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Contemporary Islamic Theology in Iran: Mohammad M. Shabestari, Mostafa Malekian, Mohsen Kadivar

*Sodobna islamska teologija v Iranu: Mohammad
M. Shabestari, Mostafa Malekian, Mohsen Kadivar*

Abstract: After the Iranian Revolution's success in 1979, authority transferred to Islamist factions, swiftly establishing a political framework predominantly grounded in the Shiite Islamic legal principles of the Twelve Imams. The emerging political structure and its Islamic proponents encountered unprecedented circumstances and challenges necessitating modern perspectives and interpretations. Nonetheless, traditional Shiite epistemological frameworks proved inadequate in providing scientific methods to address these issues. Consequently, a group of scholars among Muslim clerics and intellectuals surfaced, engaging not only in classical Islamic theological studies but also in exploring contemporary Western knowledge. This endeavour introduced a new outlook into Iran's theological discussions. This article aims to outline the emergence of a theological movement in Iran by examining the contemporary concepts deliberated by scholars like Mohammad M. Shabestari, Mostafa Malekian, and Mohsen Kadivar. Their Islamic hermeneutical initiatives have significantly contested conventional Shiite theology, despite its continuing dominance in the Islamic religious spheres within the nation. The article posits that the fresh theological ideas and concepts introduced by these three Iranian scholars have wielded substantial influence within emerging intellectual, academic, and university circles in Iran. Moreover, these ideas have extended beyond the confines of Islamic theological spheres, promoting a conciliatory atmosphere between Iranian Islamists and modernists.

Keywords: contemporary Islamic theology, Iran, Islamic Shiite orthodoxy, Mohammad M. Shabestari, Mostafa Malekian, Mohsen Kadivar

Izveček: *Po uspehu iranske revolucije leta 1979 so oblast prevzele islamistične frakcije, ki so hitro vzpostavile politični okvir, temelječ predvsem na šiitskih islamskih pravnih načelih dvanajstih imamov. Nastajajoča politična struktura in njeni islamski zagovorniki so naleteli na okoliščine in izzive brez primere, ki so zahtevali sodobne poglede in razlage. Kljub temu se je izkazalo, da tradicionalni šiitski epistemološki okviri niso bili primerni za zagotavljanje znanstvenih metod za reševanje teh vprašanj. Zato se je med muslimanskimi kleriki in intelektualci pojavila skupina učenjakov, ki se ni ukvarjala le s klasičnimi islamskimi teološkimi študijami, ampak tudi z raziskovanjem sodobnega zahodnega znanja. Ta prizadevanja so v iranske teološke razprave vnesla nov pogled. Namen tega članka je orisati nastanek teološkega gibanja v Iranu s preučevanjem sodobnih konceptov, o katerih so razpravljali*

učenjaki, kot so Mohammad M. Shabestari, Mustafa Malekian in Mohsen Kadivar. Njihove islamske hermenevitične pobude so pomembno spodbijale konvencionalno šiitsko teologijo kljub njeni stalni prevladi v islamskih verskih sferah v državi. Članek trdi, da so sveže teološke ideje in koncepti, ki so jih uvedli ti trije iranski učenjaki, imeli velik vpliv v nastajajočih intelektualnih, akademskih in univerzitetnih krogih v Iranu. Poleg tega so te ideje presegle meje islamske teološke sfere in spodbujale spravno vzdušje med iranskimi islamisti in modernisti.

Ključne besede: sodobna islamska teologija, Iran, islamska šiitska ortodoksija, Mohammad M. Shabestari, Mostafa Malekian, Mohsen Kadivar

Introduction

The exposure of Iranians to contemporary Western civilization, similar to numerous Muslim communities in the Orient, predominantly occurred amidst turbulent conflicts. This interaction undoubtedly had profound implications in shaping their perceptions regarding the West and modernity. In the 18th century, Egypt witnessed the victory of a French army, totalling 12,000 soldiers, over the Ottoman forces, numbering 30,000 soldiers. This was followed by the defeat of the Iranian army by the Russian forces between 1826 and 1828. Ultimately, the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, which functioned as both an imperial power and the caliphate representing all Muslims, prompted profound intellectual reflection among Muslim scholars. This led them to delve into the fundamental factors that contributed to these setbacks. Henceforth commenced the effort to reformulate, revive, reexamine, and reassess the comprehension and elucidation of Islamic tradition and faith. Nonetheless, this initiative gained heightened momentum after the triumph of the 1979 revolution, as its emerging political structure and Islamic ideologues grappled with novel phenomena and challenges necessitating contemporary contemplation and interpretation. The post-revolutionary authority shifted to the Islamists, who, in conjunction with leftist factions, had confronted the Pahlavi monarchy, resulting in numerous individuals enduring diverse forms of hardship. Several factors contributed to the amplification of Islamist discourse over leftist discourse, with the most prominent including the Islamic faith serving as the primary layer of Iranian societal identity and thereby fostering closer ties with clerics and religious figures; the anti-religious stance adopted by leftist intellectuals and ideologues; the substantial presence of mosques and prayer spaces coupled with extensive community participation; the existence of religious schools in Iran's major urban centres, educating and accommodating thousands of Iranians, and



