–1995), Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleqani (1910–1979), and Ali Shariati (1933–1977). Their teachings, particularly Shariati’s theory of *Ummah and Imamate* (in which he advocated the concept of guided democracy⁵) and his ideological interpretation of Islam, to some extent helped the promotion of the views of fundamentalists, which ended up with the establishment of the Islamic Republic around the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), as a clear implementation of the theory of the Imamate. However, despite sharing some common grounds with fundamentalists, they (particularly Bazargan and Shariati) fit into the category of religious modernists. Indeed, unlike their fundamentalist counterparts who wanted to change the modern world according to the pure teachings of Islam, these religious intellectuals attempted to represent Islam rationally and to accommodate it to the modern world (Moin, 2009: 59). This difference in attitude, however, was exposed more clearly after the 1979 Revolution and resulted in the distinct school of thought known as religious modernism.

Nevertheless, religious modernism has considerably changed its scope after the Revolution. While the discourse of religious modernism before the Revolution was affected by Marxism and existentialism and aimed to politicize and revolutionize Islam, after the Revolution religious modernists (most notably Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohammad Mojtahed-Shabestari) have based their intellectual works on liberal democracy, hermeneutics and analytic philosophy to depoliticize⁶ Islam (Sobhani, 1386/2008; Kamrava, 2008: 40). It was mainly due to “their lived experience with religious

authoritarianism [in the Islamic Republic of Iran],” that the new generation of religious modernists “underwent a metamorphosis and their political ideas took a decidedly democratic and liberal turn” (Hashemi, 2005: 267).

By the first decade after the Revolution, religious modernists had broken away completely from the fundamentalist idea of Islamic government and its theory of religious leadership to embrace the principles of human rights and democracy. However, since then they have been constantly under pressure from the clerical state, with very limited access to mass media.⁷ It was through Mohammad Khatami’s 1997 surprise presidential election that the religious modernist discourse “found room within the public sphere” (Kamrava, 2008: 11). However, its proponents never found an opportunity to air their reformist ideas freely. Although Khatami’s political reforms, backed by a great part of the religious intellectuals, were defeated and this was followed by the rise of a neo-fundamentalist government under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, the discourse of religious modernism has never been silenced.⁸ To some extent, the political crisis following the 2009 presidential election and the massive crackdown against the opposition Green Movement even gave a new life to the reformist discourse of religious modernists, as their critiques became bolder and harsher.

As far as the scope of this study is concerned, religious modernism can be observed from two dimensions which will be discussed in the following sections: first, its attitude towards the very foundation of the traditional reading of the theory of the Imamate; second, its encounter with the implementation of the concept of the Imamate in the absence of the Imams, as it is articulated in the system of *Velayat-e Faqih*.

Religious Modernism and the Theory of the Imamate

Generally speaking, religious modernists tend to deny or at least ignore the traditionally believed supernatural characteristics of the Imams, such as infallibility and their knowledge of the unseen, and instead focus on their this-worldly characteristics. Some even go as far as to describe the Imams as ideal and exemplary Muslims in their age and nothing more. This, however, is not new; as Hossein Modarressi argues, during the period of the twelve Imams (from 660 to 941) many among the Shi’a, while they believed that “absolute obedience to the Imams was required,” also “opposed the idea of any supernaturalism of the Imams and insisted that they were simply virtuous learned men (*‘ulama’ ahrar*)” (Modarressi, 1993: 29). Some of the Shi’a during this time even “held that the Imams did not know many laws of the *Shari’a* and had to rely on personal judgment and *ijtihad* to derive the appropriate laws” (Modarressi, 1993: 42).

