Coming to Terms with Modernity: Iranian intellectuals and the emerging public sphere

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ABSTRACT   *Almost two decades after the Islamic revolution of 1979, the quest of Iranians for a distinct religious identity produced a new socio-political movement, which incorporated a pluralistic rhetoric in the name of reform. Since the presidential elections of May 1997, an intensifying fascination has emerged with exposing the internal diversities of the Islamic nation via a language of critique. The June 2001 elections confirmed the popular desire for reform. This reform movement has given voice to the needs and desires of so-far peripheral groups (youth, women, intellectuals, artists and ethnic minorities, etc.), who tend to appropriate Islam in order to come into public life as active protagonists. Recent discursive developments in Iran demonstrate the real possibility of the public expression of dissent within the constraints of Islamic politics. This paper is meant to offer an overview of how new intellectual interpretations of Islamic tradition in Iran since 1997 are contributing to cultural, social and political critique, within a public sphere defined by Islam.*

The assertion of Islam in Iran as a compelling discourse of power in recent decades has motivated new socio-political movements which have in turn given new dimensions to this religious and cultural tradition. What emerged in Iran in the 1970s as a new Islamic political discourse became the source of both a revolutionary ideology and a blueprint for an Islamic state. The victory of the Islamic revolution of 1979, and the process of its relentless institutionalization, provided a basis for a profound politicization of the traditional concerns with spirituality, metaphysics and the meaning, origin and destiny of human existence. Or, if we agree with the charismatic leader of the Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, Islam was inherently political, and the revolution only revived this political essence (see Khomeini 1981).

The Islamic revolution was defined from the outset as a 'cultural revolution' bent on fomenting a collective identity based on religious faith and tradition. Its language was one of religious revivalism in both national and trans-national dimensions. The revolutionary discourse was based on a radical critique of 'Western modernity', as a reminder of the Western 'imperial arrogance' and as an imminent cultural and political 'threat' to Islamic Iran (and the Muslim nations alike). However, the traditionalist appeal to the power of identity, and its apparent anti-modern rhetoric, concealed two important underlying facts: the very modern nature of the Islamic revolution (see Abrahamian 1993), and the real diversity and differentiation that it initially tended to undermine, overcome or at least conceal in a bid for homogeneity.

Almost two decades after the revolution, the quest of Iranians for a distinct cultural identity produced a new socio-political movement which, although retaining the critical language of the revolution, incorporated a democratic rhetoric, and directed the critique inward. Since the presidential elections of May 1997, an intensifying fascina-

tion has emerged, bent on exposing the internal diversities of the Islamic nation via a critical language. There is an increasing acknowledgement of the need of smaller identity groups and sub-cultures to seek expression and be tolerated within the constraints of the dominant religious (Shī'ī) culture.

This movement, which came to the scene in the name of reform (*eslahat*), has given voice to the needs and desires of the so-far peripheral groups (youth, women, intellectuals, artists and ethnic minorities, etc.). These groups tend to appropriate Islam in order to come to public life as active political protagonists, while pledging loyalty to the widely shared and 'highly endeared' Shī'ī faith and culture as the cornerstone of national identity. Their contention is, rather, over the social, economic and political privileges, which are increasingly seen as 'national resources' monopolized by certain individuals, families and social groups (the Shī'ī clergy) through claims to exclusive authority over the dominant faith and culture.

This asymmetry in access to resources has meant that the Islamic identity, so far as it has been promoted in Iran since the revolution as a distinct and extremely valued cultural construct, has all but lost the ideological 'unity of the word' forged in the years of the revolution. The growing critical, and inevitably modern, discourses of civil liberty, political pluralism and individual rights in Islamic Iran indicate that this collective identity structure has ceased to be expressed solely in the uniform symbolic language of traditions. It is rather being increasingly articulated in terms of a discursive field of public expression where new identities are constructed and seek recognition, at both symbolic and political levels.

The deep-seated connection between religion and politics in Iran, and the ongoing dependence of the post-revolutionary state on mass mobilization, have made the polity a site of serious competition over allocation of the political, economic, social and cultural resources of the state (which rest heavily on the revenues coming from the oil-based economy). In recent years, this competition has been increasingly drawn to the public domain in the name of 'Islamic democracy' and 'civil society'. Iran's Islamic politics increasingly 'involves competition and contest over both the interpretation of symbols and the control of the institutions, formal or informal, that produce and sustain them' (Eickleman & Piscatori 1996, 5).

Recent discursive developments in the political philosophy of Iranian Islam (Shī'ism) demonstrate the real possibility of the public expression of political dissent and social discontent within the constraints of this presumably traditional politics. Political dissent is expressed in terms of struggles against the constraints on entitlement to citizenship rights—freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, etc.—as well as in the form of a contest for power. Social discontent, on the other hand, is manifested in terms of demands for a fairer allocation of the economic, social and cultural resources. These developments confirm that the modern desire for liberty, which is distinct from the traditional desire for divine emancipation because of its association with identity politics and its fascination with prestige and prosperity, has thrived in peculiar and curious ways even within the context of Iran's Muslim politics.

This paper is meant to offer an overview of how new intellectual interpretations of Islamic tradition in Iran are allowing for cultural, social and political critique within a public sphere defined by Islam. The paper emphasizes both the capacities of Islamic tradition for reinterpretation and innovation contributing to social and political critique, and the constraints that the same tradition places on public debate and criticism. I am particularly interested to highlight the role of a new intellectual movement that has become vocal since the presidential elections of May 1997, trying to expand the domain

of the public sphere by encouraging a public practice of negotiating Islamic symbolism under the rubric of democratic reform. But I will also note the resistance of the defenders of the entrenched official interpretation of this symbolism to the 'unholy' implications of this movement of reform.

I would argue that notwithstanding its limited gains in institutional power since 1997, the movement for reform has created a public desire for 'civil society', as a political expression of the actual social and cultural pluralities. The real merit of the idea of 'civil society' in Iran (with all its theoretical and practical ambiguities) may lie less in the idealistic aspiration that it created than in its role in invoking such critical questions as: 'How may people peacefully organize outside of government control? How is citizenship engendered and strengthened? What role should the state play as a referee or rule-setter? How should people's needs be met in the wake of the retreating state?' (Norton in Eickleman & Anderson 1999, 25).

While I want to highlight the achievements of the reform movement (the emergence of a public sphere that involves challenges to entrenched authorities via alternative interpretations), I would also like to note the sum contribution of the reforms to the consolidation of a new sense of religiously inspired nationhood within the structural framework of the Islamic republic, through a gradual shift in the Islamic political and cultural discourse from 'the boundary-minded forms it assumed after the advent of European imperial expansion into Muslim lands to a more confident and differentiated internal and external dialogue' (Eickleman & Anderson 1999, 13).

The Project of Reform and the Emergence of the Public Sphere

Since the May 1997 presidential elections, with the landslide victory of the middle-ranking cleric, Mohammad Khatami, over his 'conservative' rival, Iran has appeared to be experiencing a period of relative political and social openness. Backed by an overwhelming electoral win, this 'reform-minded' cleric introduced an idea of 'reform' into the religious–political vocabulary of the Islamic state, which had no precedent in post-revolutionary Iran.[2] The huge electoral support for Khatami's 'reformist' agenda was interpreted both as an indication of public dismay with the *status quo*, and as continued public trust in the possibility of correcting the ruling Islamic system from within. In both cases, 'reformism' appeared almost instantly as a challenge against the overwhelming 'conservative' power, which represented the *status quo*.[3] And voices of dissent found some expression in the language of democracy in a burgeoning, but fledgling, market of a 'reformist' press, as voices of 'civil society'.

