

This is a preprint version of a review essay to be published in Journal of Religious and Political Practice, Vol. 3, Issue 1 (2017). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20566093.2017.1292173>

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Review Essay

## (Theological and Institutional Soul-Searching Aside) Will Re-Problematizing Iran's Islamic State à la "Religious Secularity" Require Another Islamic State?

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Naser Ghobadzadeh, *Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), xi+267 pages, ISBN-10: 0199391173.

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What sort of state does the "religious secularity" paradigm entail in the context of the history and theory of the formation and practice of the modern state in Europe and elsewhere? Which constitutive property of "religious secularity" may turn out to be the most crucial in answering this question? Admittedly, these are not exactly the kind of questions that Naser Ghobadzadeh, an Australian-based political theorist, poses in his well-argued book titled *Religious Secularity*. Yet they are but some of the questions, I submit, that this book does lead its reader to ask. Ghobadzadeh frames the subject matter of his book as the emergent religious counter-discourse in postrevolutionary Iran that highlights "the paradoxes inherent in the Islamic state ideal" (2) and that provides religious justification for an alternative that he calls the "secular democratic" state (6). The premise of both the advocates of this counter-discourse as well as the book's author is that the strong ideological and institutional association of religion and the state which we came to witness in the wake of the 1979 revolution in Iran—or the "unification of religion and state" (4) in the author's words—is detrimental to religion itself. Hence the perceived need for "the emancipation of religion from the state" (2).

As the book's subtitle signals, the author takes the reader on a tour of the doctrinal origins of and subsequent innovations for the Shi'ite Islamic-jurisprudential state that came into existence in Iran following its 1979 revolution, and then of a religiously grounded case for dismantling the institutionalized "clerical hegemony" centered around it. Based on wide-ranging English, Persian, and Arabic-language sources, this well documented and passionately argued book will serve as an excellent introduction to what the author characterizes as "the complex and unorthodox characteristics of the political dimensions of the current religious reformation in Iran" (4). Arguably, however, the primary value of this book lies in the thought-provoking nature of the book-length argument that the author lays out. This stems partly from the lucidness of the stance the author takes in framing his subject matter, but also from the fact that he has done this within the framework of Western scholarship. Many works written by Iran's prominent religious reformist thinkers have been translated into English. Numerous analytical works based on the reading of their original texts in Persian have also been published in English. But we rarely see Iranian reformist thinkers themselves, writing outside Iran and in English, directly engage Western scholarship by positioning their arguments amongst the existing debates within that scholarship. Obviously, doing so would expose their thought and arguments to a different kind of scrutiny than they face debating in their local vernacular. The thought-provoking character I find in Ghobadzadeh's book results from the fact that he has accomplished the rare feat.

For a start, take the notion of "religious secularity." While acknowledging the novelty of the term he has adopted as the book's title, Ghobadzadeh argues that the notion of religious

secularity “draws attention to the detrimental impact upon both religion and state in their unification” (4). He also suggests that this “seemingly oxymoronic term” symbolically captures the reformationist “vision for the emancipation of religion from the state” (2). To be sure, to the extent that the term is meant to convey the sense that the kind of secularity that the Iranian religious reformationists aspire to will not seek to suppress or privatize religion, it seems to serve its purpose. Upon reflection, however, one may argue that the conceptualization of the constitutive relations between religion and secularity remains too reductive. In the same vein, one may question whether what is meant by the unification of religion and state—or Iran’s postrevolutionary Islamic state having “transcendental claims” (7)—on the one hand, and “widespread domination of clergy in the sociopolitical domain” (28) or what the author fleetingly terms “clerical hegemony” (142), on the other, can be equated, and if so, on what level of reality or analysis.