other related factors. As the Islamist faction assumed authority, there arose an expectation that they would confront emerging challenges and propose intellectual resolutions. Consequently, within the cohort of Muslim clerics and intellectuals, a subset of scholars engaged not only in traditional Islamic theological studies but also pursued modern Western knowledge, thereby injecting a fresh perspective into Iran's theological discourse (Hallaq 1997, 46). Contemporary intellectuals and scholars concluded that if Muslims wish to alter religious discourse, they must initially reconsider their approach to Revelation and the method of interpreting religious texts, as any other change would merely be cosmetic and lacking in profound emancipatory or progressive effect. According to them, a Muslim cannot uphold a medieval cognitive system regarding religious phenomena on the one hand and live a modern life without even the slightest consideration for the reasons that led the Western man to modernity on the other. This stance, they argue, generates fundamental contradictions within the thought and moral framework of Muslim adherents (Malekian 2009, 45).

Thus, to effectuate such a change, a reexamination of the core texts forming the foundations of Islamic reasoning was imperative. These new intellectual circumstances led to the emergence of Muslim scholars and intellectuals who endeavoured to uphold the Islamic faith while simultaneously addressing the novel challenges confronting Iranian Muslim society. Among these intellectuals, Mohammad M. Shabestari, Mostafa Malekian, and Mohsen Kadivar stand as eminent figures in Iran's burgeoning theological movement. Therefore, within this article, through an analysis of the principal ideas articulated by these three Iranian Muslim scholars, we endeavour to present an overview of this intellectual movement in Iran and thereby delineate the socio-cultural dynamics prevalent in contemporary Iran. Recognizing the significant impact of these three Iranian scholars within newly formed intellectual, academic, and university spheres in Iran, we posit that the ideologies and conceptual frameworks advanced by Shabestari, Malekian, and Kadivar extend beyond Islamic theological realms, fostering a reconciliatory atmosphere between Iranian Islamists and modernists.



1 Theoretical framework

Muslims encountered emerging challenges and issues stemming from Western modernism, prompting a reconsideration of their methodologies and approaches towards newly arising phenomena and problems that posed challenges to their Islamic beliefs and teachings. The emerging insights also permeated the discourses of Kalam (Islamic theology), prompting deliberations on the substance of Kalam's knowledge. However, the proliferation and refinement of knowledge today have progressed to such an extent that establishing a boundary between them is nearly impossible, especially when it comes to the delineation or definition of a knowledge as »new knowledge«. This issue becomes notably intricate when the focus of investigation is a form of knowledge or science, such as Kalam. Because, as defined by many scholars (Goldziher 1981; Soroush 1382; Halife 2000) Kalam is a knowledge or science that does not have a specific object, methodology, or defined thematic study. Therefore, when discussing a new Kalam, it is always important to bear in mind that something may remain beyond the definitions that one can assign to this knowledge. The distinctions between classical and contemporary Kalam garner both proponents and opponents within the field. Nevertheless, without delving excessively into such polemics, we a priori acknowledge the existence of a difference between the old and the new school of Kalam. Subsequently, after briefly addressing Kalam as a whole, the focus will be directed towards the new ideas and theories in Kalam's knowledge by Iranian scholars and intellectuals.

Scholars have maintained divergent positions concerning the science known as New Kalam. The initial query explored in their discourse revolves around the differentiation between New Kalam and Old Kalam. Specifically, whether New Kalam qualifies as an entirely novel discipline or if it essentially represents the Old Kalam, albeit labelled as »new« due to its focus on present-day human concerns. Various answers have been provided to this question (Avjibi 1392, 94). Some argue that New Kalam bears only the name resemblance to the traditional Old Kalam because it represents an entirely new science devoid of any similarity to the old science, meanwhile, a faction of scholars denies the existence of a science termed New Kalam, perceiving it as an extension of traditional Kalam but specifically addressing novel issues and problems that were

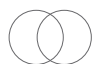


absent in the past. Abdolkarim Soroush argues that New Kalam represents a continuation of Old Kalam without any substantial divergence between them. According to him, there are three reasons why we have New Kalam today. Firstly, the primary responsibility of Kalam is to eliminate doubts about faith, and since doubts today are new, Kalam is also new. People do not follow our thoughts; therefore, they think and reach results that may contradict our beliefs. Thus, Kalam scholars must be able to address their doubts (Waezi 1392, 231). Secondly, within Kalam, emergent issues surface that were non-existent in the past, contributing to the notion of Kalam's novelty. It is essential to recognize that novel issues and quandaries cannot be resolved using antiquated methodologies. To address new doubts, a Kalam scholar must also be acquainted with new mechanisms and knowledge, thus expanding this knowledge. Additionally, Kalam assumes a new form or undergoes renewal through the integration of novel knowledge and the challenges it confronts. The third factor contributing to the evolution of Kalam is rooted in the discourse of the philosophy of religion, which examines religion from an external perspective. Hence, within the realm of religious philosophy, faith is perceived merely as an emotional or psychological understanding of humanity. This particular approach to religion has led to significant shifts in the comprehension of religious beliefs (Soroush 1382, 78–79).