During Khatami's first term as president, there was increasing evidence of the emergence of multiple and competing religious and political forces offering authoritative, and yet alternative, definitions of religion and politics. More importantly, new and old media technologies in many ways reduced the possibility of control of the freedom of expression.[4] 'Although efforts to shape, if not control, the dissemination of political communications persist, censorship is less effective than in the recent past' (*ibid.*, 21). Khatami's first term in office was certainly marked by the emergence of a public space where the diverse voices that represented Iran's new social, demographic, technological, cultural and communicational developments found some expression.

From these expressions, it also became clear how disconnected many sectors of the population had become from traditional forms of authority, ways of thinking and lifestyles. And it was perhaps the awareness of these changes that convinced Khatami to break with the past militant and restrictive views of religion and politics. His project

of reform had to be undertaken not through confrontation with the powerful others, but through engagement with them via 'dialogue between civilizations', not through 'cultural closure', but through healthy 'cultural adaptation'; not through repression of diversity, but through encouragement of free expression of marginal and even critical voices of the 'civil society'. It was, therefore, not accidental that Khatami's victory and his continued popularity should rely so heavily on an expanding public sphere in which the printed press championed the cause of freedom of expression. (For a discussion of the role of the printed press in civil society, see Anderson (1983).)

Khatami's victory in 1997 relied heavily on the support of the so-called 'reformist' groups and intellectuals who used the small media of printed publications, and the limited cultural resources available to them at the time, to campaign on his behalf on a religious–modernist platform. After this electoral victory, the printed press proliferated rapidly, in both numbers of titles and circulation.[5] The press, in effect, became the main driving force of the 'reform movement', which demanded accountability and transparency of government, pushing the existing political apparatuses to their limit. The press helped Khatami in introducing new ideas and programs for reincorporating religious traditions into the public domain in a compassionate and civil way, significantly contributing to the popularization of his ambiguous ideas of 'civil society' and 'Islamic democracy'. It was instrumental in opening up the public domain to debates on matters of public interest, no matter how sensitive to the power-holders.

Beside printed publications (i.e. newspapers, magazines and books, etc.), other media (e.g. cinema, theatre and music), which had already made headway in previous years, also developed a language of political and social critique, while maintaining their artistic and entertainment appeal for the public. Also, the drastically expanded and heavily populated universities became the scenes of heated debates on tough political and social questions, as well as protests and demonstrations (which turned violent, particularly in 1999 student riots), giving rise to a restive Islamic student movement. Meanwhile, a stream of critical literature on the nature and practice of Islamic government flowed from academic and student circles into the public arena. Even the closely controlled radio and television could not ignore burning issues of social and political debate, and the increasing desire for entertainment.

The motivations, goals, resources and potentials of the reform movement were defined in various, and at times contradictory, ways. This led some to load the reforms with too much expectation, sometimes bordering on expectations of a 'new revolution', while others saw them as a mere change of power from one hand to another within the dominant 'theocratic' establishment. For some time, the new media-driven public sphere provided a space for a rather open expression of conflicting views about what reforms should mean.

In the political sphere, those individuals and groups who championed the cause of the reforms (notwithstanding their divisions) were represented by a broad and informal coalition, known as the Khordad 2 Front (highlighting the day in the Iranian calendar of Khatami's victory in the 1997 elections). The elections of 1997 were made in the vocabulary of this broad alliance into a popular legend ('the legend of Khordad 2'). The members of this 'reformist' coalition were mostly the young and highly educated (male and female) Muslim intellectuals (clerics, journalists, academics, authors, poets, filmmakers and students, etc.) who defined, developed and popularized the idea of 'civil society' in their calls for more social and political freedoms, and in their efforts to form new 'civil institutions' (political parties and professional associations, etc.) as structured manifestations of this civil society.

Indeed, the idea of 'civil society,' despite its theoretical ambiguities and practical complications, has become the focal point of public and intellectual debates in the last four years. Under the rubric of 'civil society,' Muslim intellectuals have advanced demands for democracy, civil liberties, rule of law and freedom of expression, while trying to build institutional support for these demands. In the 'reformist' literature, the defence of civil society became the main cause of much-needed reforms in how power was exercised by the 'conservative' clerical elite. For the intellectual protagonists of the reforms the natural medium of expression was the printed press because of its traditional status as an intellectual medium, which went back to the constitutional revolution of the early twentieth century. (For a discussion of the constitutional revolution, see Keddie (1981).) The press came to play a central role, not only as a means of information provision, but also as an intellectual voice and a 'civil institution' (representing millions of highly educated young men and women), which seemed determined to make power 'transparent' and 'accountable'.

Yet it was inevitable that the contest against the dominant relations of power had to face stiff opposition from those already in power, who claimed to be defending an ancient, sacred, sophisticated and presumably 'endangered' religious–cultural tradition. In many ways, the state of political competition in Iran in recent years could be characterized in terms of the complex and ambiguous relationship of the so-called 'religious intellectuals' with both this sacred traditional heritage, and the conceptual and practical challenges of modernity. The religious–intellectual challenge against the established religious–political authority involved critical debate, as well as open conflict and confrontation, over doctrinal, political, cultural and social issues. It led to a measure of cultural and political openness, as well as to complications, limitations and setbacks.

In Khatami's first term of presidency, the majority of the 'reformist' press was shut down and many journalists and activists were put on trial and sent to jail. The 'vigilant' judiciary thus hunted down the 'demons' which (in the scare-mongering anti-reformist campaign) had set out to 'corrupt' Islam and the revolution. The 'conservative' defenders of 'pure' traditions supported the crackdown on the press as the means to combat 'mischief', 'corruption', 'permissiveness' and 'deviance' caused by 'demonic' tendencies. Yet the situation in the late 1990s was drastically different from that of the early 1980s. Although some anxious defenders of 'traditional purity' tried to return to former restrictions, the emerging public sphere made this return increasingly problematic.

As a result, the political contest turned increasingly into a competition for the control and mobilization of the cultural resources of the nation, and particularly the means of communication, which were now recognized by all sides to be playing a fundamental role in providing opportunities to connect with the public. Meanwhile, the language of politics also shifted in a significant way from one based on issuing authoritative opinions about the correct moral conduct of individuals to one addressing the new social, political, economic, educational and entertainment needs of the 'young nation'. With the increasing significance of electoral politics in determining political legitimacy, the media were turned into a major arena for political competition, as well as social and cultural representation. What was beyond the scope of the media fell into inevitable marginality. (For a discussion of the role of the media in electoral politics, see Castells (1997).) In fact, the reform movement was less realized in the sphere of institutional power than in a public domain where common social, economic and cultural concerns

could be negotiated, contested, and even fought for, by competing understandings of a common religious tradition.

It would be easy to see the 'conservatives' simply as traditionalists and the 'reformers' simply as modernists, because the traditionalist turbaned religious scholars (*ulama*) had a traditional seminary education, while the modernist intellectuals had a modern education. But this would be too simplistic, given the fact that, historically, many socially transforming modernist tendencies were driven by forces within the traditionalist camp, and many modernists turned to traditions in order to develop a modern native authentic discourse. The cases of Dr Ali Shariʿati and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini are exemplary here. Ayatollah Khomeini, although from a traditional background of learning, adopted the language of modern social and political literature, which Shariʿati introduced through a revolutionary interpretation of Shīʿī symbolism, and incorporated into the traditional language of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) to formulate an ideology of Islamic revolution and a theory of Islamic state. Hence, in practice, significant political and social changes were led by elements within the traditionalist camp, often through the agency of the religious modernists.

