BEYOND CULTURALISM AND MONISM: THE IRANIAN PATH TO DEMOCRACY[1]

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1. Introduction

A quarter century after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the name of "cultural authenticity" the establishment has been challenged over the very same issue. Children of the revolution, the voices of change and the social base of the current reform movement, are now skeptical of all Islamic clerical solutions such as Islamic state, Islamic society, Islamic economy, and, recently, Islamic democracy. The central argument in my paper therefore represents the central conflict that characterizes Iranian politics today – that is, the relation between the global and the local paradigms, between the universal and the particular or between universalism and culturalism. More specifically, the paper explores a key question concerning the nature and the future of modernity and democracy in Iran.

Can Western modernity be Iran's future goal, or should Iran seek a different path to modernity? Is democracy, as Amartya Sen (1999) suggests, a "universal value," or is it a civilizational achievement of the Occidental culture and therefore not easily transferable to other civilizations (Huntington 1996)? Are Muslim-majority states, Iran included, "exceptionally" immune to the process of democratization? If not, what would be the Iranian path to democracy? What are the main features of such a democracy? To what extent is this democracy a global, and to what degree a local, achievement?

2. The "Universal" and the "Particular": Three Theoretical Approaches

In this paper, I have identified three approaches through which to expound and examine the relationship between "particularism" and "universalism": they are "Culturalism" "Monism" and "Minimum-universalism" (Parekh 1999). By culturalism we mean an essentialist interpretation of culture in both the Oriental and the Occidental

[1] This paper was delivered at The Fifth Biennial Conference of International Society for the Iranian Studies (ISIS) at Bethesda, Maryland, USA, on May 28-30, 2004.

traditions. Moreover, the cultural relativism of people from the left and cultural essentialism of people from the right are considered to be two versions of culturalism.

Monism stands for an arrogant, totalizing, and ethnocentric interpretation of modern values defined exclusively on the basis of Occidental traditions. Finally, minimum-universalism represents plural, reflexive, and dialectical relations between the particular and the universal. Unlike culturalism, it simultaneously gives room for different cultural interpretations and avoids cultural determinism. Unlike monism, it rejects the holistic totalizing concept of universalism and yet advocates a reflexive and inclusive version of universal values.

Pure particularism is “self-defeating.” This is largely due to the “conservative logic” of pure difference, which leads us to the “route of self-apartheid” (Laclau 1996: 26, 33). Hence, the world of culturalism is small, but not always small that is beautiful (Booth 1999: 5). The giant world of monism is big, but not always as in big is better. It is, indeed, ethnocentric in nature and totalitarian in outcome.

Minimum-universalism, in contrast, is a democratic approach, which encourages open and unforced cross-cultural dialogues. It suggests that there are several different moral lives, and yet they “can be judged on the basis of a universally valid body of values.” There are universal values that constitute “a kind of ‘floor’ and ‘irreducible minimum’”; once “a society meets these basic principles, it is free to organize its way of life as it considers proper” (Parekh 1999: 131). The logic of minimum universalism, as Michael Walzer puts it, is a reflection of the character of human society: it is universal because it is about humans; and it is particular, because it is about society (Walzer 1994: 9). In other words, “the *Other* is an alien,” Booth argues, but “*another* is all of us” (1999: 31) As such, minimum universalism is the combination of universalism and the “politics of difference.” Such a synthesis will produce “a number of different ‘roads to democracy’ and a variety of ‘democracies’ at the end of the road.” The danger, however, remains if ‘difference’ prevails at the expense of universalism, and vice versa. In the former case, if ‘difference’ overcomes at the expense of the universal value of democracy, it would generate a “religious republic.” In the latter case, if universalism overcomes at the expense of ‘difference’, we would experience political regimes such as “liberal oligarchy” (Walzer 1994: ix).

What has to be done, then, to avoid culturalism coming through the back door? How do we "make space for the inescapable cultural mediation of universal values without depriving them of their cultural and critical trust" (Parekh 1999: 151)? First, one has to realize that values differ from institutions. Societies may realize the same universal values through different institutions most suited to their culture and history. Second, universal values are general and therefore can be articulated in the language of society's *norms*. And third, one has to follow a "minimalist" as opposed to maximalist approach. This minimalism relies on the principles articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Parekh 1999: 151-52).

3. Iran: Searching for a Third Alternative

What has this to do with the Iranian path to modernity and democracy? It is to suggest that neither the culturalism of Khomeinism nor the ethnocentric version of modernity is conducive to Iran's democratic transition. Charles Taylor charts a third alternative path beyond what he calls modernity's "boosters" and "knockers" (Taylor 1992: 11, 22-23). This path is not that of a half-hearted compromise favoring a "simple trade-off between the advantages and costs of modernity. Rather, the aim is to renew serious reflections on the meaning of modernity and its possible future directions" (Dallmayer 2002: 97). This is to suggest that, "grounded in different traditions and faced with different challenges, different societies move along different paths towards modernity and represent different kinds of modernity" (Madsen et al 2002: 116).