2 The cognitive orientations of Iranian contemporary Islamic theology

The Iranian intellectuals examined in this paper are acknowledged within Iran as »religious intellectuals« (*roshanfekr-e dini*), a concept that undergoes detailed debate within Iran's intellectual circles. The selection criteria for these scholars is rooted in their impact on Iranian society.

It's noteworthy that Shabestari, Malekian, and Kadivar originate from Shiite madrasahs, yet each demonstrates a substantial acquaintance with modern Western knowledge. The exclusion of Ali Shariati from this group is due to the absence of a noteworthy contribution in the realm of current Kalam knowledge, despite his undeniably influential input in modern Iranian thought. Moreover, there is an additional discourse regarding whether these intellectuals, whose ideas will be addressed further below, align



more with Kalam or with philosophy. Hashemi posits that intellectuals of this nature should be categorized as »Kalamists« rather than philosophers. The objective pursued by religious intellectuals—inclusive of Ali Shariati—was to introduce a more robust, intellectually engaging dimension. Their endeavour aimed to transcend the conflicts existing between faith and the modern world while also navigating religion away from diverse crises. From this perspective, indeed, we can truly label them as »religious intellectuals« because they earnestly grappled with the state of faith in the modern world. They were acquainted with the Western world, thus, from this standpoint, they are recognized as contemporary intellectuals. However, it's imperative to note that these contemporary thinkers do not fall within the ranks of philosophers; instead, they align within the faction of Kalamists. Their cognitive frameworks are constrained, and even their concerns primarily revolve around the dimensions of faith. Hence, they are identified as »Kalamists« (Hashemi 1396, 286).

There exist notable disparities between philosophy and Kalam, as well as in the activities of a philosopher and a Kalamist. While both disciplines, philosophy and Kalam, draw upon human reasoning, the philosopher does not impose boundaries on their rational perceptions. Conversely, the Kalamist employs reasoning to advocate for an a priori truth derived from a religious text. Consequently, the Kalamist actively engages in their intellectual pursuits, whereas the philosopher critically assesses, doubts, challenges, critiques, negates and embraces all elements contributing to their conclusions. Unlike the Kalamist, who anticipates a predetermined outcome at the onset of their discourse and consequently prepares to achieve the intended result, the philosopher does not initially seek a specific outcome. Consequently, considering the focus of these Iranian scholars' endeavours on comprehending and interpreting Islamic faith within the current global context, they are rightfully classified as »Kalamists«. The thematic concerns of the modern world that the new Kalam took on in Iran can be traced back to the period of the Constitutional Revolution (*Enghelāb-e Mashrūteh*). With the advent of modernity and new sciences in the latter period of the Qajar dynasty, issues with religion, which constituted a fundamental element of Iranian tradition and culture, also began to emerge. Consequently, various examples and models started to be proposed concerning the conflict that had arisen between religion and modernity.



A faction led by Mirza Fethali Akhundzade espoused the perspective that Islamic religious ideology remained unaltered and incapable of improvement. Hence, they supported the idea of purging Iranian intellectual discourse from remnants of Islamic faith, suggesting that this purification process would expedite the progression of Iranian society toward modernity. The Muslim clergy and their adherents stood in opposition to this faction, asserting that the only remedy for Iranian society against the »corrupted (*fasid*) Western ideas« rested in reverting to the foundational principles of Islam (Ajoudani 1387, 39). Emphasizing the irreconcilability of religion and modernity, this group saw salvation in reverting to early Islamic practices. They labelled any opposition to this idea as deviant, even branding opponents as agents of the West. However, after numerous efforts and debates, a third moderate approach emerged, aiming to reconcile both aforementioned perspectives and create a synthesis between the Islamic faith and modernity. The first to conceive of such a synthesis was Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, later followed by intellectuals and Muslim scholars such as Allameh Tabatabai, Ayatollah Taleghani, Bazargan, Ali Shariati, and Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari. The latter is considered the founder of the new Kelam in Iran.

3 Mohammad M. Shabestari

Mohammad M. Shabestari (1936–) has studied Islamic sciences and philosophy. As a student in Qom, Shabestari was a disciple of Ayatollah Khomeini and Allameh Tabatabaei, from whom he obtained the rank of ijtehad and a doctoral degree in philosophy. He also studied the works of theologians like Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, and Karl Rahner, as well as philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. He was engaged as a regular professor of Islamic philosophy at the University of Tehran, he has lectured on religion and comparative theology. Shabestari served as one of the editors of the *Great Encyclopedia of Islam* published in Tehran and chaired the Department of Theology and Sects at the Centre for the Great Encyclopedia of Islam. Since the early 90s, he has been increasingly active in publishing articles in Iranian newspapers and journals, aiming to introduce a new or more critical approach to religion. Shabestari critiques religious absolutism, which he hermeneutically considers unproductive and pragmatically futile. Furthermore,



he undertakes a robust defence of modern concepts of individualism, democracy, and human rights, even though these notions are not explicitly articulated within Islamic sources. Nevertheless, Shabestari has notably contributed to the introduction and application of modern hermeneutics in traditional Shiite theology and jurisprudence. His most significant contribution lies in the relativization of classical interpretations of the Islamic faith and his stance on the evolution of textual understanding in line with the development of non-religious sources and knowledge.

