

RELIGIOUS SECULARITY: A THEOLOGICAL CHALLENGE TO THE ISLAMIC STATE

Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State,
Naser Ghobadzadeh, Oxford University Press, 2015, 267 p.
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Based on the lived experience of an Islamic state in Iran since 1979, Ghobadzadeh problematizes the concept of Islamic state theoretically and questions the state-religion relationship within Iranian context. Iran has been going through the first modern Islamic state experience under the rule of the clergy. Ghobadzadeh argues that the theoretical ideal of the Islamic state has been crippled with the economic, socio-political, and theological contradictions of reality, and the notion of the Islamic state has been largely contested in Iran. The systematic contestation of Islamic state by the religious reformist scholars gave rise to a counter-discourse that Ghobadzadeh names as 'religious secularity.' By the oxymoronic term 'religious secularity', Ghobadzadeh meant 'the vision for the emancipation of religion from the state' (p. 2).

The book 'Religious Secularity: A Theoretical Challenge to

the Islamic State' is composed of six chapters besides an introduction and a conclusion. In the introduction, Ghobadzadeh elaborates on the concept of religious secularity. Firstly, he clarifies the difference between the terms secularism and religious secularity. Accordingly, secularism meant "emancipation of state and economy from religion." Religious secularity, however, concerns religion itself, and implies "liberation of religion from the state" (p. 5). Ghobadzadeh identifies two components of the concept of religious secularity. These are: 1. The disadvantages of the Islamic state to religion, which stems from Iran's experience of political instrumentalization of religion by the Islamic state to justify state policy (p. 5). 2. The argument that Islam is compatible with the secular democratic state. Departing from this argument, religious secularity discourse aims to "invalidate the religious basis of the unification of religion and state and to offer

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religious justification for their separation” (p. 6). Ghobadzadeh’s articulation of religious secularity does not consider ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ as separate categories. Contrary to the Judeo-Christian understanding that holds “being secular as antithetical to being religious,” the boundaries of the two categories are blurred within religious secularity (p. 7). While conflating the two terms into one, Ghobadzadeh points the necessity to disassociate religious knowledge from religion itself. Then, religious secularity is not about understanding religion itself, but understanding “the process by which human beings develop knowledge of religion in an earthly context” (p. 7). In challenging the general Western dichotomy between the religious and the secular, Ghobadzadeh affirms that “in the Islamic context, to be religious is to be secular and to be secular is to be religious” (p. 7). Religious secularity in the Islamic context does not negate the public involvement of religion and its contribution to the civil society; thus, religion has a role both in public life and in the political process. However, “it insists upon the importance of an institutional division of state from religion” (p. 8).

Regarding the historical evolution of the religious secularity discourse in Iran, Ghobadzadeh informs that it first developed by Abdolkarim Soroush in a series of articles he had written in 1989. Soroush was joined by other scholars, journalists and politicians, who became known as ‘religious reformists’ (p. 25). Since then, religious reformists have been influential in demonstrating the po-

larization between the clergy in power and their critics who engaged in a new phase of enquiry that criticized jurisprudential state in Iran (pp. 25-26). The six chapters of the book scrutinize the politico-philosophical arguments of religious reformists against the religious claims of the Islamic clerical state, and portray their endeavor to articulate to a new model of secularity.

The first chapter deals with the “question of divine versus popular sovereignty and introduces challenges to the notion that state authority in the contemporary world may be derived from divine resources” (p. 27). Firstly, the concept of sovereignty in the Shiite school is discussed. According to Twelver Shi’a understanding, “the right to govern was given by God solely to the 12 Imams, all of whom were ancestors of Imam Ali and believed to be infallible” (p. 32). However, among the 12 Imams, only Imam Ali could form a government as the fourth caliph. The governments during the time of the Imams after Ali were illegitimate, and the 12th Imam, Mahdi, who is believed to be in occultation, is expected to return to form a just government. Departing from this belief, the Twelver Shi’a scholars argued that God did not appoint a specific person to rule in the occultation era. Although Safavid era witnessed legitimization of state authority by employing Shiite thought, the politicization of clergy in modern era started with the Constitutional Revolution and led to development of theories regarding political sovereignty among the clergy. However, the politically polarized