In this regard, Ali Shariati is well known mainly for his notion of *Alavi versus Safavi Shi’ism*. In his famous book on this subject, he makes a distinction between his favored Shi’ism as “*Alavi*” (named after Imam Ali (598–661)) and the dominant and distorted Shi’ism as “*Safavi*” (named after the Safavid dynasty (1501–1732)). Shariati argues that *Safavi* Shi’ism is the creed of superstition, irresponsibility and mourning; whereas *Alavi* Shi’ism is the creed of martyrdom, rationality and responsibility. In *Safavi* Shi’ism the Imams are considered as superhuman and non-earthly creatures, while in *Alavi* Shi’ism they are considered as elevated humans, paragons of humanity, and righteous Muslim leaders (Shariati, n.d.: 62–65). In fact, Shariati, in accordance with his ideological

and revolutionary mindset, attempts to emphasize the earthly dimension of the theory of the Imamate. For him, the Shi'i Imams are "the best models to follow because not only did they embody the three dimensions of freedom, equality, and love, but their lives were also examples of struggle and jihad" (Rajaei, 2007: 140).

Ayatollah Nematollah Salehi-Najafabadi⁹ (1923–2006) is also noteworthy here. He was the author of the highly controversial book *Shahid-e Javid (The Eternal Martyr)*, first published in 1968, in which he criticizes the traditional narration of Imam Husayn's martyrdom in Karbala in 680. Given that Salehi-Najafabadi denies "the Shi'ite tradition which endows the Imams with occult wisdom which enables them to peer into the future, the gap between his portrayal of the fallible Imam and the traditional portrayal of a supernaturally wise Imam was so much the greater" (Siegel, 2001: 150–151). In fact, according to Salehi-Najafabadi, the traditional understanding of the Imams, and Imam Husayn in particular, "is only good for making people weep. It is supernatural, presenting no model for believers to follow" (Siegel, 2001: 161).

In his various works, Salehi-Najafabadi is particularly concerned with what he calls 'gholov' (exaggeration) in the traditional theory of the Imamate. By referencing the Qur'an, Islamic traditions and some of the early Shi'i authorities, he argues that the Imams were not in possession of all knowledge, including knowledge of the unseen, but only of Islamic decrees as well as the social and political affairs of their time (Salehi-Najafabadi, 1380/2001: 39). He maintains that unlike the belief in God and the hereafter, the Imamate is not a cardinal principle of faith, because it is just a recommended way for the better understanding of Islamic teachings (Salehi-Najafabadi, 1382/2003: 176–177). In fact, Salehi-Najafabadi's writings and teachings have inspired the younger generation of religious modernists, such as Mohsen Kadivar (b. 1959) and Hasan Yousefi-Eshkevari (b. 1950), to become involved in such debates.

In the West, Hojjat al-Islam Mohsen Kadivar, a former student of Ayatollah Montazeri, is primarily famous as a vocal critic of the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*, and an advocate of democratic and liberal reforms in Iran. However, in recent years, he has also developed controversial nonconformist remarks on the basic concepts of the Imamate. In an article based on a lecture delivered in 2006, under the title of "Rethinking the theory of the Imamate according to Imam Husayn's movement," Kadivar first claims that the theory of the Imamate has been radically changed since the first century of Islam. He continues that in fact, "in some dimensions it has been exaggerated while in other dimensions it has been diminished. The exaggerated aspect is a kind of sanctification of the concept of the Imamate; while in the early centuries of Islam there was little (if any) trace of such an idea" (Kadivar, 1384/2006).

Later in that year (2006), inspired by Hossein Modarressi's book *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam*, Kadivar published a controversial paper on this issue called "The forgotten reading: reviewing the theory of 'ulama' abrar; the earliest perception of Shi'i Islam from the principle of the Imamate." As is clear from its topic, in this essay Kadivar wants to indicate that according to the true and original perception of the Imamate, the Imams were not supernatural, infallible, capable of performing miracles, and in possession of knowledge of the unseen; in contrast, they were virtuous learned men who obtained religious knowledge from their previous Imams (or the Prophet in the case of Imam Ali) and used *ijtihad* and deduction to extract Islamic

decrees from the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet. Kadivar maintains that, according to this original theory of the Imamate, unlike the Prophet Muhammad, the Imams were fallible, though the least fallible of all people¹⁰ (Kadivar, 1385/2006). Since then, Kadivar has pursued this line of thought and attempted to develop his scholarship around the theory of *ulama' abrar*.