In the remaining part of this review essay, therefore, I will attempt to stimulate discussion by engaging part of Ghobadzadeh’s argument with regard to his notion of religious secularity. In his attempt to separate his critical discussion of varying religious justifications for the Islamic state and an alternative “secular democratic” state both from the debate over secularization as a historical process in the sociology of religion as well as the issue of secularism as an ideology “for the sake of [authoritarian] dominance” in the Muslim-majority countries, Ghobadzadeh insists that by the notion of secularity, he does not mean to introduce a “new political paradigm” (9). Rather, in line with a conception of secularity as an analytical approach to religion-state relations as well as a “neutral framework capable of accommodating a broad range of religions and beliefs” (Scharffs 2011: 110), he argues that it can be construed narrowly as “a political project . . . that promotes the institutional separation of religion and state” (9). As for the latter (i.e., state), after supplying the vernacular term *doulat* to specify what he means by it, Ghobadzadeh insists on deferring the “issue of ‘what kind of state’” (8). For, while implicitly acknowledging the expected need to “negotiate[e] religion-state relations” (8) in the event of actual institutional separation, he contends that the “prevailing circumstances in Iran” are such that the “reformist scholars have focused on explaining why “the unification of religion and state” lacks the proper religious basis and why adopting the alternative is “imperative,” rather than reflecting on “how to go about implementing” an alternative “secular democratic” state (6). With regard to the connotation of “secular” in the notion of secularity, Ghobadzadeh further suggests that the “secular” in the Islamic context encompasses a much broader domain than in the Western Judeo-Christian context in that in the former the secular may include human knowledge of religion whereas in the latter the secular tends to be construed as something antithetical to the religious (7). Understood in this way, religious secularity may not, after all, be such a novel state of affairs in the context of Islamic history, as Ghobadzadeh so suggests.

Be that as it may, and regardless of the stage at which Iran’s “broader enterprise of religious reformation” (4) finds itself currently, however, one aspect that cannot be left out in re-problematizing Iran’s postrevolutionary Islamic state is the fact that it is a modern state that is the subject of discussion. Hence the aforementioned set of questions. The pertinence of these questions are clear on two levels. First, on the conceptual-cum-analytical level, whatever secularity that those Iranian religious reformationists envision—and, for that matter, whatever religion that they seek to liberate from the state—they cannot simply be timeless entities that one may simply regain or rediscover (although I fully concur that subjectively they may be imagining that way). Rather, they have to be modern constructions in the sense that Talal Asad (2001: 217, 221) remind us of. The point is that, analytically speaking, both “religion” and “secularity” are not only historically emergent and contextually variant but particularly modern constructions that are linked to each other in mutually constitutive ways, and that the key link between those two is the context-specific, historical workings of the political power commonly known as the modern state. The suggestion here is that rather than treating religion and the secular two dichotomous options and then rejecting the dichotomy as “false” (14) or “reductive” (214), we need to pay adequate attention to the process of how one comes to redefine and regenerate the other, and vice versa, and to the role of the modern state in this process. In this conceptualization, freeing “religion” from state control—or for that matter, from political use by the state—would be a mutually redefining, prolonged process of resecularization, rather than a one-time, surgical-operation-type separation between two autonomous “things.” In the modern Iranian context, we first witnessed a larger trend in which the modernizing

Pahlavi state, starting during the interwar period and continuing through out the post-WWII period, redefining the secular and curtailing the public role of religion.<sup>1</sup> In that wake, it became the cornerstone of Ayatollah Khomeini's brand of Islamic revivalism to resist what he called the "slogan of the separation of religion from politics." In the corresponding fashion, as Ghobadzadeh points it out, we now witness the Iranian postrevivalist religious reformationists arguing for downscaling what they call the inflated expectation of religion in the realm of governance (71). As the postrevolutionary expansion of the role of religion in governance came to be institutionalized through the working of Iran's Islamic state, this "resizing of the proper realm of religion" (Matsunaga 2011: 375)—if and when it happens—will also have to be worked out and institutionalized, at the end of the day, by the sovereign state of the day. The point here is that these concrete trends and counter-trends well corroborate the analytical claims that religion and secularism/secularity as empirical phenomena are mutually dependent modern constructions (Asad 2001: 217) as well as that religion and modern governance are constitutively intertwined (Mahmood 2006: 325).