clergy of the time fortified the view that divine sovereignty could not be exercised by an Islamic state; rather the people, who would be guided by the clergy, had the right to political authority. Ayatollah Khomeini was the first cleric who articulated the concept of an Islamic state on the basis of divine sovereignty during the occultation era. Although the people vested with the role of electing the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, this role was bound to religious principle. Thus, Ghobadzadeh argues, “the Constitution and Khomeini’s thought on divine or popular sovereignty vindicates the doctrine of divine sovereignty” (p. 42).

The debate on divine or popular sovereignty is a major discussion in the religious secularity discourse. In challenging the notion of divine sovereignty as the source of authority in the Islamic state, the religious reformist scholars developed three approaches. One is the jurisprudential approach advocated by Mohsen Kadivar, Ayatollah Montazeri and Hasan Yousefi-Eshkavari. They reconsidered the Islamic sources to challenge the jurists’ divine authority, to develop a theory of elect against the theory of appointment, and to question the religious basis for the notion of divine sovereignty. The second approach is from a historical perspective, advocated by Mehdi Haeri-Yazdi, Kadivar, Mojtabeh-Shabasteri, Eshkevari, and Bazargan. This perspective highlighted the difference between prophecy and caliphate, portrayed Velayet-e Faqih as a recent innovation in the Shiite school, considered the prophet’s role as a messenger to

demonstrate his governance as an historical fact rather than a divine mission, and analyzed the acts and deeds of the infallible Imams none of whom claimed a divine right to political authority. The third challenge has been originated from a non-jurisprudential perspective, advocated by Soroush and Mojtabeh-Shabasteri. Soroush differentiated between religion and religious knowledge and argued that governance was a non-jurisprudential issue (pp. 60-61). Mojtabeh-Shabasteri employed a hermeneutic approach to the Quran and demonstrated that there is a conversational correspondence between the text and the reader which leads to many readings to Quran according to the pre-knowledge and pre-supposition of the reader, and there cannot be a neutral reading of the holy text (p. 69).

The second chapter is about the process of rise of a jurisprudential state which Ghobadzadeh refers paradoxically as seeding secularity. He examines Khomeini’s introduction of the concepts of ‘absolute mandate of the jurist’ and ‘expedient fiqh’ in the early years of the Islamic state in order to justify and legitimize the political decisions by the ruling clergy that would not be religiously justified otherwise. Khomeini’s invention of these concepts as a method of governance in Islamic state to overcome the discrepancy between religious precepts and realities of governance led to the formation of a jurisprudential state. The notion of jurisprudential state has been challenged by the religious reformers as being against the spirit of religiosity since it disregards eth-

ical aspect and led them to “reclaim the non-jurisprudential dimensions of Islam” (p. 85). Religious reformists argued that the unification of religion and state reduced Islam to jurisprudence and led to hypocrisy and corruption in the Islamic community that harmed genuine religiosity (pp. 74-95).

Ghobadzadeh devotes the third chapter to the discussion of how practical consequences of the formation of a jurisprudential state has given rise to the religious secularity discourse in Iran. Titled as ‘Religious Rationale for Separation,’ the third chapter explores the religious motivations of scholars in challenging the Islamic state and the search of these scholars for “an alternative to expedient fiqh that would discharge religion from governmental responsibility” (p. 102). The religious reformists assert the necessity to differentiate religion from political ideology in order to prevent social disillusionment with religion stemming from the unrealistic expectations created by the all-encompassing Islam of the Iranian state. Religious secularity discourse, Ghobadzadeh argues, “promotes the notion that Islam does not include a blueprint for governance” (p. 116). This argument is based on two grounds: 1. The extra-religious nature of governance; 2. The unification of religion and governance that attempted to apply jurisprudential solutions to the country’s sociopolitical and economic problems expanded the functions and competency of fiqh in a way to attribute political authority to the jurists solely on the basis of their competency in fiqh that

would not be entitled to rule otherwise (p. 120).