Before turning to the next section, it is better to review the comments of Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945) on the issue of the Imamate. Soroush has been among "the first intellectuals from within the Islamic Republican system to open the debate on some of the topics that had been off limits until recently" (Kamrava, 2003). According to Soroush, the *Khatamiyyat* (Finality)¹¹ means that after the Prophet Muhammad no one, including the Imams, would have a prophet-like stature to claim independent religious authority (Soroush, 1378/1999: 67). Therefore, he criticizes the dominant reading of the Imamate, which considers the Imams to have an absolute religious authority due to their infallibility and divine knowledge. For Soroush, believing in these characteristics of the Imams negates or at least weakens the concept of the *Khatamiyyat*¹² (Soroush, 1384/2005a; Soroush 1384/2005b).

However, Soroush does not reject the whole idea of the Imam Mahdi, the awaited saviour, but links it to "the notion of religious revival; and the revival of experiential religion at that" (Soroush, 2002). Without emphasizing a specific person (Imam Mahdi), Soroush argues that "the main aim of the one who will come at the end of time is to realize, define and reform human beings' relationship with God" (Soroush, 2002). He suggests that the Saviour's mission is to "show that, first, in the modern world and in the heart of modern life, authentic religious experience and powerful contact with the other world is possible. Secondly, to allow others to share and participate in his spiritual experience" (Soroush, 2002).

Religious Modernism, *Velayat-e Faqih*, and Democracy

The late Ayatollah Husein-Ali Montazeri (1922–2009) is the first name that comes to mind in discussing critical views about *Velayat-e Faqih* (guardianship of the jurist).¹³ However, Montazeri (like Salehi-Najafabadi) neither fitted into the category of fundamentalists, nor belonged to the camp of religious modernists, but stood between these two extremes. Montazeri, although he remained somewhat loyal to his early fundamentalist ideas and the very foundation of the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*, significantly distanced himself from the official reading of the theory of the Imamate in the Islamic Republic, which is embodied in the form of *Velayat-e Motlaqe-ye Faqih* (absolute guardianship of the jurist).

In fact, "in tracking his comments on the relationship between religion and politics in Iran . . . one can discern a clear pattern of the democratization and [*de facto*] secularization of his political and religious thought" (Hashemi, 2005: 253). Montazeri also gradually became concerned with the principle of human rights, as is evident from one of his last scholarly works: *Resaleh-ye Hoqouq* (*Treaties on Law*) (1385/2006). According to Montazeri, "the Prophet of Islam and the holy Imams were the staunchest advocates of the sanctity of human rights that include activities from freedom of expression to holding rulers accountable for their actions" (Rahimi, 2008). Montazeri in practice also showed

deep respect for the issue of human rights. Particularly in the last few months of his life, after the disputed election of 2009, he strongly condemned human rights abuses and the use of violence against opposition groups, and even issued a statement (in response to an inquiry by Mohsen Kadivar) in which Montazeri clearly questioned the legitimacy of the *Vali-e Faqih* (the guardian jurist), Ayatollah Khamenei, for his mismanagement of society (Montazeri, 2009).

The core of Montazeri's criticism of the official version of the *Velayat-e Faqih* is his "opposition to the absolute nature of clerical rule as practiced in post-Khomeini Iran" (Abdo and Montazeri, 2001). In his works, Montazeri calls for limits to be put on the powers of the *Vali-e Faqih* to prevent political despotism.¹⁴ For him, the legitimacy of the position of the *Vali-e Faqih* comes from his election by the people,¹⁵ and so, *Velayat-e Faqih* must be seen as a "social contract" between the *Vali-e Faqih* and the nation (Abdo and Montazeri, 2001). Montazeri argues that "since the *Vali-e Faqih* is elected by the nation to bear a specific responsibility, and since he is not infallible, he should naturally remain open to public criticism, and held accountable with respect to his responsibilities" (Abdo and Montazeri, 2001). In summary, it can be said that in the last few years of his life, Montazeri sought to reconceptualize the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih* "by furnishing it with democratic principles" (Akhavi, 2008).