So when we talk about 'conservatives' and 'reformists' we must be appreciative of the fact that the main junctures of social and political action have often been marked by some doctrinal and intellectual shift in the established tradition from within, which indicates the preparedness of the institution of the clergy not only to adapt itself to outside changes and influences, but also to master and appropriate the outside influences in such a way as to maintain its position as a leading authority. What has come to be known as 'reformist' and 'conservative' in Iran over recent years signifies more than a factional political competition, although its most salient expressions are political. In the real life of Iranians, these terms also represent a main cultural divide that has engulfed the nation in a bitter conflict over finding a shared idea of community, identity and authority.

A Quest for Religious–National Identity

The political rivalry and conflict between the 'reformist' and 'conservative' factions should not conceal the main issue at the heart of the idea of 'reform', namely the issue of the legitimacy of a sovereign religious–political authority to which both factions pledged loyalty. What inspired the idea of 'reform' was the continuing project of sustaining a religious nation-state in an increasingly 'hostile' global environment. The centrality of the continued challenge of nation building to Khatami's project of 'reform' cannot be overemphasized. After all, the political legitimacy of the Islamic state in Iran (not unlike other modern states) could not be maintained over the long haul without a sense of nation that it would represent. The challenge of upholding an Islamic nation-state in Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution followed a continuous pattern of defining religion as a political culture, and making cultural policy serve the political aspirations and developmental needs of a modern nation-state.

The main impetus to reforms almost two decades from the establishment of the Islamic republic was not an attempt at a new revolution, even less a mere shift of power from one hand to another. Rather, it was predominantly a need to resolve the surging tension between religious and national loyalty, which was threatening the continued political power of religion in the Iran of the late 1990s and beyond. Khatami's rhetoric during his election campaign in 1997 was a prelude to his project of nation building:

We had an Islamic revolution, which produced a concrete outcome: an Islamic political order. We therefore are no longer engaged in a struggle to establish an Islamic political state. The main task now is to preserve, reform and strengthen this (already established) political system. This [Islamic political] order is a popular state, which means that it is an outcome of an interpretation of Islam whereby a significant role has been conferred upon the nation.[6]

Surely, from a legal perspective, the constitution of the Islamic republic had resolved the tension between religious and national loyalty in the early 1980s by recognizing both the sovereignty of God and the right of the people to govern. It had recognized a place for the popular vote, which was reflected in the allocation of executive and legislative power to elected officials. Yet it had also given superior authority to the Shīʿī jurists (*foqaha*), as the representatives of God, over the affairs of the community of believers. But the insistence of some religious and political tendencies on interpreting the privileged position that the constitution accorded the jurists so as to limit political participation, and even the right of citizenship, to the dedicated followers of the juridical authority came to serve, from very early on, as a source of dormant political, religious and legal divisions and conflicts over the interpretation of the constitution (although at the same time, this provided an opening for new possibilities).

The divisions and conflicts over the constitution remained dormant in the 1980s because the state had little difficulty in creating religious–national solidarity around a solid social constituency, namely millions of revolutionary youth with unequivocal loyalty to the ascetic–revolutionary views of religion propounded by Ayatollah Khomeini (the founder of the Islamic republic)—a loyalty strong enough to engage them devotedly in a 'heroic' war with the external enemy (Iraq) which was 'raping the sacred Islamic territory'. The incessant efforts to use legislation, education, communication, mass mobilization and even coercion to build religious faith and culture into both a moral and a legal element in the legitimacy of the post-revolutionary Islamic state also played a major part in making religious cultural values the cornerstone of nationhood. The problem was that the domain of enfranchisement of this religious sense of nation had become too limiting. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, with the war ended and the father of the Islamic republic gone from this world, tension surged not only at legal and social levels, but also in the political and cultural spheres. There were increasing signs that the earlier social solidarity was not to last.

Khatami's proposal for reform ensured a logical continuation of the earlier form of political legitimacy; but it also entailed a necessary departure from it. For Iran of the late 1990s was much too populous, young, diverse, vocal, technically advanced and socially complex to remain loyal to political authority based solely on a juridical understanding of religion. Hence, Khatami appealed to a reading of the constitution of the Islamic republic that would rest the legitimacy of the state on the will of the nation, without violating the ultimate sovereignty of God. Indeed, his political platform (in his election campaign in 1997) was based largely on a religious–nationalist reading of the Iranian constitution, which emphasized the 'republican virtues' of the Islamic state by incorporating the idea of 'civil society' into the religious traditions, thus differentiating his idea from the 'secular' concept of civil society. Khatami's idea of 'Islamic civil society' was thus conceived as a religious public domain, which would be a proper site for cultivating a democratic sense of citizenship. (For a critical discussion of the idea of civil society, see Habermas (1989) and Taylor (1993).) Here, a compassionate and civil

religious tradition would become the basis for extending the right to be a citizen of the nation to all those who expressed commitment to the constitution of the Islamic republic. In Khatami's words:

> Whereas in the West, civil society took shape on the conceptual basis of the separation of state from religion, in Iran, religion actually created the conceptual means necessary for construction of a nation … And hence … [it became] a point of departure for the creation of a civil society; exactly the reverse of what had happened in the West … In this part of the world, it was the religion that recognized the right of the people to self-determination; it was the religion that legitimized the establishment of a state by the nation; it was the religion that said that the state was the servant of the people and not their master.[7]

Khatami's project of 'reform' would be better understood in light of the enduring aspiration for building a strong religious state based on the 'awakening' of the Islamic nation, going back at least to the Islamic revolution, and maybe even further to the constitutional revolution of the early twentieth century. Khatami himself acknowledged his debt to the pioneering efforts of Ayatollah Naíni in the early twentieth century:

> In Iran, the idea of the establishment of a House of Justice [*edalat-khaneh*], a Consultative Assembly [*Majlis*] and a constitution, notwithstanding the influences of the Western thought, was rooted in our religion … It is our great honor that the first figure who tried to explicate civil society on the basis of the Shī'ī *fiqh* was the honorable jurist Sheikh Muhammad-Hassan Naini. In other words, he tried to explain that constitutionality meant the creation of a government that emerged from the people and was responsible before the people, and that the involvement of the people in running the society in the absence of the Concealed Imam was in harmony with the Shī'ī *fiqh*.[8]

Islam, as a universal faith, is not territorially bound, as Ayatollah Khomeini had noted from very early on. But the imperatives of political geography since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had already established Iran as a territorial nation-state. What was still lacking was a collective imagination of a unique identity that would inspire dignity and pride, make the national territory sacred, enlist the loyalty of the nation and demand recognition from other powers. Since the early twentieth century some religious and political leaders had harboured aspirations for such a religious national identity. The efforts of the Pahlavi monarchy (1920–78) to build a modern state (although they transformed Iran socially, economically and structurally) failed to provide this sense of identity. The facts of religious demography (Shī'ism is the faith into which more than 90 per cent of Iranians are born) made the Shī'ī faith and culture a factor much more inclusive than the Aryan race or even the Persian language in creating a collective identity, so essential for the sense of loyalty to the Iranian Shī'ī territory. The Islamic revolution of 1979 provided precisely that sense of religious nationality.

The main motivating elements of this sense of religious nationalism were the religious notions of historical victimization, divine mission to restore justice and the culture of sacrifice (martyrdom) (see van der Veer & Lehmann 1999). These elements were the pillars of the cultural–revolutionary reading of the Shī'ī faith, a reading that claimed to provide the Iranian–Islamic nation with a common cultural self-understanding. Shī'ism was thus presented as both a revolutionary faith, and a collective culture: a powerful faith that would inspire a militant spirit only to create a culture of hope. The age-old

mass rituals of Ashura—a grass-roots religious ceremony that commemorates the sufferings and ordeals of the third Shīʿī Innocent Imam on a national scale (preparing the believers for martyrdom)—combined with the nation-wide hope for a *monji* (saviour), the Concealed Imam, who would return from concealment to restore the government of absolute justice—gave a proper religious–cultural basis for national identity.