Shabestari's perspective posits that religion inherently allows for varied interpretations. He argues that individuals with substantial scholarly expertise and intellectual acumen can offer unique insights and interpretations diverging from established traditional norms. According to him, these interpretations hold equal validity alongside others in the realm of religious discourse. In the book *Naqd-e bar Qerā'at-e Rasmī Dīn*, he emphasizes that ancient Greek metaphysics has shaped the interpretation of Islamic faith, thus rendering this interpretation immutable. »The issue of belief in Islamic faith from an ontological perspective essentially mirrors philosophical ontological knowledge related to the system of Existence« deriving its origin from ancient Greek philosophical frameworks (Shabestari 2000, 367). Shabestari asserts that the message of faith includes the call to God, spirituality, hope, and significance. This essence has remained ingrained within Muslim communities since the inception of Islam. Nonetheless, after Muslim exposure to Greek philosophy, a distinctive and metaphysical interpretation of Islam emerged, which, as per Shabestari's assertion, remains pervasive and inescapable even in modern times. Therefore, he proposes a faith-centred interpretation (*imani yorum*) in opposition to this metaphysical and philosophical reading of Islam. For him, such an interpretation consists of faith (*imani*), which constantly brings about change and new production, consequently leading to fundamental changes in human existence.

He argues that a Muslim adopting such a religious interpretation consistently pursues novel experiences and comprehensions (Shabestari 2000, 369). Another concept developed by Shabestari in the forthcoming writings is the critique or historicist reading of sacred texts. Historicist readings and interpretations have long been prevalent in the perspectives of Muslim thinkers aiming to structure a contemporary reading of Islamic



texts. Additionally, Shabestari's view of the text is hermeneutic, specifically within the framework of Gadamerian hermeneutics. According to this approach, there should be a dialogue with the text, allowing it to speak. He believes that the role of the reader should not be disregarded in understanding the text. Furthermore, Shabestari opposes scholars who solely consider the author of the text and decrease the role of its reader.

Shabestari has penned influential works that delve into the necessity for re-evaluation and progression in the interpretation of Islamic texts. His recent perspectives on the Quran and prophethood were articulated in an article titled *Prophetic Interpretation of the World*, inciting substantial responses both supportive and opposing. Within this work, he contends that the Quran represents the »prophetic discourse« of the Prophet of Islam, arising from Revelation, yet distinct from Revelation itself (*wahy*). In this five-part article, Shabestari presents two primary claims:

According to the insights of the philosophy of language over the past two centuries, the Quran (*Mushaf*) should be considered a linguistic text in Arabic comprehensible by all (believers and non-believers). It can be attributed to a human being (the Prophet of Islam), and as such, it can be understood as a human discourse. If we characterize it directly and without any mediation, with all the characteristics of the Arabic language as a book of God, not only does this disregard the possibility of its understanding by all, but it also eliminates the component of its »intelligibility«. Therefore, to attribute such a text to God, an alternative approach and method must be chosen. The literary genre of nearly all verses in the Quran is narrative. The Quran is a monotheistic reading of the world that is formed upon the basis of the »hermeneutic experience of the Prophet«. Within this text, there also exist other genres of prophetic experiences expressed in non-narrative and non-literary forms. However, these expressions merely enrich and expand that hermeneutic experience. The Quran is the foundation of a monotheistic reading of the world and is not a repository of cognitive truths or truths about Existence. (Shabestari 2010, 7–8)

Shabestari regards religious and Quranic meanings as symbolic, hence he does not see any distinction between them. According to him, the



Prophet's conversations and interactions with people during the twenty-three years of Revelation created an oral culture that we no longer have the slightest idea about today. What we possess now is merely a symbolic compilation (the text of the Quran) that sheds little light on that oral culture. Therefore, the verses of the Quran were revealed within the framework of an oral culture about which we lack sufficient and reliable knowledge. Little is also known about what occurred within this oral culture between the Prophet and his audience, as after his death, this oral culture transformed into a written culture. He also contends that Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is not a solution for today's Islamic societies and states. According to him, the fundamental issues faced by the Islamic Republic of Iran stem from the references within Shiite Islamic Jurisprudence that do not assist in overcoming any social or state-related challenges. Shabestari identifies two main reasons for Iran's current state: firstly, Islam is a faith with its own political, economic, and legal systems derived from its jurisprudence, applicable at all times and places as Muslims are required by God to live by these systems; secondly, the mistaken belief among Muslims that the state must invariably enforce the laws and regulations of Islamic faith (Shabestari 2010, 11). Beside his books and lectures, Shabestari has engaged in numerous polemics with Iranian religious scholars and is considered one of the most influential figures among intellectuals who have brought a critical perspective to theology and contemporary Iranian Kalam.

