

## *Book Reviews*

### **Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State**

*Naser Ghobadzadeh*

*New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 267 pages.*

Naser Ghobadzadeh's *Religious Secularity* presumes that Muslim thinkers no longer consider an Islamic state as the desired political system. This aversion to a theocratic state is perhaps felt most by those Iranian reformist thinkers who have had to operate in such a state since the 1979 Islamic revolution. The author claims that in its place, the Muslim world has devised a new theoretical category called "religious secularity," which allows for a religiously secular state to, at least theoretically, present itself as an alternative to an Islamic one. He defines this religiously secular attitude as one that refuses to eliminate religion from the political sphere, but simultaneously carves out a space for secular politics by narrowly promoting only the institutional separation of religion and state.

He claims that this concept has two goals: to (1) restore the clergy's genuine spiritual aims and reputation and (2) show that Islam is compatible with the secular democratic state. In Iran, rather than launching overt attacks against the theocratic state, this discourse of religious secularity has created a more "gentle, implicit and sectarian manner in challenging the Islamic state." Unlike in pre-revolutionary times when there were both religious and non-religious ideologies vying for an audience, Ghobadzadeh suggests that in Iran today, "the alternative discourses are religious and concentrate on liberating religious discourse from state intervention."

The author pays homage to Abdullahi An-Na'im and claims to be using *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (2008) as a conceptual framework. As far as subfields within political science go, Ghobadzadeh's *Religious Secularity* is also similar in form to Nader Hashemi's *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy* (2009) and, as such, can be considered a work of theoretical comparative political science.

The first chapter, which offers Shi'i discourses on political authority in the Age of Occultation, presents and then refutes the theory of *wilāyat al-faqīh*. The second chapter discusses *maṣlaḥat-e niẓām*, an innovation introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini. This concept, a kind of secular pushback against strict adherence to the letter of religious law, expanded the jurisprudential concept of *maṣlaḥah* (public interest) and was devised as a practical workaround in cases where inflexible religious principles seemed to impede efficient governance. According to it, practical necessity can trump clearly established divine law if the Supreme Leader has decided there is a need to do so. This concept exists in traditional Islamic law and has been invoked, especially by modernist thinkers, to prohibit or allow something on the basis of whether or not it serves the common good or public welfare. Ghobadzadeh seems to be suggesting that inserting the secular into the religious began shortly after the revolution and at the hands of the founder of the theocratic state, thereby positing a kind of inevitability to the regime's trajectory.

The third chapter argues that expecting religious knowledge to solve all political and social issues without taking extra-religious know-how (e.g., natural sciences, social sciences, and the liberal arts) into account is unrealistic. This chapter submits that another way secularity found its way into reformist discourse was through the infusion of extra-religious knowledge and an acknowledgment of its necessity to acquire a better understanding of the world, yet another allusion to the unavoidability of a secular incursion into the religious. Chapter 4 discusses Iran's clerical establishment by attempting to show how Ayatollah Khomeini's choices, his theory of *wilāyat al-faqīh*, and his personal conduct led to that establishment's domination of the nation. Chapter 5 continues this analysis by explicating the rift between the ruling clergy and the more senior clerics in the Qum.

This work is a useful addition not just to the field of comparative politics, but also to secular studies. By presenting the works of Iranian Muslim reformers – believing reformers who span a range between Islamist and secular – the author's very useful concept of religious secularity pinpoints a new political category in the Muslim world, a tendency that is at once religious and secular. Ghobadzadeh claims this concept might come across as oxymoronic (he says as much in the introduction), but this simultaneously religious and secular attitude is the actual reigning alternative to the dominant political theory of *wilāyat al-faqīh*, a post-Age-of-Occultation theory that during the Twelfth Imam's continued absence, the religious and political custodianship of the people falls upon the *faqīh* (jurist). According to the Shi'ah, the Twelfth Imam (i.e., the Mahdi) is the legitimate guardian

of the Muslim community and is thought to have disappeared during the tenth century.

Muslim scholars who uphold this theory disagree over how encompassing this custodianship should be. Is it limited to non-litigious matters (*umūr hisbīyah*), or is it absolute and thus inclusive of political governance? This second version of guardianship, advanced by Ayatollah Khomeini, now forms the basis of Iran's constitution, for the *Valī-ye Faqīh* (the Guardian Jurist) serves as the Supreme Leader of the state. Inserting secularity into a system so entrenched with absolute power is no small feat, and Ghobadzadeh seems convinced that the reformist thinkers have a working alternative. This book, therefore, is also useful for those in comparative politics who study democratic transitions and have been wondering about the fusing of Islam into democratic forms of governance. At least on paper, these thinkers are suggesting that the two are, in fact, quite compatible.

Students of Iranian politics and Islamic reformist movements more generally will find Ghobadzadeh's new category and his study of several of the more relevant Iranian reformist thinkers illuminating. The author does an impressive job of presenting the works of Abdolkarim Soroush, Grand Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, Ayatollah Mohsen Kadivar, ex-Ayatollah Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari, ex-Ayatollah Mohammad Mojtahed-Shabestari, and others, insofar as showing how each of them justify their use of religious secularity. Their political positions have been discussed by scholars in the West before this, but not under the rubric of a framework as instructive as that offered by the author.

Although this book presents a much needed and very useful concept in terms of studying the reformist movement, not just in the Iranian political system but also in the greater Muslim Middle East, and even though the materials are extremely well-researched and well-chosen, the language is sometimes less than clear. One has to strain to make connections that should have been stated at the top of each chapter and in the introduction.

Ghobadzadeh has come upon a very handy designation in the term *religious secularity*. In fact, although he does not make this claim, it seems that, as such, this new category could better explain the strange co-mingling of religion and politics even in the more religious western societies like the United States.

Banafsheh Madaninejad  
Visiting Assistant Professor of Religion, Department of Religion  
Southwestern University, Georgetown, TX