The notion of culture, and particularly Iranian Shīʿī culture, remained central to Khatami's sense of nationality. This was evident in the persistence in his rhetoric of the early contention that the Islamic revolution was a 'cultural revolution' based on the revival of the true essence of Islam in the Iranian Shīʿī territory. Khatami was already known as a cultural man when he was nominated for the presidency by the 'reformist' clerical association, the Assembly of Militant Clergy (Majmaé Rohaniyyun-e Mobarez). He had served as Minister for Culture for almost ten years (1983–92) under the two previous presidents before he resigned in the early 1990s under pressure from conserva-tive forces against his policies of cultural openness. In his resignation letter to President Rafsanjani, he had said:

> The challenge of our revolution, which claims to save humanity by creating a new superior culture, is heaviest in the domain of culture ... I have always believed that preparing the ground for a healthy development of culture is the precondition for the intellectual growth of the nation, and could immunize the younger generation against the devastating effects of atheism, deviance, back-wardness and corruption.[9]

Thus since May 1997 the revolutionary quest to create a religiously based national identity and political sovereignty took the form of a reformist struggle to find a resolution to the question of compatibility between democracy and Islam in order to expand the domain of national enfranchisement. This quest, which was pronounced in Khatami's idea of 'civil society,' seemed to be more vigorous among a new generation of 'religious intellectuals', which appeared, not only as social critics, but also as enthusiastic political ideologues of this new sense of religious nationalism.

The New Religious Intellectuals and the Constitution of the Republic

The new 'religious intellectuals' (*roshanfekran-e deeni*) who championed the cause of the 'reforms' were determined to revive the original emancipatory and egalitarian aspira-tions of the Islamic revolution of 1979 by promoting and driving forward Khatami's reformist agenda. These aspirations were emphatically articulated in the revolutionary slogans 'freedom' and 'independence', and conspicuously enshrined in the constitution of the Islamic republic. As already noted, the constitution had recognized the right of the people to govern their own affairs under the sovereign power of God. According to article 56:

> Absolute sovereignty over the world and mankind belongs to God. And it is He who has made man sovereign in his social destiny. No one can take away this God-given right, or put it at the service of specific individuals or groups. And the nation applies her right in ways and means that are stipulated in other articles [of this law].

Moreover, the state was held responsible for providing for the social and cultural

welfare of the nation. Khatami had already proclaimed that 'the main framework' of the Islamic republic was the 'constitution' and the 'civil society':

> In my opinion, a significant task at present is to institutionalize the Islamic order and civil society … on the basis of the constitution … We must instil this important principle that our constitution, which is based on Islam, should be implemented. (Khatami 1997)

That such emphasis was placed on the constitution came from the fact that it had recognized the consent of the people as a main source of the legitimacy of the Islamic republic of Iran. The intellectual movement, notwithstanding its internal divisions and factional infighting, seemed determined to protect the constitution against the kinds of interpretation that would, in effect, undermine the constitutional recognition of the vote of the people (as the source of political legitimacy) in the name of defending the Sharīʿa and the power that it invested in the Shīʿī jurists.

Various intellectual voices from the religious camp offered alternative ways of thinking on the role of religion in polity and society. These so-called 'religious intellectuals' launched an intriguing critical debate on the form and content of a desired version of Islamic government. Yet notwithstanding their challenge to the political authority of the Shīʿī jurists, the reformist religious intellectuals have remained unequivocally committed to Shīʿī Islam as their faith, and to the Shīʿī jurists as Islam's highest spiritual authorities. Shīʿism is to these intellectuals an identity structure in which to take national pride, but one that would enforce constitutional accommodation of democracy and political pluralism.

The reform-minded lay religious intellectuals argue that by defending the constitution against narrow interpretations of the Sharīʿa, they are in fact trying to protect the true essence of the Shīʿī faith and its huge public appeal in Iran. Their argument in support of the constitution is derived from the wide acknowledgement that the constitution of the Islamic republic is already inspired by the spirit of the Sharīʿa while guaranteeing the right of the nation in determining their destiny. As Khatami had spelled out in his election campaign:

> The Islamic revolution overthrew the monarchic dictatorship and placed this nation on the course of a new stage of its history. So that the people could participate in running their worldly affairs, create a state in the name of religion but under their own supervision, where all human beings—Muslim and non-Muslim—were entitled to their citizen's rights … The constitution of the Islamic republic is a law inspired by a Shīʿī interpretation of government in which the right of citizenship is recognized. (*Ibid.*)

With the constitution in place as a common political and social framework, the intellectuals considered the religious rulings of the jurists as no more than personal opinions of learned religious scholars. Moreover, the revolutionary background of some religious intellectuals, their sensitive positions in the post-revolutionary polity, the moral influence of their ideas over student activists in the universities and the social weight of the vast population of university students and graduates as emerging reference groups created a relatively strong social standing for the intellectuals, which could be readily translated into electoral popularity. The increasing significance of elections, which extended from the 1997 presidential elections to the nation-wide council elections of 1999, the major parliamentary elections of 2000 and the presidential elections of 2001 drastically increased the public credibility of the 'religious intellectuals' as elected officials, while expanding the domain of public participation in politics. Yet

questions remained about the translation of popular votes into real institutional power, which still largely rested with the conservatives.

The reform movement was thus conceived, at least in part, as an intellectual attempt to revive the republican virtues of the constitution *vis-à-vis* the entrenched political power of an elite group of Shī'ī jurists, whose rise to power, based on their superior religious authority over the affairs of the community of believers, was also recognized by the constitution. Yet, while the reform movement advanced the idea of 'civil society' as a site of broader political participation—a public space where citizens of the republic should be entitled to freedom of expression—the defenders of the established powers and privileges tried to deal with this challenge by redrawing the limits of the public sphere.

In this context, new critical trends have emerged (within and outside the government), as both an expression of a struggle for political power, and a reflection of serious religious disputes at broader cultural, doctrinal and intellectual levels. Of particular significance is the role of the vast population of youth and women in driving the new trends in the public debate. Youth and women are the most active agents in the construction of new identities and demands that challenge the elderly and male dominated religious and political institutions. This has been evident in their massive turnouts in election after election to vote for reformist candidates. They have taken heart from Khatami's assertion that:

> We must decisively resist the tendencies that try to establish only one trend, or view, or taste, as equivalent to the whole [Islamic] order … We must try to bring various tendencies into the system, all the tendencies that respect the principles of the [Islamic] system … We must accept the principle of competition, and the principle of competition is based on exercising tolerance for the other. (*Ibid.*)

From the intellectual debates over the last four years it has also become clear that while the overwhelming majority of the religious intellectuals conceded to the sovereign power of an Islamic republic, there is a diversity of views as to how to define and run such a government in the modern world, particularly with respect to the demands of a modern nation-state. These are the views of a young nation coming of age in its search for an answer to the question of how to reconcile the traditional identity of Islam with the distant and yet imminent modernity, or even post-modernity, of the global age. This question is posed while a new generation is rising in the midst of significant economic, cultural and political problems.

This new generation (or the so-called 'third generation' of the revolution) is a product of the baby boom of the early 1980s. It has no personal memory of the revolution against the Shah, and little or no experience of the 'sacred defence' (the official term of reference for the eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s). Yet nonetheless, the enfranchisement of this very generation is essential for the continued political existence of the Islamic republic as a national polity. In fact, it would be unthinkable for the Islamic republic to keep up the idea of a 'religious revolution' and maintain the legitimacy of a 'religious government' (in a situation totally different from the years of the revolution and the war) without a new sense of 'religious society' and a properly cultivated core recruited from the young generation that would be willing to respect and uphold the religious and cultural values of this society.

