

*Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State.* By Naser Ghobadzadeh. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. 288. \$31.95 (paper). ISBN: 9780190664893.

The question of Islam’s compatibility with secularism and democracy is one of the most contentious issues in current political discourse. In the West, the rise of political Islam has challenged classical theories of secularization and rendered the visible presence of Islam a scandal. In the Muslim world, the question of what exact role Islam should play in the political arena has been deeply contested and remains at the very center of public conversation. It is not surprising, then, that much ink has been spilled over this interminable debate; yet most works written on the subject within the Western academy have had little to no engagement with modern Muslim intellectuals who grapple with these issues. Naser Ghobadzadeh’s recent study of modern Iranian reformist thought represents a significant step toward rectifying this glaring lacuna.

In *Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State*, Ghobadzadeh sets out to present an alternative indigenous Muslim discourse that uses religious reasoning internal to the Islamic tradition in order to critique the modern ambition for an Islamic state. Present in his title is the oxymoronic term *religious secularity*, which he contends best encompasses “the vision for the emancipation of religion from the state” (2). On his account, the usefulness of the term is its ability to capture what is fundamentally unique about the Islamic discourse surrounding secularity: namely, that unlike the Western historical experience, in which secularist discourse has often been anticlerical and hostile to religion, the Iranian discourse for secularity in political life has been one entirely based on religious motivations and reasoning. He is careful to distinguish Iranian “religious secularity” from the aspiration for a secular state in the Western mold, which has had a troubled history in the Middle East because of its attempt to remove religion entirely from politics. Here, Ghobadzadeh channels the distinction between politics and the state previously made by Abdullahi An-Na’im in *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Sharia*:<sup>1</sup> for both of these thinkers, Islam has a role to play in the former but must be completely separated from the latter. The dubiety of this distinction is a point I return to later.

Ghobadzadeh’s study provides both an examination of the relationship between religion and state in modern Iranian political history and an intellectual historical analysis covering a range of Iranian thinkers writing on the subject of religion and politics. The book as a whole fleshes out two central arguments of these reformists against the establishment of an Islamic state: (1) the weakness of the religious foundation for the idea of an Islamic state and (2) the Islamic arguments in favor of the establishment of secular democracy. In its organization, the book consists of six chapters, five of which focus on a specific aspect of this “religious-secularity” discourse and one of which reconstructs the history of how Iran became the first Muslim state in history to be ruled by clerics.

In chapter 1, “Shiite Discourse on Sovereignty,” Ghobadzadeh discusses the critics of the doctrine of divine sovereignty, which is the philosophical basis of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He begins with a brief history of Shiite political theology in the modern era, which was dominated by Shaykh Morteza Ansari’s apoliticism and lasted from the early nineteenth century up until the Constitutional Period (1905–1911). It was during this time that major scholars like Akhund Khurasani and Muhammad Ismail Gharavi Mahallati promoted a notion of popular sovereignty

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1 Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Sharia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

that separated temporal from religious authority and based legitimate rule on the will of the people. Even a scholar like Mohammad Hossein Naini, who held a conception of clerical rule, did not promote it as a political project. On balance, the scholars of the Constitutional Period maintained the dominant Shiite apolitical position intellectually, while subtly supporting the political developments of the time. Ghobadzadeh also focuses on later figures, among them Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, once the right-hand man of Ayatollah Khomeini, who later in his life waged important critiques against Khomeini's doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih* ("Guardianship of the Jurist"), proposing in its stead an Islamic theory of the social contract. Toward the end of the chapter, he discusses the ideas of religious intellectuals like Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohammad Mojtaba Shabastari, who have been critical of the aforementioned jurisprudential approaches to political thought, since for them, politics is a wholly scientific and rational subject and should therefore have nothing to do with religion in the first place.