As mentioned before, inspired by his mentor, Ayatollah Montazeri, Mohsen Kadivar has been known primarily for questioning the very foundation of Ayatollah Khomeini's version of *Velayat-e Motlaq-e Faqih* (absolute guardianship of the jurist). In *Nazariyaha-ye dawlat dar fiqh-e Shi'a* (*Theses on the State in Shi'i Jurisprudence*), Kadivar mentions nine different theories (produced by prominent Shi'i theologians during the Occultation period), "ranging from a religious justification of monarchy to democracy" (Hashemi, 2005: 256). Kadivar concludes that Khomeini's thesis "can in no way be considered the definitive or authoritative political model for the Shi'a school of jurisprudence" in the absence of Imam Mahdi (Hashemi, 2005: 256).

Kadivar also argues that over time, *Velayat-e Faqih* itself has been developed in two different ways: "one that is appointive and unlimited in scope of power and authority – *Velayat-e Entesabi-e Mutlaqeh*,¹⁶ or Appointed, Absolutist *Velayat* – and another that is elective and has comparatively limited authority – *Velayat-e Entekhabi-e Moqayyadeh*,¹⁷ or Elected, Conditional *Velayat*" (Kamrava, 2008: 163). In his dichotomy, the former is close to the notion of Ayatollah Khomeini and the latter is similar to Ayatollah Montazeri's view. However, in his conclusion, he sees no merit in either case.¹⁸

The principle of *Velayat-e Faqih* is neither intuitively obvious nor rationally necessary. It is neither a requirement of religion (*din*) nor a necessity for denomination (*mazhab*). It is neither a part of the Shi'i general principles (*osul*) nor a component of the detailed observance (*foru'*). It is, by near consensus of Shi'i *ulama*, nothing more than a jurisprudential minor hypothesis, and its proof is contingent upon reasons adduced from the four categories of the Qur'an, tradition, consensus and reason.¹⁹ (Kadivar, 1377/1998: 237).

With regard to the relation between *Velayat-e Faqih* and democracy, Kadivar also maintains that while the "elective, conditional *Velayat-e Faqih*" can be seen as "a form of limited democracy," the "appointive, absolute *Velayat-e Faqih*" is entirely incompatible with

democracy,²⁰ although some of its proponents think otherwise (Kadivar, 2002). He argues that, in fact, *Velayat-e Faqih*, in either case, is a “reflection of the Iranian theory of kingdom and Eastern despotism in the mind and essence of Shi’ite jurists” (Kadivar, 2002). Nevertheless, Kadivar believes that “Islamic society can be governed via democratic means” (Kadivar, 2002). His belief in the compatibility of Islam and democracy, even in the case of Shi’ism, is partly due to his particular reading of the theory of the Imamate in which he considers the Imams as fallible persons and so equal to other people (at least in social and political issues).

As mentioned earlier, over the last two decades Abdolkarim Soroush as “the intellectual voice of the Islamic Republic” has been at the center of controversy (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2008: 89). The core of this controversy is his “rejection of the ideological claim of the Islamic regime as the sole bearer of ‘true’ Islam” (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2008: 89). Soroush builds his criticism on two premises. First, he makes a distinction between religion itself and knowledge or understanding of religion. For him, unlike religion which is pure and divinely-inspired, the understanding of it is not absolute and complete. This means that “whatever God has deemed necessary, he has revealed, and in this sense [religion] has no shortcoming”; but “what one gains from the text [the Qur’an] and the traditions [the ways of the Prophet and his household] . . . is based [on] methodology” (Rajaei, 2007: 228). This dichotomy has a pluralistic connotation, in the sense that since the understanding of religion is a human phenomenon and not divine, no one group can claim exclusive and absolute understanding of, and authority over, religion.