In their quest for solutions to urgent problems of the young nation, the religious intellectuals are thus trying to situate the ideas of democracy and civil society within

the Islamic tradition; hence resisting what is seen as the attempt of certain juridical–political tendencies to transform the Islamic republic into an absolutist theocracy by undermining the 'democratic spirit' of the constitution of the republic. Here too Khatami has provided the guidelines:

> My priority is to move within the framework of the law, because it is the law of an Islamic order … In other words, we want security, liberty, justice, participation and development for the nation, all within the framework of law and the Islamic values. (*Ibid*.)

The political significance of the religious intellectuals became increasingly evident in the attention they attracted from the ruling elite themselves. Since May 1997, the conservative political forces have been alerted to the serious political challenge of the reformist intellectuals to their authoritarian style of rule, which they took for granted for almost twenty years. The conservatives are particularly upset by the inclination of the new religious intellectuals to make alliances with forces outside the polity around such 'secular' objectives as 'civil society' and 'freedom of expression'. Yet the religious intellectuals, as the engine of the reform movement, need to expand their sphere of social influence by making these alliances. In this, they follow one of Khatami's most popular and frequently repeated slogans—'freedom for the critics'—particularly for those who do not conform to the dominant politico-religious ideology. Khatami's reform project is thus represented by an intellectual movement that is bent on broadening the domain of national enfranchisement via 'civil society' while keeping the religious symbolism of the state intact. 'We made a revolution in the name of religion, but it led us to create a civil society,' Khatami once asserted (*ibid*.).

The Origins of the Religious Intellectual Movement

The new intellectual movement in Iran has grown from among the religious forces that brought the Islamic republic to power; but its origins go further back in history. It is, in fact, a product of four important events that have marked the recent history of this ancient land: the tobacco movement of 1892; the constitutional revolution of 1905–11; the oil nationalization movement of 1951–3; and the Islamic revolution of 1978–9 (see Keddie 1980, 1981 and Arjomand 1988, 1990). The first generation of modern Iranian intellectuals was faced with the colonial expansion of the West and the beginnings of the breakdown of the traditional social structures in the non-western world (see Algar 1973).[10]

The early Iranian intellectuals were the first to raise the issue of the rule of law, which led up to what is known as 'the constitutional revolution'. The incorporation of the constitutional monarchy into the law was meant to limit the absolute powers of the monarch, which were perceived to be the main obstacle to modern progress. But constitutionalism never found institutional strength and was blatantly undermined by the Pahlavi modernizing dictatorship in the following decades.

Meanwhile, the Islamic ideological movement, consisting of modernist religious intellectuals and religious revivalist clergy, began to assert itself as a serious political force (see Dabashi 1993).[11] The coalition of the religious modernists and the religious revivalists sought to enter politics as a strong force. In fact, it was successful in the following years in making the strongest challenge yet to the Pahlavi regime, a challenge that eventually led to the Islamic revolution, the fall of the monarchy and the institution of an Islamic republic in 1979.

With the Islamic revolution the intellectual environment radically changed. While in the 1960s and 1970s the intellectuals fought for a revolution against monarchic tyranny, in the 1980s they had to defend the revolutionary state against its enemies. In the 1990s, the change was even more radical. Now the post-revolutionary religious souls were faced with the unprecedented task of justifying and at the same time criticizing a religious government in the modern world.

In the 1980s, the revolutionary zealot enforcement of saintly virtues as the only qualification of enfranchisement by the Islamic state had left the nation divided, although this divisive nature of the early revolutionary sense of religious nationhood did not emerge for almost a decade because of the state of security alert caused by ideological, cultural and military threats against the Islamic revolution. Towards the mid-1990s, though, the cracking of revolutionary–ideological solidarity (based on enforcement of public piety and mass mobilization) revealed the divisions of the nation, which were partly a result of new needs and desires, and partly a reflection of the true diversities that were previously somewhat successfully contained or concealed. More than anything else, the economic needs of the nation demanded that the Islamic revolutionary state—with all its emphasis on spirituality, piety and otherworldly salvation—should provide for the 'secular' worldly needs and desires of a modern nation.

With the end of war also came the return of the vast army of young revolutionary enthusiasts, who had fought a heroic war against the external enemy, and now naturally demanded a share in the power, prestige and wealth of the revolutionary state. Other cultural, political, social and economic issues too required urgent attention following the war, such as defining a value system to defend the next generation of the Islamic revolution in a global world, clarifying the extent of the role of religion in the state, attending to the questions of social welfare, health, education and law and order, etc. or deciding on the extent of the role of government in the economy, and the sensitive issue of opening the Iranian economy to the global process.

In the early 1990s under the presidency of the influential cleric Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, the state programme for post-war economic reconstruction whetted people's appetites for economic prosperity. But the failure of the state to maintain a sense of social and economic justice in peacetime (as a result of factional rivalry, economic mismanagement and decline in oil revenues) created a strong sense of social division, which in time became a source of increasing sentiments of discontent, waiting for an opportunity for expression. This was coupled with an intensifying sense of moral decay, which was reflected in expressions of concern (even in the official media) about corruption, violence, crime, drug abuse, prostitution, promiscuity and even homosexuality, which were prohibited by both religion and law.

Considering the huge youth population of Iran (almost half of the population of 65 million are in their teens or early twenties), it was natural that concerns about moral decay were more acute when it came to the nation's youth. This led to open criticisms (even within the revolutionary ranks) of economic corruption, political repression and cultural policies based on regulation or repression of desire. While the official media kept blaming the Western (mainly American) economic sanctions and cultural–communicational invasion for Iran's problems, some printed publications began to offer an outlet for critical views with respect to state policies.

Khatami himself came to the political scene as a reformist religious intellectual, a man of culture and knowledge, equipped with both traditional and modern education; someone who criticized the *status quo*, and was thus deemed by the electorate the best

man to address the political, economic, educational, cultural and entertainment needs of the nation in the global context. The education, cultivation and ultimately enfranchisement of a new generation of youth were arguably his most challenging task.

Moreover, the modern middle class (a product of Pahlavi's modernization), which was virtually disenfranchised by the aggressive push of the jurists to revive the religious traditions, also began to express critical views. The modern middle class had suffered from massive revolutionary purges, as well as social and cultural restrictions. Many millions of the members of the modern middle class had chosen, often reluctantly, to go into exile, depriving the nation of the contributions of millions of its citizens (including many highly educated professionals, technocrats and academics) who did not subscribe to ascetic–revolutionary virtues.

The new intellectual movement therefore emerged in a situation where a shift in the focus of national development seemed inevitable. This shift meant that the concerns about the faith and morality of a society in the throes of decadence should be combined with attempts at fulfilling the social, cultural and economic needs of a young and highly educated nation with great potentials.[12]

Religious Intellectuals and Hermeneutics

I should also stress the hermeneutic nature of the new intellectual movement in Iran. This is clearly a natural consequence of the quest (since the 1970s) to define the modern Islamic polity on the basis of new interpretations of sacred texts. The main concern of the religious intellectuals in this regard is to find acceptance for religious and subsequently political pluralism in the context of Islamic politics. Indeed, over the last four years concern for political pluralism has been the main force behind the inception of politico-religious disputes based on multiple interpretations of sacred texts, considered a time-honoured Islamic tradition by the reformists, and heretical innovation by the conservatives.

These contesting interpretations of Islam certainly have something to do with abstract doctrinal prejudices; but their primary significance is in the serious challenge they have created to the dominance of the conservative Shīʿī jurists over the institutions of power (political, economic and legal). It should be remembered that the main source of the legitimacy of the political, legal and economic power of the conservative Shīʿī juridical establishment is its religious authority, which is derived from its monopoly over what is considered to be the valid interpretation of the Shīʿī religious texts.