The fourth chapter of the book explores the political construction of clericalism. The jurisprudential nature of the Islamic state in Iran bestowed the clerics a unique position in political leadership and led to what Ghobadzadeh refers as ‘clericalism.’ Shiism has essentially been an apolitical tradition. After establishment of Qom seminary in 1921, the dominant tendency among the leading Shiite clergy was in accomplice with the tradition of political quietism. Political engagement of some clergy, most notably Ayatollah Kashani and Navvab-Safavi, were marginal to the mainstream Shiism, and yet, they both did not advocate for the political leadership of the clergy as their religious right (p. 135). Ayatollah Khomeini was the first Shiite cleric who propagated the idea of the direct rule of the clergy as their “right and responsibility to ensure the implementation of Shari’a” (p. 142). The institutionalization of Khomeini’s idea sustained with the acceptance of the second draft constitution written by the Assembly of Experts in 1980. Today, the clerics occupy not only the constitutional governmental institutions but also many administrative positions in almost all state organizations, and “any discussion of clerics returning to mosques and seminaries has been totally marginalized in the official political lexicon” (p. 148).

Ghobadzadeh discusses the clerical opposition against the clericalism of the Islamic state in Iran in the fifth chapter of the book and portrays how

the anti-clerical arguments within the ranks of the clergy contributed to the discourse of religious secularity. The clericalism of the Islamic state generated “a new generation of high-ranking clerics, such as Mesbah-Yazdi, Makarem-Shirazi, Nouri Hamedani, Javadi Amoli, Sobhani, Safi-Golpayegani, who unconditionally subscribe to the politico-religious discourse constituted by Khomeini” (p. 151). However, many high-ranking Ayatollahs, such as Marashi-Najafi and Golpayegani, and Grand Ayatollahs such as Araki, Khomeini and Sistani either remained quite on the issue of the leadership of the clergy or expressed their objection. The objections against clericalism by Ayatollahs Shariatmadari and Montazeri even led to fierce conflicts between the two and the clerics in power. Ghobadzadeh further argues that not only Sunni Muslims but also the senior Shiite clerics in Iraq and Lebanon have also rejected the idea of the political leadership by the clergy, and neither Sunni and nor Shi’a Muslims have been activated to establish an Islamic state after the Iranian example (p. 169).

The last chapter of the book explores the contradictions and paradoxes of the clerical hegemony portrayed in the arguments of religious scholars who contributed to the discourse of religious secularity. Ghobadzadeh discusses Ali Shariati’s pre-revolutionary concept of ‘Islam without clergy,’ and Hashem Aghajari’s post-revolutionary lecture titled ‘Islamic Protestantism and Shariati’ where he resembles the clerical establishment in Iran and Christianity

before the Protestant Reformation (pp. 173-176). Ghobadzadeh further articulates the shortcomings of the Hawza educational system and the clergy’s financial livelihoods as the two dimensions of the governmental incompetence of the clergy. As to the educational system, decentralized structure of the seminary, outdated textbooks and teaching methods and determination to hal-low textbooks used in the seminaries, the appropriation of ‘shobha (uncertainty)’ to prevent questions addressing the accepted principles of religion, domination of fiqh in hawza education are the main criticisms of religious reformists to challenge the competence of the clergy to rule (pp. 177-181). Secondly, the criticisms of Ayatollah Motahhari and Soroush against sahm-e Imam, the direct contribution of the Shiite believers to the financial resources of the clergy, are discussed. Motahhari argued that although sahm-e Imam enabled financial independence from the government, it brought dependence on the masses that prevented the clergy to reform religion as necessary. The solution Motahhari suggested was to form “a central fund that would collect religious payments and taxes and redistribute them among the clerics” (p. 183). Soroush, however, developed a more essential approach and questioned the clergy’s making a living from religion. He suggested, “unless they pay for their education and earn their financial livelihoods through a profession distinct from their religious role, the problem cannot be solved” (pp. 184-185).