Second, unlike Shariati, who attempted to present Islam in the form of a revolutionary ideology, Soroush wants to de-ideologize religion and society. For him, religion is far greater than ideology. Soroush argues that making religion equal to ideology transforms it to something superficial and hides its complexity. In addition, Soroush continues, ideology makes religion suitable for a specific time and circumstance, and destroys its timeless and eternal nature (Soroush, 1372/1993: 126–128). He maintains that it is also dangerous to have an ideological society since such a society impedes free thinking and paves the way for totalitarian and tyrannical systems. Soroush adds that an ideological society needs a particular group as ideologues (e.g. clergy) to interpret the ideology, which, in effect, justifies class domination (Soroush 1372/1993: 135–137).

Putting these two premises together, Soroush questions the Islamic government’s “absolutist claim of religious legitimacy,” based on the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*, as its state ideology (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2004). In other words, as Farhang Rajaei observed, Soroush’s ideas challenge the claim of the Islamic Republic’s official line “that only the clerical jurisconsults should rule, [and that] obeying the ruling elite is both a religious and legal duty” (Rajaei, 2007: 229). Soroush clearly argues that this situation results in an acquisition of power without restriction (as it is practiced in Iran’s ideological state by the *Vali-e Faqih*), which is of course dangerous and bound to lead to corruption and injustice, regardless of the justness or unjustness of the ruler (Soroush, 1375/1996). Hence, Soroush maintains that the legitimacy of government cannot be derived exclusively from God, but also must be derived from the people, so that they would be able to independently put restrictions on power (Soroush, 1375/1996).

In his criticism of the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*, Soroush also essentially sees *fiqh* (jurisprudence) as insufficient for administering the state. The reason is that *fiqh* only

responds to legal questions, while the issues of, for example, justice and freedom remain unanswered (Soroush, 1372/1993: 49). For Soroush, the issue of governance is beyond the scope of *fiqh*; this issue must be discussed in theology (*Kalam*) and anthropology²¹ (Soroush, 1375/1996). Moreover, he claims that *Velayat-e Faqih* suffers from an epistemological contradiction since it is derived from and in continuation with the Prophecy and the Imamate, which are theological and not jurisprudential concepts. Hence, *Velayat-e Faqih*, as a theory of governance, should be discussed from the point of view of theology in the first place and not jurisprudence (Soroush, 1375/1996).

Generally speaking, Soroush insists on the independence of religion and politics from each other. In a recent interview with Rooz Online, Soroush defends his position by stating that “with the political secularism of a non-theocratic state, pious individuals, too, will be reassured that their religion and their faith will be safeguarded, and that the state will not attack their beliefs and their deeds” (Soroush, 2010). He continues that “believers must recognize that, nowadays, the implementation of justice, which religion also demands, is only possible through democracy; not through individual rule, not through guardianship [*Velayat*]” (Soroush, 2010). In this sense, for Soroush, there would be no contradiction between Islam and democracy. This means that in an Islamic society, as a result of democracy the state inevitably takes an Islamic form, and as long as Islamic rules “do not explicitly contravene human rights” they can be applied to legislation²² (Soroush, 2010).

Besides the above-mentioned thinkers, there are some other intellectuals²³ who have a prominent role in the discourse of religious modernists in today’s Iran. However, their critical remarks on the concept of the Imamate and particularly its implementation through the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih* more or less fit into the previous discussion. In fact, contrary to the so-called axioms of the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*, all the intellectuals, in one form or another, claim that except in its emphasis on “justness,” Islam (Shi’ism in particular) does not prescribe any specific form of government (for example, see Mojtabed-Shabestari, 1377/1998: 60; Yousefi-Eshkevari, 2006b: 87; Bazargan, 1374/1996). Moreover, they all believe in the supremacy of democracy as the best possible model of governance that ensures the justness of government. For example, Mohammad Mojtabed-Shabestari (b. 1936), a prominent figure in religious modernist discourse, in his *Ta’ammolati dar Qara’t-e Ensani az Din (Reflections on a Humane Reading of Religion)* writes:

The spirit of Islam and the values of democracy are highly compatible, and combining them is, in fact, a matter of urgent necessity: I endorse democracy because it is the only system in contemporary times that allows mankind to reach the twin ideals of freedom and justice, without which humanity cannot fulfill its full potential and adequately perform its responsibilities before the Almighty. Only through free choice can mankind meet the full range of his responsibilities before God. (Kamrava, 2008: 170)

Conclusion

As implied by the previous discussion, there are three different schools of thought in Twelver Shi’ism: traditionalism, fundamentalism and religious modernism. However,

when it comes to the discussion of the Imamate and leadership, there are two broad interpretations. The classic view considers the Imamate as the continuation of the Prophecy, or more precisely the Prophet Muhammad's mission in guiding human beings in their "external" lives and "acts" as well as their "spiritual" lives (Tabatabai, 1977: 189). Therefore, according to this line of thought, the Imams possess all the characteristics of the Prophet, except receiving revelation from God. On the other hand, there is a modern view that sees this theory of the Imamate as at odds with the *Khatamiyyat* (Finality) of the Prophecy, and so considers the Imams merely as paragons of humanity, exemplary Muslims and righteous leaders without any prophet-like characteristics or divine inspiration (Sorush, 1384/2005a; Shariati, n.d.: 62–65). However, within these two extremes a broad spectrum of views on the subject of the Imamate can be found.

Generally speaking, while traditionalists and fundamentalists are the same in their adherence to the classic understanding of the Imamate, religious modernism is distinguished by its critical remarks on the traditional reading of the Imamate. Religious modernism as a school of thought in contemporary Iran aims to modernize Islam according to the circumstances of the new age. However, until the Islamic Revolution in 1979, it was not fully articulated as a separate (and even a monolithic) discourse with totally distinct characteristics. In fact, together with the school of fundamentalism, both currents had successfully attempted to revive Islam in the public sphere and to reinforce the connection of religion and politics. This alliance, with the help of other revolutionary forces, resulted in the establishment of a fundamentalist regime which was finally shaped around the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih* (guardianship of the jurist).

With this new situation and the growing disillusionment with the outcome of the 1979 Revolution, particularly in the last twenty years, religious modernism has emerged as a distinct school of thought in the intellectual scene of Iran. The focus of this new trend is to seriously challenge the official reading of the Shi'i concept of the Imamate, both its basic principles and its implementation in the form of the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih* (as the continuation of the political mission of the Prophet Muhammad and the Imams). Despite the diversity of views in the discourse of religious modernism towards the role of Islam in the public sphere, liberalism, socialism, and social justice, religious modernists generally try to reconceptualize Islamic thought to reconcile it with modern concepts of humanism by emphasizing the principles of democracy, pluralism, and human rights.

Having criticized the classic reading of the concept of the Imamate in practice, contemporary religious modernists reject the existence of any specific divinely planned blue-print for the Islamic way of governance after the Prophet Muhammad. Instead, they believe that Islam presents some general views on the justness of government, which is achievable only through democracy and respect for human rights. In fact, on this liberal and pluralist ground they question the legitimacy of *Velayat-e Faqih*, which according to fundamentalists is the only true Islamic way of governance during the Occultation. However, it is interesting that religious modernists in their opposition to the ideas of fundamentalism have arrived at the same conclusion about the separation of the state and religion as the traditionalists, albeit on different grounds.