4 Mostafa Malekian

Mostafa Melekian (1956–) started his university life in engineering studies but soon diverged from this path, shifting focus to philosophy and Islamic sciences. He studied at the university and the traditional madrasas in the city of Qom. He studied under renowned theologians of Qom, including Muhamadtaqi Mesbah Yazdi and Abdullah Javadi Āmūli. After completing his education, he began working in the philosophy departments of numerous research centres and universities in Qom and Tehran. Due to his anti-establishment stance during the eight-year presidency of Mahmud Ahmadinejad and his critical approach toward the traditions and classical theology of religious clerics, Malekian was excluded from all state educational institutions in Iran. Currently, teaches at private schools and research



centres within the country. In an interview with an Iranian magazine, Mostafa Malekian discusses the five phases of his intellectual life: fundamentalism, traditionalism, reformism, existentialism, as well as rationalism and spiritualism (Malekian 1392, 5-7). Although he never adopted the attire of a Shiite cleric, Malekian was educated and worked extensively in the traditional madrasas of Qom.

In Iran, he initially gained recognition as an educator in philosophy within madrasas and universities, subsequently diverging from the conventional Iranian tradition to align himself with intellectuals, assuming the role of a reformer within Iranian society.

Malekian believes that, whether we like it or not, on the one hand, we are all modernized, and on the other, to some extent, we are religious. He then adds that the modern person can no longer understand religion in the same way as the traditional person did. »Faced with this, there remain only two paths: Either completely abandon religion and lose its benefits, or accept religion in a new form.« (Malekian 1387, 239) Hence, for him, this new form or understanding of religion today is called spirituality. In this sense, according to him, spirituality stands against the traditional understanding of religion, an understanding that can no longer be defended. Therefore, spirituality is what fulfils the modern individual's need for religion. In explaining his choice to use the term »spirituality« instead of »religion« (*din*), Malekian presents two arguments: one pertains to the historical aspect, acknowledging that throughout history, religion has demonstrated not only positive aspects but also negative dimensions and outcomes. His second argument relates to the distinction between spirituality and what we commonly refer to as religion today. He contends that spirituality differs significantly from what is currently considered religion, with its most notable outcome being that an essence of spirituality exists within the core of every religion. However, this does not imply that the entire structure of those religions inherently leads to spirituality (Hashemi 1396, 269).

After traversing various intellectual phases throughout his life, Mostafa Malekian arrived at a theory he named »Spiritualism and Rationalism« (*Manewiyet wa Aqlaniyat*). In this theory, Malekian aims to make a complete distinction between faith and rationality. He contends that religion,



as a standardized system constructed through various historical processes, cannot offer human dignity. Furthermore, according to him, absolute rationality that negates all subjective and spiritual aspects fails to provide ontological stability. He asserts that faith demands submission and obedience from the individual, compelling them to accept everything offered by its founder, scripture, or authorities, even contradicting empirical scientific and rational truths. Malekian argues that faith and rationalism are incompatible, leading to the belief that attempting to synthesize them is erroneous and futile. Malekian posits that an individual cannot inhabit both religious conviction and rationalist principles concurrently. Conversely, a rationalist cannot adopt religious faith. He emphasizes, »It would lack coherence for someone to self-identify as Muslim and simultaneously assert that they wouldn't adhere to a verse of the Quran without substantial evidence. Such a stance would imply that every individual in existence could be classified as Muslim. However, a true Muslim is someone who wholeheartedly submits to the Quran and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, unequivocally embracing their words and instructions without any semblance of doubt.« (Malekian 2012) In his viewpoint, an intellectual and rationalist cannot profess religious affiliation as it would necessitate adherence to information that lacks rational or scientific validation. »We lack the right to distort or impose our interpretations or preferences onto someone else's statements. It is essential to be candid and acknowledge that, according to the Quran, A is B, yet from my perspective, A does not equate to B. It is up to individuals to decide whose statement they will embrace.« (Malekian, 2012)

Regarding this, Malekian presents his project »Rationalism and Spiritualism« and believes that these two components are sufficient today to lead a secure and dignified life. However, Malekian's view on the incompatibility of religion with rationality can only be considered concerning the Abrahamic religions, which have a dictatorial authority such as the Book and the Prophet. This viewpoint doesn't universally apply to other religions like Buddhism, and Hinduism, among others. Furthermore, not all scholars and theologians believe that religion requires submission and imposed belief, as some consider religion to be »love«, »affection«, or »morality«. Mystics, for instance, perceive religion more as a spiritual experience and education rather than a cognitive or epistemological system. Additionally, according to Wittgenstein, religion is a style of faith-based life that does not necessarily adhere to the serious cosmological and anthropological claims



of historical religions. He views religion as a spiritual perspective on the world that strengthens when repeatedly practised (Fenāyī 1389, 141).