Some theologians have attempted to reconcile the traditional religious science of *tafsīr* (exegesis) with the modern science of hermeneutics in the context of Islamic theology. The theologian Mohammad Mojtahed-Shabestari, for example, has used the concept of 'hermeneutic understanding' of the Islamic sacred texts to highlight the limited nature of previous interpretations of such texts by scholastic Muslim jurists—interpretations that, he claims, are rooted in the traditionalist juridical understanding of society, politics, justice, ethics and human rights. He argues that such an understanding has historically limited the practice of the jurists in forming independent authoritative opinions on doctrinal and legal matters (*ijtihād*), and in issuing religious rulings (*fatva*) that are fit to address the modern political, social and economic problems of Muslims. This historical limitation, he stresses, questions the claims that certain interpretations of the sacred texts have eternal value.

According to Shabestari, hermeneutics is a scientific tool for discovering the most historically relevant meanings of the religious texts from among several possible meanings (Mojtahed-Shabestari 1375/1996, 13; see also Ricoeur 1991, 1992). In his view

'understanding' is a historical phenomenon shaped by the same historical processes that have created new conditions and possibilities for varied cultural and linguistic expressions. He echoes German hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer when he writes:

> What is said in a particular historical horizon (based on the historically-specific experiences of human beings of themselves and their world) requires a special type of rendering and a new form of expression in order to be understood in another historical horizon. (Mojtahed-Shabestari 1375/1996, 14; see also Gadamer 1975, 1977)

In this sense, the role of the interpreter of the text in revealing its most historically relevant meaning is fundamental. The preconceptions, pre-judgements, pre-understandings and prejudices of the interpreter play a vital role in making the semantic rules fruitful in revealing the meaning of a text. According to Shabestari, the interpretation of the texts of tradition bent on understanding is in essence a critical engagement with the text by the interpreter. This critical engagement is based on two premises: that understanding is possible only through an interpretative process, and that there is always more than one interpretation of a text. In other words, the text is not the same as its meaning, which is to come out in the interpretative process, nor can the meaning be disconnected from the text, which constrains the degree to which preconceptions of the interpreter can limit alternative meanings.

For Shabestari, the hermeneutic interpretation of the texts of tradition, particularly the sacred texts, is the only means for human beings to understand the collective historical experience of humanity. Otherwise, it would be impossible for human beings belonging to the present historical horizon to understand the humanity of those who belonged to previous historical horizons. Aware of the inability of the hermeneutic approach to understanding the past to be a positive experimental science of history, Shabestari writes:

> In order to perceive the reality and meaningfulness of the understanding of the texts of traditions, it is necessary to accept that we and the human beings from the past possess a common humanity. We should accept that, despite all historical developments that have made our experience different from the experiences of the past generations, we share in certain common and lasting experiences that pertain to our humanity. It is in light of this sharing that we can rediscover our own questions in theirs and find the connection between their answers to our questions. (*Ibid.*, 29–30)

Many of the critics of the hard-line policies of the conservative authorities have adopted the interpretative approach to the understanding of religious traditions. The main thrust of the rhetoric of such critics is to express opposition to what they see as the attempts of the jurists-in-power to interpret the Muslim faith in support of the consolidation of their own political power. These critics also appeal to modern 'rationality' to expose the 'irrationality' and coercive nature of what they see as 'narrow' interpretations of religion and politics.

A daily theme of critique in the burgeoning reformist press over the past four years has been to question the claim of modern religious extremists to be the upholders of the purity of tradition. These extremists are themselves a modern phenomenon, an Iranian scholar argues, living in the modern world and using modern means to invent new versions of traditions (Ashuri 1998, 18–24). Pointing to the imbalance between frequent and overzealous references to the Islamic tradition and the use of modern security organizations and media networks to repress dissent and glorify violence, the

critics of religious extremism express concern that resort to violence with the use of modern techniques is to strengthen a cruel and repressive form of relations of power in the name of a tradition which boasts about its contributions to human civilization, peace, prosperity and spirituality.

The new Muslim intellectuals of the late 1990s thus set out to be the modern critics of their social, cultural and political environment in response to the trend of tradition-alization that prevailed in the political culture in the 1980s. The problem was that in Iran, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, the traditions had already been modernized largely through exogenous influences, particularly in the colonial period. Moreover, the problem of countries like Iran was one of the repercussions of a new phase of modernity, where the validity of all grand ideas and philosophical schools was subject to critique, questioning and re-examination; hence, the desire to return to traditions in order to resist the 'alien' Western modernity, and revive a sense of communal belonging and cultural security (Azimi 1998, 18–25; Shayegan 1992, 1377/1998, 18–26).

In Iran after the revolution, intensely emotional attachments to traditions drastically reduced the chances of any credible critique of the religious political culture (which was considered to be under siege), leading to a situation where the political use of repression and violence was justified as a strictly internal cultural issue. Any critique was dismissed as an insult and disrespect, or accused of being connected with a foreign plot. But in the new intellectual discourse, which emerged after the 1997 elections, respect for 'human dignity' in individual and collective form took priority over respect for a tradition that violated human dignity. The appeal to traditional 'authenticity' advocated by repressive political tendencies, which did not allow for diversity, was often considered by the intellectuals to be flawed.

According to the reformist Muslim intellectuals, just as science and technology in their global expansion have known no cultural boundaries, the modern quest for human dignity could not be confined by cultural limitations (Ashuri 1998, 18–24). They argued that the quest for human dignity, although it did not need to undermine traditional identities, could and should bring into question the repressive and violent nature of a return to an isolationist communal existence, which seeks to impose cultural purity and uniformity on the multicultural fabric of a modern society.

By promoting alternative interpretations of religion and politics in their publications, the intellectuals made a significant effort to form a critical understanding of the internal structures and functions of power. The main characteristic of the new religious intellectual movement in Iran is its attempt to create a balance between its native belonging and the broader modern world. This native discourse contains not only an attachment to the heritage of Iranian–Islamic tradition, but also a preparedness to welcome the opportunities offered by Western modernity. It has already proposed a democratic model of government as a serious alternative to traditional autocracy. The logic of democracy, if not its spirit, is increasingly promoted in reformist publications as an efficient and just method of government.

Yet the reformist intellectuals have had a lot of difficulty in tackling this task. Many believe that this is due to the weakness of the critical tradition in Iran, on the one hand, and the lack of a democratic tradition, on the other. In fact, like other Third World intellectuals, Iranian intellectuals are caught between two difficult tasks: one of 'decon-structing' their own traditions as part of their collective historical experience; and another of 'constructing' a yet undetermined identity, which can accommodate the uncertainties and tremendous opportunities of the modern world (Shayegan 1377/1998, 18–26).

Iranians are generally appalled by the opportunity created for deception and corruption by the official policy of imposing on the public an outward conformity to strict religious codes of behaviour. Over the last four years, the reformist press has become the medium of the intellectuals who have made it their business to disclose what they have seen as deception and corruption in positions of authority guarded by traditional sanctity. The growing trend towards talking openly about formerly taboo issues such as abuse of power under religious immunity, economic gains of the religious authorities and the failure of religious politics to provide social and economic justice and guarantee individual rights can be better understood in this context.

The preponderance of religious politics in post-revolutionary Iran has resulted in the critical engagement of Iranian intellectuals with their religious traditions. This may be the most significant feature of the current intellectual life in Iran, and could initiate a serious religious and political reformation. At stake here is the quest for the redefinition of the parameters of political legitimacy.