Notes

1. The Shi'a believe that, for various reasons, God concealed Imam Mahdi (in AD 941) from humankind, and that he will reappear at the end of time to fill the world with justice.
2. Due to their quietist approach and their preoccupation with cultural activities, in any case traditionalists are, to some extent, receptive to the idea of democracy. In fact, not only are the traditionalists quite comfortable with any political system which includes democracy, but also essentially they prefer democracy since they would be free to pursue their cultural activities without any political obstacle.
3. For more details in this issue, see Mehdi Bazargan's *Rah-e tey-Shode (The Passed Way)* (1377/1998) and *Be'sat va Takamol (The Prophecy and Evolution)* (1378/1999); Ali Shariati's *Eslam Shenasi (Islamology)*; Abdolkarim Soroush's *Bast-e Tajrobeh-ye Nabavi (Expansion of Prophetic Experience)* (1378/1999); and Fazlur Rahman's *Islam and Modernity* (1982).
4. However, particularly Shari'at-Sangelaji was accused of promoting a Shi'i version of Salafism and Wahhabism.
5. However, in the last years of his life, Shariati explicitly rejected his earlier idea of guided democracy.
6. With regard to the depoliticization of Islam, however, Mehdi Bazargan was a pioneer among other contemporary religious modernists in Iran. In 1992, three years before his death, in a lecture under the title of *Akherat va khoda, Hadaf-e Be'sat-e Anbia (The afterlife and God, the goal of the appointment of the Prophets)*, Bazargan radically distanced himself from political Islam and claimed that the only mission of the Prophets was to guide people toward God and prepare them for their afterlife, and not to reform and organize their this-worldly affairs. In other words, he argued that religion has nothing to do with conducting people's social and political affairs in this world, though implementing religious teachings inevitably would have indirect effects on human relations in this world (Bazargan, 1374/1996).
7. While the state media have exclusively promoted the official line of thought, which is summarized in the theory of *Velayat-e Mottalage-ye Faqih* (absolute guardianship of the jurist), religious modernists have used their own journals (though in a limited way), most notably the now-banned journal of *Kiyan*, to discuss their religious reforms. *Kiyan*, for example, "aired the views of not only Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohsen Kadivar, Mohammad Shabestari, Saeed Hajjarian, Emadoddin Baqi, Alireza Alavitar, Dariush Shayegan, and Baha'odin Khoramshahi, but also of many dissidents, including Ayatollah Montazeri, Hassan Yusefi Eshkevari, Mehrangiz Kar, and Abdolali Bazargan from Iran; Mohammad Ali Katouzian, Mohammad Reza Nikfar, and Farhad Khosrokhavar from Europe; and Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Hamid Dabashi from the United States" (Rajaei, 2007: 205).
8. Mehran Kamrava (2008: 40) truly observed this situation: "Significantly, however, the political death of the reform movement did not mean its intellectual death as well. Journals and newspapers could be banned; outspoken editors and journalists could be jailed; reformist politicians could be sidelined. But the doors to the new thought that had long been percolating and was now finding ways to express itself could not be closed."
9. Salehi-Najafabadi had something in common with fundamentalists, as is clear from his book (1367/1988) in defense of *Velayat-e Faqih* (although not its absolutist version). Therefore, in fact, he stood somewhere between fundamentalism and religious modernism.
10. In fact, earlier, Kadivar had a different view in this regard, which was reflected in a debate between Kadivar and Hatam Qaderi (a secular intellectual) in 2003. At that time, Kadivar

believed that only in social and political issues were the Imams equal to other people and therefore, they were fallible and questionable in that sense. However, he professed that as far as religious issues were concerned, the Imams benefited from divine guidance and knowledge and so, they were infallible and unquestionable (Kadivar and Qaderi, 1382/2003).