In one of his written pieces, Mostafa Malekian details three facets of Islam, delineating the attributes of each: Islam One involves the amalgamation (*Majmua*) of the Quran and authenticated Hadith; Islam Two consists of compilations of commentaries (*tefsir*), interpretations, explanations (*tabyin*), and apologetics offered by Muslim scholars concerning Islam One; and Islam Three encompasses the historical actions undertaken by Muslims (Malekian 1387, 98). According to him, only through a liberal interpretation of Islam One Muslims can address their contemporary needs; otherwise, they will continue to be victims of their old worldviews, which no longer have any impact on their lives. Many of his ideas and opinions have sparked debates and polemics among Iranian intellectuals, establishing him as one of the most influential contemporary thinkers in Iran. His studies and works delve into issues like morality, religion, philosophy of religion, existentialism, psychology, and philosophy. He is also recognized as a critic of the intellectual school known as »religious intellectualism« and a translator of several works by prominent Western philosophers.

5 Mohsin Kadivar

Mohsen Kadivar (1959–), a scholar and professor of Islamic Jurisprudence and Philosophy, began his teaching career at the madrasa in Qom, where he worked for fourteen years. He later taught Islamic Philosophy and Theology at Imam Sadiq University, Mofid University, Shahid Beheshti University, and Tarbiat Modares University. Due to his political stances and scholarly writings challenging the theory of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist and Iran's political system, he was expelled from all academic institutions in Iran and subsequently immigrated to the United States. Currently, he teaches in the Department of Islamic Studies at Duke University in North Carolina.

Another topic extensively debated among Muslim intellectuals, beyond theoretical discussions, pertains more to practical issues and encompasses dimensions of liberalism. Kadivar is one of the Iranian scholars



dedicated to human rights and freedoms, exploring how the philosophy of universal human rights can be acknowledged and applied within Iran. He strongly emphasizes the superiority of the rights and freedoms outlined in the *International Convention on Human Rights* compared to the human rights envisaged within the Islamic system (Kadivar 1382, 27–28). Therefore, he believes that currently, the Islamic faith should be interpreted within the framework of universal human rights.

He distinguishes between a historical Islam and a spiritual Islam in his essay *Historical Islam and Spiritual Islam* (Kadivar 1387, 59), emphasizing that Muslims should consider the historic dimensions of Islam, highlighting its spiritual messages. He advocates for interpreting Islam based on the principles of universal rights. Kadivar also states that within traditional or historical Islam, the medieval concept of human rights has deeply permeated. A fraction of his intellectual work has been devoted to issues concerning women's rights. According to him, there are two types of verses and hadiths that relate to women's rights in the Quran and Sunnah. The first category outlines human rights for women, recognizing equal rights for men and women as human beings beyond physical differences. The second category considers that women, due to their perceived lesser capacities, are granted fewer rights than men in managing household affairs and society. Simultaneously, reason and Sharia require that women be treated justly based on what is collectively accepted as good and right (Kadivar 1381, 422). Kadivar also emphasizes that Muslim scholars, following Aristotle, interpret justice as a right based on proportional equality and consider women as inheritors of certain rights due to what they view as their lesser inheritance capacity. However, both proportional equality and justice based on this concept are unexplained and unjustified. Contemporary rationality recognizes human beings as bearers of rights, promoting fundamental equality and egalitarian justice. This notion of justice aligns closely with human dignity and Quranic anthropology. According to egalitarian justice and fundamental equality, even though women differ from men physically and psychologically, they should have equal rights because they are human beings. Humanity, not gender, colour, race, class, religion, or political ideology is what upholds rights, obligations, dignity, and conscience. This version is closer to the Quranic spirit and Islamic standards, evidence of the official inequality that, due



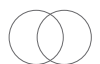
to its temporariness, cannot be considered an obstacle to achieving legal equality (Kadivar 1387, 249).

Mohsen Kadivar has made a significant contribution to redefining blasphemy (*irtidād-murtad*) in the new context of Iran. He openly criticized the execution law and wrote a book on this issue. According to him, there is no religious evidence from the Quran, Sunnah, consensus (*ijma*), or reasoning that could legitimize the shedding of blood for someone accused of apostasy or slandering the Prophet. On the contrary, this contradicts Quranic reasoning. Moreover, the negative impact that could arise from legitimizing someone's bloodshed could be substantial, potentially weakening Islam. Only a healthy legal system can make a judgment and oversee its implementation. Rendering a judgment outside the legal system by a qualified jurist to issue legal opinions is not justified. The judgment on slandering the prophet has absolutely no basis in the Quran. Traditional jurists, through the practice of *ijtihad*, have reached this judgment and have sought consensus based on unique or reliable hadiths. The rule of killing the blasphemer or insulter of the prophet is incorrect and impossible to implement, as emphasized by Kadivar.