An Interpretative Contest for Power

According to the young jurist and theologian Mohsen Kadivar, the legitimacy of the Islamic political authority is based on both the 'rational justification' that it offers for its own exercise of power, and the consent of the people (Kadivar 1376/1997, 41–3). Kadivar has categorized the various theories of state in the Shī'ī *fiqh* (jurisprudence) in relation to the thesis of *velayat-e faqih* (the politico-religious supreme authority of the jurist) and on the basis of their views of the sources of legitimacy of political power. Digging in more than a thousand years of Shī'ī juridical tradition (*fiqh*), he highlights the lack of a detailed argument among the Shī'ī jurists until the modern period about a coherent political philosophy. Indeed, apart from scattered attempts by the early jurists to argue for the authority of appointed jurists in religious matters (*shar*') and the rule of the legitimate king in secular affairs ('*urf*), the bulk of political statements of the jurists belong to recent times.

Since the teachings of Islam have made it clear that God is the ultimate source of rightful legitimacy in all aspects of life, the main issue in Kadivar's discussion of legitimacy in Islamic political thought is to juxtapose two main competing views of the role of religion in politics (*ibid.*, 52). One view believes that God has relegated political authority over a people to a 'chosen' group (the Shī'ī jurists), and another insists that God has invested the people themselves with the authority to determine their political destiny.

According to the proponents of the first view, the divine authority in political and social management of the community (which is directly relegated to the Prophet and the immaculate Shī'ī Imams) could be extended to 'just jurists' in the absence of the Prophet and the Imāms (in the period of the great concealment or *ghabat-e kobra*). In this view, the political authority of the divine is directly invested in the qualified jurists, and thus the consent of the people is immaterial. People are thus obliged to accept and obey the rulings of the appointed jurists. Government and the management of political affairs belong to the jurists and obedience is the duty of the people. According to the second view, however, God has conferred the political management of the Muslim community upon the people themselves as long as the principles of the faith are not violated. In this latter view, the role of the jurists is reduced to a supervisory one allowing the compatibility of the rule of the people with the religious laws to be ensured.

The critical position of the reformist tendencies after the 1997 elections with respect to theocratic interpretations of *velayat-e faqih* is a public manifestation of the opposing views of the relationship between religion and politics. It amounted to a direct challenge to the political power of the conservative jurist–rulers, which had remained virtually uncontested. Not surprisingly, this challenge involved new interpretations of religious texts. The main question was whether the authority of the state was divine, or emanated from basic rights of the people and the will of the nation.

A prominent critic of the absolutist understandings of the *valayat-e faqih* is the lay philosopher of religion, Abdokarim Soroush, who has spoken of the 'revival of religion'; and in the heated atmosphere of accusations of heresy and apostasy, he is at pains to declare that his interpretation of religion is not a heresy. The long historical background of religious reformism in Iran has convinced the reform-minded Soroush of a major difference between the traditional and modern Muslim reformers. His view is that the traditional reformers (since medieval times) have believed that there was a timeless essence to the Sharīʿa that must be kept immune against the influence of the 'eclectics' and 'sophists'. The present-day reformers, on the other hand, have the more difficult task of reconciling 'eternity and change' (see Soroush 1374/1995). This reconciliation, according to Soroush, has been needed to provide a balanced relationship between tradition and modernity, which would not fall into the trap of traditionalist and modernist extremism.

He also invokes the dialogical history of exegesis in Shīʿī Islam, and particularly the history of various understandings of the Sharīʿa, to dispute the views that advocate a prohibition on fresh interpretations of the Sharīʿa. In his theory of 'contraction and expansion of the Sharīʿa', Soroush refers to the Sharīʿa as 'silent' (*samet*), which does not express any explicit meaning, and suggests that the meaning of the Sharıʿa emerges out of the interaction of various understandings put forward by competing interpretations (*ibid.*, 181). Obviously, his theory of 'contraction and expansion' has explicit political implications with respect to tackling the claims of the official clergy to the exclusivity of religious knowledge.

Soroush asserts, for example, that 'in the context of the theory of contraction and expansion, it is fundamentally impossible to conceive of a class or group that bears and preserves an official understanding of religion' (*ibid.*, 35). He rejects such an official understanding because it is offered as 'an exclusive religious ideology' by those who get their 'power and subsistence' from it, whose 'material and worldly interests are mixed' and whose political power base and material survival are derived from it:

> The matter of religion is too great an issue to be exclusively entrusted to the clergy. A clergy that supports itself through religion will gradually be converted to a body whose work will be aimed at preserving itself. When a person's livelihood depends on confirming and supporting the organisation of clergy, how can he think freely? (Soroush 1374/1995, 25–31)

Besides challenging attempts by an official class of theologians to monopolize religious knowledge, Soroush has tackled such political concepts as freedom, pluralism, democracy, human rights and civil society. He presents freedom and religion as mutually inclusive. 'Only free people can guard religion,' he argues, 'and it is in the shadow of such freedom that individuals can defend the religious life' (*ibid.*). This priority of freedom over belief, he adds, is what makes religious belief a meaningful experience rather than a mechanical discharge of duty.

Concerning the model of political rule, Soroush advocates a pluralist democracy in which the clergy as much as any other group have the right and obligation to participate in politics. In this sense, the clergy are not entitled to any special privilege as far as participation in politics is concerned; rather their desire for power must be determined by the respect and acceptability they are accorded by the nation.

On the concept of *velayat-e faqih*, Soroush's approach is based on his assumption that in the modern world a fundamental change has taken place in popular attitudes toward rights and obligations. He writes:

> In the modern world speaking of human rights is desirable because we live in an age when people are more concerned with discovering and understanding their rights than their obligations. That the issue of human rights in our age is highly regarded, despite the abuses that are perpetrated in its name, is of extreme importance, and justifies every effort at its understanding. (Soroush 1376/1997, 419–43)

According to Soroush, what makes the acceptance of the current concept of *velayat-e faqih* and the Islamic government difficult is that this government is based on 'obligation,' whereas in the mind of modern humanity and the majority of modern political philosophies, the state ought to be subject to the 'rights' of the people. Government is no longer an instrument for the exertion of authority of the rulers over the ruled, he argues, but an instrument for rendering service and management.

Some intellectuals have advocated a mystical (*irfani*) interpretation of the Islamic traditions as most compatible with the spiritual and humanistic intent of religion. The main argument of the intellectual proponents of mysticism (*irfan*) is that the Iranian mystical tradition has fundamental compatibility with the requirements of freethinking and even modern political pluralism. In this perspective, the religious tradition of *irfan* is promoted mainly for its concern with the inward aspect of religious experience, and its scorn for external public piety achieved through strict regulation of social behaviour (Ashuri 1998). Accordingly, *irfan* is rooted in a tradition of interpretative understanding of sacred texts, which has refined and deepened the human understanding of religion, and has shown tolerance for multiple interpretations of religion.

Such understandings of religion have an affinity with the views of religious existentialist philosophers (e.g. Karl Jaspers), in which religion is defined as an experience irreducible to any specific form of conceptual or rational order, an experience that instils a moral anxiety in human consciousness. This anxiety is understood as an inner force, which makes faith a human affair whereby human beings remain faithful to their humanity in connection with a moral order that transcends social, political and legal systems, a moral order deeply rooted in human freedom and dignity. According to this alternative view of religion, faith should not be equated with a certain traditional form of order, which existed once and should be recreated or revived uncritically. God could not have intended for His religion to become limited to a specific form of outer appearances that marked a historically specific form of traditional order (Ashuri 1998).

This conception of religion is one of an expanded understanding of the sacred, which is connected at the same time with the depths of the esoteric and ontological relationship between man and his origin. In this sense, religion is a type of inner and eternal connection between God and human beings that, while overriding specific cultural and national boundaries, makes its presence felt in countless cultural, behavioural and institutional contexts.