The goal, of course, is "not to find a new title for the mantles of nationalists or religious apologists who already claim that all that has ever been of value in the world has come from Iran, or Islam" (Milani 2004: 21). Instead, the idea is, first, to admit that there are as many roads to modernity and democracy as there are societies; and, second, "to show that democracy, rationalism and the rule of law are not strange and alien ideas" to non-western cultures, but have "deep native roots in the intellectual soil" of these societies (Milani 2004: 21).

Let us be explicit about the fact that we are very much aware of some terrible historical experiences that have redefined modernity in line of culture at the cost of violation of human rights, the rule of law, the democratic process, and individual

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liberties. Nonetheless, the fact is that, as Mirsepassi (2002: 93) points out, global social movements have already challenged the non-reflexive vision of modernity. "Calling for a different and more tolerant project of modernity, at a time when modern secular ideas and institutions seem to be under Islamist attack, may be perceived as politically risky, intellectually naïve, and practically unthinkable" (Mirsepassi 2002: 91). Yet history shows that totalizing universalism has proved to be equally, if not more, "politically risky, intellectually naïve, and practically unthinkable." The experience of the modern secular authoritarian polity is an undeniable fact. Our respect for the liberal and "enlightened" ideals of modern rationalism does not justify ignoring or overlooking the troubling history and colonized experience of modernity.

Accordingly, we can argue that, while alternatives *to* modernity and democracy are repressive responses, alternative modernities and democracies are practical paths. There are no unified, final answers in the permanent process of change. "All that is solid," says Karl Marx, "melts into air" (Berman 1988). We may interpret this as meaning that either local or global paradigms, tradition or modernity, can melt into air if they are solid and are not reflexive.

Jürgen Habermas argues that "modernity" is an "unfinished project." In the same vein, some social theories suggest that "'tradition' is likewise a perpetually unfinished project – that is, how people understand their traditions and apply them to practical situations is subject to dynamic change and constant negotiation" (Anderson, Seibert, and Wagner 1998 quoted in Monshipouri et al 2003: 122). A modern individual is, indeed, involved in a dialogue with the past, in which society and culture progress in a dialectic of continuity and change.

4. Iran: Religion and Democratization

Can religion and republicanism coexist? Iran's post-revolutionary politics of culturalism, which has been displayed in the form of clerical "Islamization" of society, has made many people skeptical of such a possibility. The question of religion – its nature and function – in Iran's transition to democracy becomes extremely significant.

A cardinal question is whether the current crisis of cultural politics might push Iran to an extreme and excessive secularism characterized, not by separation, but by a

total segregation of religion and politics. Is monism replacing culturalism in Iran? Who should define the relation between religion and republicanism in Iran? Does the elite or the electorate define and determine the nature of that relation? Relying on its own socio-cultural context and its historical heritage, I submit, the Iranian society as a whole must decide and determine the extent and the nature of Iranian secularism. A genuine democracy and a true republic, to use Habermas's phrases (1989; 1996), are shaped by public "communicative" actions, people's "deliberation", and "discursive" debates over the proper role of religion in the public sphere, either in politics or in civil society organizations.

For all this to happen, one has to simultaneously challenge two opposing discourses: first, the "politicization" of religion; second, the "privatization" of religion. The politicization of religion represents a state-sponsored religion and obviously violates the very foundation of democracy. Similarly, the concept of privatization of religion is a problematic one; it is not necessarily conducive to democracy. The logic behind the privatization of religion is the idea that the elimination of religion from the public sphere is a condition of democracy and that religion and democracy can live together if and only if the religious domain remains confined to private life. There is no doubt that the "relocation" of religious institutions from "state" to "civil society" is the first necessary step for having any models of democracy. This relocation, however, should not be interpreted as the "privatization" of religion (Casanova 1994: 1047).

The third alternative may be called "public religion". *What* is public religion? And *why* does it matter? The concept of public religion should not resemble political religion. Here public never means to replace the private, nor does it mean political. It also has to be distinguished from civil religion, inspired by Rousseau's and Durkheim's concept of "civil religion," which tends to be a shadow of top-down religious development. Public religion, instead, is an alternative notion, which characterizes a kind of bottom-up societal expression. It refers to a form of "civic faith" within a republic – to use a phrase coined by Benjamin Franklin in 1749 (Marty 1987).