Another contradiction of the clerical hegemony in the Iranian Islamic state occurred with the appointment of Ali Khamenei to the position of Valey-e Faqih after the death of Khomeini. Originally, the political-religious position of Valeyat-e Faqih was to be occupied by a Marja-e Taqlid, the most learned clergy in religion and the most respected by the people. However, appointment of Khamenei, who had not been recognized as a marja-e taqlid at that time, contradicted with this principle. Thus, the government position of valey-e faqih gained supremacy over religious position of marja-e taqlid. This controversy not only created problems for the state-clergy relationship but also fortified the hegemony of the ruling clergy over the society. Hence, the religious reformist scholars argued for “the emancipation of Marjaiat from the state” as the solution (p. 193). Lastly, Ghobadzadeh mentions the harms that the direct intervention of the state in religious affairs has given to the reputation of the clergy. He argues that religious secularity discourse aims at “restoring the clergy’s reputation, which, from a reformist point of view, has been tarnished by their direct engagement in politics,” and “their involvement in financial, moral, and political corruption” (pp. 202-203).

In conclusion, the religious secularity discourse proposed by Ghobadzadeh as a novel concept to the literature on religion and secularism, contributes to the recent scholarship that no longer considers the validity of secularization thesis, contests the dichotomy between religion and secularism, and recognizes the reality of multiple secularisms and multiple Islamisms. In his attempt to find a middle ground between “dogmatic secularism and radical Islamism,” the writer provides an excellent account of the paradoxical contribution of the Iranian experience of Islamic state to religious reformation and secularity on the religious grounds. The religious secularity concept, by introducing religious reformist scholarship that has flourished in the Iranian context, not only challenges the minds trained in Western scholarship, but also those adhered to the ideal possibility of an Islamic state ruled by the clergy. Reconsidering the dichotomous categories, Ghobadzadeh provokes the reader to think about expansion of genuine religiosity in a secular democratic political system, where religion is liberated from state intervention.

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- Öz bölümü (abstract) ortalama 150 kelime uzunluğunda olmalıdır. Türkçe makalelerin İngilizce özeti de sunulmalıdır.
- Makalelerde 6 ila 10 anahtar kelime bulunmalıdır. Türkçe makalelerin İngilizce anahtar kelimeleri de sunulmalıdır.
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Kitaplar

Norman Stone, *Kitabın Adı*, (London: Basic Books, 2007), s. 67.

Norman Stone (ed.), *Kitabın Adı* (London: Basic Books, 2007), s. 67-9.

Norman Stone ve Sergei Podbolotov, *Kitabın Adı* (London: Basic Books, 2005), s. 99.

Takeip eden referanslar: Kıvrımlı, *Kitabın Adı*, s. 99.

Dergiler ve Makaleler

Norman Stone, “Makale Başlığı”, Dergi Adı, *Cilt. #*, Sayı. # (Ay, Yıl), s. #.
Takip eden referanslar: Kırımlı, “Makale Adı”, s. #.

Derleme Kitap Makaleleri

Norman Stone, “Makale Adı”, Hakan Kırımlı, “Kitap Adı” (London: Crimea Publishing Co., 2000), s.100.

Resmi Belgeler

Meclis Zabıtları: TBMM Yayınları (Meclis Yayınları, 1988, V), 111.

Tezler

E. Beytullah, “The Crimean Khans’ relations with the Arab Amirs”, yayınlanmamış doktora tezi, Bilkent University, 1999, Bölüm 5, s.44.

Tekrarlar

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