Second, on the social and political level, given that those who control the rein of Iran's Islamic state today, together with those who constitute their social base, will most likely continue to counter any effects of the religious reformationist counter-discourse, a fuller picture of contentious dynamics between the "Islamic state" and the "religious secularity" camps must include the dimension of strategic interaction between the two. In this regard, as we have continuously witnessed since the 1979 revolution, those who have a grip on Iran's Islamic state arguably have maintained their overall upper hands, due not so much to the religious justifications for the "unification of religion of state" and whatever authority arising from them as to all those resources that Iran's Islamic state as a strong modern state have made available to themselves. A cursory glance at Iran's pro-"unification" principlists (*osulgarayan*) and India's Hindu right would show how similar their respective modus operandi are in terms of using all the institutional and ideological resources of the modern state to "lead the charge against who do not conform to its version of 'national culture'" (Chatterjee 1998: 347). It is worth mentioning, in this regard, that some rightist "religious intellectuals" from among Iran's domestic opponents of the religious reformationists have argued that there can never be religion-friendly "political secularism"—their term for institutional separation between religion and the state—in that political secularism is based on and derived from philosophical secularism which is by nature humanist, thus seemingly agreeing with Asad (1999: 185; 2003: 191-192). This indicates, at the minimum, that political struggles over institutionalizing secularity are bound to be rather fierce.

Given, however, that real-world authoritarian rulers who appear to have all the reasons to be able to survive any crisis do sometime fall, let us assume—for the sake of argument—that those who favor "religious secularity" may eventually see a day when they emerge victorious in Iran. Suppose, however, that the remnants of those favoring the "unification of religion and state" are still around. Then, under such circumstances, the post-"unification" Iranian state will have to do what competent modern states always do, that is, to reshape the form religion takes in public and private and the subjectivities it endorses (Mahmood 2006: 326) in such a way that the "religious secularity" state may not relapse into the "unification" state. It is for this reason that the Iranian religious reformationists' claim that they are in favor only of separating religion from the state but not of separating religion from politics (8) seems rather problematic. For, as Asad (1999: 180; 2003: 183) and Mahmood (2006: 328) have suggested, secularity cannot but be normative in the sense that it allows only certain religions, and the corresponding subjectivities, that are capable of acting in accord with a modality of particular political rule, or the rules of proper political conduct. To be sure, competent modern states—both secular and religious ones—do sometimes "reform" institutionalized social practices, including religious rituals and laws, on interestingly similar "public interest" grounds (see, for example, Chatterjee 1998: 353-358; Matsunaga 2009: 478).<sup>2</sup> Given the magnitude of the task of regulating and allowing only certain religious forms, values, embodied practices, and subjectivities to enter Iran's political sphere, can the post-"unification" state eschew becoming a theologian of its own?

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<sup>1</sup> Saba Mahmood (2006: 326) rather convincingly points out, however, that secularism has sought—in many different national contexts—not so much to banish religion from the public domain but to reshape the form it takes, the subjectivities it endorses, and the epistemological claims it can make. The Pahlavi-era efforts in Iran also seem to confirm her analysis.

<sup>2</sup> In a more recent case, the Iranian parliament was able to overcome religiously-based opposition from an eminent Islamic jurist (*marja'-e taqlid*) to an inheritance law reform by claiming that, in reforming the law toward gender equality, it had relied on a *fatwa* of the ruling jurist (*vali-ye faqih*), that is, the head of the Islamic state. See "The Parliament Speaker's Reply to Ayatollah Sobhani on the Women's Inheritance Law" (in Persian), *Khabaronline*, January 29, 2009.