Conclusion

In the political environment of Iran since the May 1997 elections, almost all aspects of the state—from its political philosophy, to its religious doctrines, to its specific social and economic policies—have been re-examined, and as a result their validity has been contested. At issue was a quest to redefine Iran as a modern religious polity and to reconstruct the society on a yet undetermined set of moral values that can, at one and the same time, preserve a religious identity and forge a modern nationality. In these uncharted territories, every aspect of life was affected by an intense political struggle, manifested at the rhetorical and institutional levels in the competition between two main political factions: the reformists and the conservatives. There were numerous examples of this kind of competition on a daily basis, reflected in the vocal criticisms of the reformist activists against the conservative clergy in power, on the one hand, and the heavy-handed reactions of the latter, on the other. Persecution, prosecution and sometimes imprisonment of reformist religious intellectuals by the conservative-dominated judiciary are a reflection of this political contest.

The reformist religious intellectuals were predominantly the children of the revolution. They were often the former students or scholars of the religious centres of learning. But their dismay at how Islam had been presented in the previous two decades pushed them towards thinking of a serious reformation in the religious tradition. They focused their attention on re-examining and reviving those aspects of the Shīʿī tradition that had been neglected or pushed to the margins by the dominant juridical thought. Their effort was directed at reviving the tradition of tolerance and pluralism (*tasahol va tasamoh*), which they believed would reflect the more profound side of Islam by its emphasis on reason, freedom, justice, natural human rights, the responsibilities of a religious government with respect to the needs of human beings in this world and the attention given by Islam to building a civilized and at the same time spiritual social existence as a prelude to otherworldly salvation.

The activation of such intellectual trends in the religious community since the 1997 elections has contributed to a discursive understanding of religion, which promises to make it compatible with the modern concept of human dignity while freeing it from constraining behavioural and cultural codes. Politically speaking, it also promises to open up further the domain of the public sphere, contributing to the emergence of a grass-roots democratic movement. The defence of 'civil society' by reformist Muslim intellectuals, in the name of protection of an important part of social and communal activities against what they see as the repressive intrusions of the state and its official juridical version of religion, has already raised public awareness and interest with regard to individual democratic rights, which is reflected in the increased popularity of electoral politics.

The views of many of the reformist intellectuals represented the quest of the former revolutionaries to resolve the paradox of tradition–modernity in order to reconcile Islam with democracy, and redefine the relationship between the state and religion. The question that dominated the agenda of reform in Iran during Khatami's first term in office was how to address the conflict between traditional and modern understandings of the relationship between religion, state and society.

The most powerful political force arrayed against various shades of reformist forces over the last four years was the 'conservative' alliance, which controlled the main apparatuses of power. The conservative jurists, as the core of this alliance, often

appealed to literal interpretations of religious texts, symbols and rituals, in order to legitimize an increasing concentration of power in their own hands in defence of what they saw as the purity of Islamic faith and culture. The traditionalist juridical understanding of the relationship between religion and politics had been bolstered by the success of the Shī'ī religious establishment throughout Iranian history and gained an increasing amount of political legitimacy in the eye of the population (Akhavi 1980, 1983; Fischer 1980; Fischer & Abedi 1990). The ascendance of the Shī'ī jurists to power after the victory of the Islamic revolution owed a lot to the success of the politically minded clergy in eroding the political legitimacy of the monarchic political order, replacing it with their own religiously based political authority.

However, as we have seen, with the establishment of the Islamic republic, two opposing views emerged with respect to the source of political legitimacy in the process of drafting the constitution: one that located the legitimacy of Islamic government in divinity; and the other that saw the people as the source of the legitimacy of Islamic political authority. The clerical proponents of the first view successfully used their religiously based political legitimacy to include the traditional concept of *velayat-e faqih* as the source of the authority of the burgeoning Islamic polity. But the proponents of the will of the people enshrined in the constitution the republican principle of popular political participation as a cornerstone of the identity of the state as a modern republic.

The current struggle between the conservative and reformist political discourses is rooted in the early contest between the two concepts of legitimacy. Since 1997, this struggle has been waged predominantly over two readings of *velayat-e faqih*. Although this struggle began in a religious context, with the intertwining of religion, politics and society in Iran since the Islamic revolution, religious disputes were inevitably extended from government circles and religious seminaries to the public arena. The dispute over the doctrinal issue of *velayat-e faqih* became the subject of broad political debate, making technical religious issues into issues of public policy which were everybody's business and open to everybody's judgement.

The debate over the question of *velayat-e faqih* represented an attempt to redefine the relationship between religion and state, and to clarify the form and nature of the Islamic republic as a religious–national polity. The struggle between the two versions of *velayat-e faqih* was characterized mainly by attempts to offer new interpretations of religious traditions to make them adaptable to the requirements of running a modern national polity. The reformist religious intellectuals, in fact, considered themselves collectively as a seat of alternative religious and political thinking in Iran. They offered a religious thinking that was loyal to the principal canons of Shī'ī Islam, but tried, in Mohammad Iqbal's words, to 'reconcile eternity with change'.

In this paper, I have tried to offer a broad view of intellectual life in Iran today. I have particularly stressed the emergence of new forms of politico-religious critique that offer, in turn, new understandings of the role of religion in politics and society. These views are offered in the context of an intense struggle between various contesting discourses of power. They have taken various forms of expression, ranging from theological and juridical disputes, to mystical and philosophical arguments, to modern political and social debates. But because the Shī'ī religious tradition has become the cornerstone of social, political and cultural life in Iran since the Islamic revolution of 1979, they all play a part in the effort to offer alternative views of this widely shared religious faith and culture.

NOTES

1. Dr Mahmoud Alinejad is an Iranian scholar based in Iran. He is conducting research on the emergence of the public sphere in Iran within a programme of 'Transnational society, media, and citizenship' in association with the International Institute of Asian Studies and the Amsterdam School of Social Science Research.
2. After a period of decline in public interest in elections, more than 80 per cent of eligible voters took part in the 1997 presidential elections. Khatami won these elections with more than 70 per cent of the votes.
3. I use the labels 'reformist' and 'conservative' because of their significance in the current political language in Iran, but one should always be aware of their multiple and shifting meanings.
4. A case in point is the recent use of fax and internet technologies by one elderly jurist (Ayatollah Montazeri)—whose alternative ideas and views on the role of religion in politics have landed him under house-arrest as a political dissident—to propagate his views all over the world from his home in Qom, and the state's attempt firstly to block and then to limit the spread of such ideas and views.
5. It was estimated that 'in a span of thirty months the number of newspaper titles rose more than four times, and the circulation figure reached 3 million (about four times what it was six months before May 1997' (see Rezaie 2000).
6. Excerpts of Khatami's interview with the Iranian Daily *Jomhuri Eslami* (*Islamic Republic*) in February 1997, cited from *A Collection of the Transcripts of the Interviews and Speeches of Seyyed Muhammad Khatami*, Tehran, March 1997.
7. Excerpts of Khatami's speech at the University of Shiraz quoted in *Salam*, 22 March, 1997: cited from *A Collection of the Transcripts … ,* March 1997.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Excerpts of Khatami's resignation letter of 1992, as printed in the Iranian newspaper *Salam*.
10. The first generation of modern Iranian intellectuals, men such as Akhund-zadeh, Malkam Khan and Mirza Aqa Khan, were mainly statesmen and social reformers who lived at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.
11. In the 1960s, such figures as Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Ali Sharı'ati, Mahmoud Taleqani, Mehdi Bazargan and Morteza Motahhari gave a definite ideological formulation to the Islamic revolutionary movement.
12. In Iran at the end of the millennium, there were about twenty million school students, two million university students and millions of graduates.

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