Moshen Kadivar has also authored a four-volume work on the theory of Iran's political system, *Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist)* (Momen 1985; Akhavan Azari and Osredkar 2022), which he considers inapplicable in today's context. Kadivar's ideas are currently being read and criticized within Iran, and the critical writings against his thoughts serve as further evidence that he is challenging the classical theologians of Iran with his new ideas.

6 Discussion

The difference between the traditional world and the modern world in dealing with many life phenomena effectively demonstrates the approach of modern and post-modern individuals towards the role of reason and rationalization, as well as their methods and fields of application. In this new reality, religious thought has encountered formidable challenges as it has been subjected to profound criticisms, often entirely dismissed or significantly marginalized. The modern rationalists, with David Hume being



one of the most renowned among them, directed subtle criticisms towards religion. Among other statements, he declared: »There is no sound logical path that could lead from the finite world to infinity.« (Kolakowski 2001, 68)

The radical rationalists posed a serious challenge to the assertions and information propagated by religious figures, dismissing all aspects of religion as inconsequential to present-day individuals. By limiting human existence exclusively to rationality, these thinkers excluded any consideration of its other fundamental dimensions. As a result, they not only deprived contemporary humans of spiritual development and enrichment but also played a role in diminishing literary and cultural creativity. While intending to critique the epistemological and cosmological tenets of theology, modernist rationalists inadvertently suppressed the spiritual and psychological facets of modern humans. On the other hand, we have Muslim »religious intellectuals« who continuously exploit or capitalize on the inevitable human need for spirituality, striving to expand their influence in various segments, particularly in the socio-political sphere. This would not be problematic if their knowledge system had evolved and yielded tangible results akin to science and philosophy. However, this system and religious reasoning were established in the 10th century under circumstances entirely different from the present. Those advocating for such ideals have never been willing to reconsider or revise the content of this system. Here, the knowledge system of religious authorities refers to the claims made by Muslims, asserting that all knowledge, even in many medical instances, can be found in Islamic religious texts or the works of Muslim scholars (Weiss 2002, 136). Thus, the Iranian intellectuals discussed in this article are more inclined towards critical rationalism than other more radical forms of rationalism.

It is recognized that forms of maximal rationalism, empirical or dogmatic scientific rationalism, do not accommodate religion or anything affiliated with domains such as mythology, metaphysics, and the imperceptible realm. Yet, among diverse rationales, there exists critical rationalism. By scrutinizing both religious and rational reasoning, it facilitates a more conducive environment for the deliberation and handling of various issues.

We, despite being believers, claim the possibility of critiquing and rationally evaluating religious belief systems. However, contrary



to maximal rationalists, we also assert that rational analyses and studies should not be expected to conclusively validate a religious belief system that could convince everyone. Embracing such an initiative implies that we have entered the domain of critical rationalism. (Peterson 1991, 86)

Critical rationalism also instructs that in order to ascertain the truth, a multitude of disciplines and lines of reasoning need to be engaged, including religious reasoning or theology, without exclusion. Under this paradigm exists no methodology that can guarantee complete immunity from error. Rational judgment, according to critical reasoning, necessitates the presence of a robust argument to distinguish it from emotional, egocentric, or subjective judgments, which cannot be accepted without compelling justification.

The critical engagement of reason with itself is to be acknowledged for its role in minimizing its errors in discerning truth and forming judgments, encompassing those of a religious nature. Consequently, no alternative method or avenue exists to completely refute the entirety, precision, and assurance of error. Any individual possessing logical and epistemological certitude can only achieve it within the realms of Logic and Mathematics. Psychic certainty regarding logic and epistemology holds no validity. Thus, once more, it is through reason that the resolution of the conflict between reason and another form of reasoning, or between reason and Revelation or Reason and Transmission, is determined. (Fanāyī 1389, 257)

The model proposed by Mohammad M. Shabestari, Mostafa Malekian, and Mohsen Kadivar for understanding religion encompasses all the teachings of critical rationalism, including the opposition to inductive approaches. One of the outcomes of critical rationalism is the rejection of any form of violence and radicalism in the name of religion. This is because the primary causes of violence supported by belief and dogma, whether religious or political, lie in the »certainty« of the truthfulness of that path or method chosen by the person advocating violence. This kind of »certainty of belief« is a justifying approach to the teachings and rituals that an individual believes.