11. The *Khatamiyyat* is the belief that the Prophet Muhammad was the last prophet.
12. Soroush even, to some extent, refutes the supernaturality of the Prophet himself, let alone his successors. In his theory of “expansion of Prophetic experience,” Soroush tries to prove the historicity of the Prophet’s revelatory experience by emphasizing that he was a human being with a totally human experience. For him, the Qur’an that the Prophet introduced was not a pre-determined divine revelation, but it was shaped and affected by the Prophet’s earthly experience during his life, though with divine guidance (Soroush, 1378/1999: 12). In other words, according to this line of thought, “the very expression of the Islamic revelation in the Arabic language and the culture that grew around it, could consistently be established as historically ‘contingent’ rather than ‘essential’ features of religion” (Arjomand, 2002).
13. However, the Freedom Movement of Iran, *Nehzat-e Azadi-ye Iran*, then headed by Bazargan, was the first organization which officially criticized *Velayat-e Motlaq-e Faqih* by releasing a leaflet in 1988 entitled *Tafsil va Tahlil-e Velayat-e Motlaq-e Faqih* (analysis of the theory of *Velayat-e Motlaq-e Faqih*). The anonymous authors criticized *Velayat-e Motlaq-e Faqih* as being baseless and in contrast with the Qur’anic teachings. They also argued that *Velayat-e Motlaq-e Faqih* results in nothing but religious despotism (Nehzat-e Azadi-ye Iran 1367/1988: 60–62).
14. In an interview with a German newspaper in 2003, Montazeri clearly stated that: “A governmental system cannot and must not rest on one person. We need a society where the people occupy the most important place ... The absolute government of the clergy is wrong. An Ayatollah has only the responsibility to reply to religious questions. Matters relating to economics and politics should be relegated to the specialists” (Akhavi, 2008).
15. Montazeri, in a treatise entitled *Democracy and Constitution* published in 2000, emphasized election as the basis for the legitimacy of government, and maintains: “The fact is that legitimacy of government in Islam stems from appointment of the ruler by God (although this is mediated). Or it comes about through being elected by people who swear allegiance to him (a social convention between people and the ruler). The fact also arises of a difference between the rule of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) or an infallible Imam and that of the religious jurists in the age of *gheibat* (occultation). In that instance, the rule of the Prophet (PBUH) or the infallible Imam – like their message – was an appointment by God, while the rule of the jurist materializes through popular election” (2000: 2).
16. In this version, *Vali-e Faqih*’s “powers extend from the public and political arenas to all aspects of society; the person occupying the office rules based on what he determines to be in society’s best interests; his decisions are guided by his knowledge of the divine religion and are not limited by man-made laws; and, as was the case with the Prophet Muhammad and the Shi’a Imams, his powers are absolute and his term of office is unlimited” (Kamrava, 2008: 164).
17. This type of *Velayat-e Faqih* is “an elected position that is closely supervised by the people’s elected representatives, [it] is open to criticism, and the person occupying the position may be impeached and removed from office” (Kamrava, 2008: 164).
18. Such an idea about the inauthenticity of the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih* is also discussed in detail by Ayatollah Mehdi Ha’eri-Yazdi (1923–1999), a son of Ayatollah Abdolkarim

- Ha'eri-Yazdi (the founder of the Qom seminary and a teacher of Ayatollah Khomeini), in his *Hekmat va Hokumat (Wisdom and Government)* (Ha'eri-Yazdi, 1994: 115–120).
19. I am relying on Mahmoud Sadri's translation in *Sacral Defense of Secularism* (2001).
 20. One of the main problems, Kadivar argues, is that "the ruler (or the supreme leader) is responsible only to God—no human being has the authority to oversee his actions. Other elite jurists can only inquire into his merits in preparation to their finding him meritorious for asserting his supremacy" (Kadivar, 2002).
 21. In the aftermath of the political crisis following the presidential election of 2009, Soroush in an interview with the BBC Persian service suggests that in the theory of governance, *fiqh* must be replaced by religious ethics and morality (Soroush, 2009).
 22. Essentially, Soroush advocates an Islamic liberalism and calls for radical reforms in theology (*kalam*) in the first place, and then in *fiqh*, in order to address new demands in the modern world (Soroush, 2010).
 23. Including but not restricted to: Mohammad Mojtahed-Shabestari (b. 1936), Hasan Yusefi-Eshkevari (b. 1949), Alireza Alavitarbar (b. 1960), Hashem Aqajari (b. 1957), Emadeddin Baqi (b. 1961), Saeed Hajjarian (b. 1954) and Abdollah Nouri (b. 1949).

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