Nonetheless, a key question still remains unanswered: *why* public religion? First, religion inevitably has and will find its own way to influence the "public" sphere; so it is "better to recognize this and make such religion a subject of citizen observation and

debate than to keep it covert and leave it unacknowledged" (Marty and Blumhofer). Unlike the Enlightenment philosophers, Tocqueville remained skeptical of the prediction that religion would decline and become politically irrelevant with the process of modernization and the advance of democracy. Interestingly, he "thought that the incorporation of ordinary people into democratic politics would only increase the relevance of religion for modern politics" (Casanova 1994: 1048). For this reason, by entering the public sphere, "religions and normative traditions are forced to confront and possibly come to terms with modern normative structures" (Casanova 1994: 1048-49). Such a public encounter may permit the reflexive rationalization of religious discourses.

Second, by questioning the absolutist principles of inhuman morality of the state's security doctrines and the market's impersonal and amoral self-regulation, public religion could play a role of counterbalance against those two major power centers, i.e., state and market. Jürgen Habermas divides the public sphere into three spheres of state, market, and civil society, and puts much emphasis on civil society in order to balance the powers of state and market. He refers to "state" "market" and "civil society" as three mechanisms of social integration and suggests that modern societies meet their needs for integration by balancing these three resources (Habermas 1996). Accordingly, it is legitimate to suggest that "public religion," being exclusively part and parcel of civil society, could play its "public" role while remaining far from any state-sponsored "political" role. An active public religion in civil society differs at once from a private isolated religion and from a political ideology of the state. Moreover, environmental and ecological concerns are not well addressed by hidden or individualized religion. It is in the public expression of religion that the environment will be faced with respect to ethics (Marty and Blumhofer).

Third, in a time of uncivil domestic politics, religion can best be overcome by religion: creative forms, not non-religion, will set out to attract the hearts of those who have used God against humanity (Marty and Blumhofer). In the context of the Muslim world, Abdullahi An-Na'im (1999: xii) reminds us, one must not to "abandon the field to the fundamentalists, who [could] succeed in carrying the vast majority of the population with them by citing religious authority for their policies and theories."

5. Conclusion: "Maps of Misreading"

Let me conclude this paper with a powerful argument, made by Alfred Stepan, warning us not to misread the "lessons" of the historical relationship between Western Christianity and democracy. He cautions us against "four possible misinterpretations." According to Stepan, *empirically*, the defining feature of democracy, as it exists in fifteen European countries, is not a "wall of separation," but the political reconstruction of "twin tolerations." *Doctrinally*, one has to avoid the simple temptation of believing that a religion is univocal on democracy or human rights. The question is, who speaks for a particular religion? *Methodologically*, we should pay close attention to the "fallacy of unique founding conditions," which claims that in non-Western countries democracy will not be achieved unless they meet the same founding conditions, such as capitalist economy, independent civil society, and the like. This is to "confuse the conditions associated with the invention of something with the possibility of its replication, or more accurately, its *reformulation* under different conditions." And *normatively* one has to be cautious about taking "the truths of religion off the political agenda" (Stepan 2000: 37-57). According to the Rawlsian argument, "public argument about the place of religion is appropriate only if it employs, or at least can employ, freestanding conceptions of political justices" (Rawls 1993). What is missing in Rawls's argument is a prior question of "how actual polities have consensually and democratically arrived at agreements to 'take religion off the political agenda.'" In many democracies the core conflict for a long time "was precisely over the place of religion in the polity…This conflict was politically contained or neutralized only after long public arguments and negotiations in which religion was the dominant item on the political agenda" (Stepan 2000: 45). Stepan adds,

> [I]n polities where a significant portion of believers may be under the bend of doctrinally based non-democratic religious discourses, one of the major tasks of political and spiritual leaders who wish to revalue democratic norms in their own religious community will be to advance theologically convincing public arguments about legitimate public reasoning; they are vital to the success of democratization in a country divided over the meaning and appropriateness of democracy (2000: 45).

The implication of this argument is twofold: *theoretically*, it proposes such categories as "modernity and pre-modern" "religion and democracy" and "tradition and change" are neither mutually exclusive nor totally discontinuous.

Practically, it suggests that Muslim societies have to engage in a new hermeneutics of their own religion in order to achieve democracy. This is, of course, a "necessary" but certainly not "sufficient" condition. This is also far beyond an abstract, hypothetical debate among elites and intellectuals; it is more about society's active and deliberative engagement. "Democratization in the Muslim countries, Iran included, will not be achieved against the will of the Muslims." Indeed, "it will be accomplished with them or not at all" (Addi 1997). Institutionally, such democracy is most likely to be different from the Westminster model. Intellectually and philosophically, however, is certainly far beyond all naïve and superficial interpretations of traditional Islamic political thought, which translate and represent such expressions as *Shura* or *Ijma* as identical to the modern concept of "democracy."

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