Those who have »complete certainty« in the truthfulness of their beliefs and thoughts consider those who do not share their beliefs and thoughts, even those who believe and think slightly differently from them, as lost and deviated. These individuals perceive themselves as superior and more righteous than others. Consequently, their actions and judgments toward those who do not believe and think like them are deemed »unjust«, and this sentiment allows them, in certain cases, to resort to violence or various forms of stigmatization and harassment. »A very useful remedy that cures dogmatic certainty is the consideration we should have regarding the 'modesty of our knowledge', which is considered one of the pillars of critical rationalism.« (Paya 2014, 178)¹

Therefore, it is very challenging to evade rational judgment and evaluation of religious systems, particularly given the chaotic state of the Islamic world today. Moreover, within many orthodox Muslim theologians and clerics, postmodern criticism is utilized to legitimize their ideas and beliefs, which were structured more than ten centuries ago and are often presented today as the sole solution to human problems. It's interesting to note that rational and scientific arguments are used to defend specific religious systems; however, when these arguments collide with these systems, either an appeal is made to the guaranteed rights to believe in a certain manner, or reason and science are deemed inadequate for assessing those belief systems. Among many adherents of a faith or sect, another phenomenon is observed, where rational and scientific arguments are frequently used to debunk or substantiate the paradoxes of religion or rival sects.

However, if the same arguments dismiss their faith or sect, then these individuals launch accusations and stigmatize their adversaries. Such a fact indicates that this isn't about the pursuit of truth but rather about the preoccupation to preserve existing convictions at all costs. Otherwise, a believer should be willing to respond to any criticism directed toward their religious system, meaning they must prove these criticisms to be inconsistent, unserious, and lacking substance, or acknowledge the criticisms as true and strive to balance and improve their actions while preserving the essence

1 Paya has recently published the book: *Islam, Modernity and a New Millennium: Themes from a Critical Rationalist Reading of Islam*. London: Routledge, 2018.



of their faith. This cannot be done except through the rational judgment and analysis of religious systems, which is considered impossible by the majority of believers.

However, the emphasis placed on reason and rationalism should not be misconstrued as a disregard for tradition. »Tradition is a collection of theoretical and practical experiences of our predecessors and the result of their efforts in theoretical and practical matters in various aspects of life.« (Fanāyī 1389, 258) Critical rationalism instructs us to endeavour to maintain and utilize them. Nevertheless, embracing tradition and faith without a critical analysis and critical treatment, blindly adhering to them, is as irrational as outright denial, and in certain instances, deeming them alien. Critical rationalism demands that we optimally leverage the outcomes of various forms of reasoning, including religious reasoning, as this facilitates the fullest development of our intellectual and spiritual education. Additionally, it should be highlighted that reason itself is limited and constructed by the epistemological environments we inhabit from childhood, always operating within certain cultural structures. Therefore, its judgment can never be final or absolute.

Undoubtedly, the application of rational reasoning to religious beliefs has led to ontological and epistemological crises among numerous reflective believers or adherents of faith. However, this phenomenon might have acted as a catalyst for the emergence of influential personalities and seminal works that humanity has inherited. It's noteworthy that some of the most eminent intellects in the annals of thought and science, both in Eastern and Western cultures, have arisen from religious backgrounds, emphasizing the significant rational and spiritual facets of human existence. It's worth noting that the thorough philosophical consideration of theology is essential for societal thought and progression. The fundamental values and mindset across various strata within Muslim societies remain entrenched within the confines of religious traditions, many of which necessitate critical re-evaluation. Hence, if Islamic theology continues to be disregarded and met with indifference, genuine intellectual advancements in philosophical discourse may not materialize. Consequently, for Muslims to actively engage in societal progress and contribute to the evolution of thought and knowledge, embracing the critical rationalism advocated by these three Iranian scholars, pivotal figures in contemporary Islamic



thought, becomes crucial. This includes acknowledging the necessity for their religious system to undergo critical examination and study.

Conclusion

One of the primary concerns of contemporary Iranian Muslim intellectuals is the creation of a synthesis between Islam and modernity. Modernization as an intellectual and social movement in the Islamic world has influenced every sphere of life, including the theological and religious realms. Hence, Muslim scholars offer various approaches and stances toward this phenomenon. However, the most significant contribution in this direction has come from scholars who have studied Islamic culture and tradition, while also being acquainted with the intellectual and technological outcomes of modernity in the Western world. The contribution of these Iranian scholars, especially that of Mojtabah Shabestari and Mohsen Kadivar, in redefining and interpreting the fundamental teachings of Islam, exceeds what is expressed in this work. The exceptional influence of these scholars is not only seen in the extensive volume and re-publication of their works but also in the significant public engagement evident from the large number of citizens attending their lectures and discussions. This extraordinary impact is also evident in the continuous censorship and boycotts imposed on them by political authorities. It is also noteworthy that, besides these three Iranian scholars, recently there have been emerging figures, such as Abulqāsim Fanāyī, who, with the new approaches and methodologies applied in the interpretation of Islamic faith, is rapidly ascending the ladder of influence akin to the aforementioned scholars. The substantive contribution of these Iranian scholars has presented a serious challenge to the traditional madrasas of Iran, prompting a resurgence of calls for the reform of Shiite Islamic theology. Additionally, voices from within religious clerics have emerged in support of a secular model of governance. The intellectual methodologies and approaches of these Iranian scholars facilitate the establishment of a novel hermeneutic that transcends the historical frameworks of orthodox Islamic theology and contemporary secularism. This offers an avenue for a deeper reconsideration and broadening of spiritual life.



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