Chapter 2, "Seeding Secularity: The Rise of a Jurisprudential State," highlights the detrimental consequences the state has had on religion when the two are combined. One of Ghobadzadeh's central points here is that the Iranian Islamic state has increasingly favored political exigency over a commitment to religious principles, which was the result of the implicit recognition of the contradiction between the two and the pragmatic (and virtually necessary) choice to elevate the former over the latter (77). To support his argument, he presents Khomeini's own ideas on the primacy of the state over religious precepts, exemplified best by the establishment of the Council for the Determination of the Expedience of the Islamic State, which looks out for the interests of the state over and above the Guardian Council and religious precepts. He also makes the argument, primarily building on Soroush, that Iran is a jurisprudential rather than religious state, as religion has been reduced to the realm of *fiqh* (Islamic law), which has consequently hampered "true religion" from taking shape in Iran. On this point, one might ask whether it is even possible for a state to delve into the esoteric realm, which is precisely why it must focus on the external, thus blunting the weight of Ghobadzadeh's criticism.

In chapter 3, "Religious Rationale for Separation," Ghobadzadeh discusses the religious reform projects of thinkers like Soroush and Mohsen Kadivar, which attempt to put religion in its proper place vis-à-vis politics. These writers promote the idea that religion is primarily about the hereafter and that politics should be based solely on civic reasoning since governance is an extra-religious matter. Here some differences emerge among the writers: Soroush, for example, thinks that the law-centric approach to Islam overlooks the fact that a majority of society's problems are hardly jurisprudential, whereas Kadivar still maintains some faith in *fiqh's* ability to order society, along with the help of the social sciences. It is difficult to see how this chapter is not simply a call for the privatization of religion, but Ghobadzadeh still maintains that Islam can have a role in public life (which he never clearly elaborates).

Ghobadzadeh then moves to the all-important issue of the major role clerics play in Iranian political life, which is a distinct feature of the Iranian state and wholly absent from the rest of the Muslim world. In chapter 4, "Political Construction of Clericalism," Ghobadzadeh sets out to trace the trajectory of the encroachment of the clerics into the Iranian governmental apparatus. On the whole, the 'ulama (religious scholars) were relatively inactive politically under the shah's rule and there was certainly no idea of the political rule of clerics, which illustrates the novelty of Khomeini's thought. Here Ghobadzadeh traces the development of Khomeini's political views, in the process revealing that he began, to much surprise, as something of a constitutionalist, putting forward the idea of clerical rule only some time after the 1979 revolution. Ghobadzadeh's conclusion, which successfully challenges the contemporary Iranian political framework by historicizing its development, is that "the idea of a privileged position for the clergy in Iran's post-revolutionary

political system was neither dominant in conceptual discourse nor evident in the political conduct of key religious figures in the 1979 revolution” (146).

This leads Ghobadzadeh to a discussion of leading religious figures who have argued against the politicization of the ‘ulama in his fifth chapter, “Clerics against Clericalism.” Ayatollah Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari was one of the first intellectual figures in this dissident tradition and was eventually put under house arrest. Yet, as Ghobadzadeh notes, the resistance has on the whole been one of a political rather than scholarly nature. Much of this chapter is devoted to Ayatollah Montazeri’s critique against the Islamic state, made later in his life, in which he proposes a term limit on the Valey-e Faqih and suggests that the ‘ulama should rule over religious matters alone. Ghobadzadeh does well to show the inadequacies of this criticism, however, since Montazeri’s all-encompassing view of Islam and his belief in its ability to speak on sociopolitical matters renders his call for a division of labor virtually unobtainable.

This topic is taken up further in chapter 6, “Clerical Hegemony: Contradictions and Paradoxes.” In this final chapter, Ghobadzadeh provides what is found to be his most original argument against clerical rule in Iran. Building on the work of Kadivar and Soroush, he touches on the Marjiaat-Velayat conflict by highlighting the inherent tension between the former, which represents a spiritual and legal religious authority based on pietistic and scholarly bases, and the latter, which combines political prowess and charisma with religious authority in a way unprecedented in Shiite history (188–89). In providing a good case study of this tension, Ghobadzadeh examines the scholarly hierarchical progression of figures like Khomeini and the current supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, who have used political power to obtain their status as *marjas* (Shiite religious authorities) despite not having the necessary scholarly qualifications. He views this development as a serious transgression against the ‘ulama’s autonomy, since it disrupts the norms and rules they internally developed to govern the practices of scholarly rank and progression. It also creates religious problems for Shiite believers, who are religiously required to emulate these figures. Instead of following the most pious or knowledgeable clerics, which is the orthodox Shiite position, they now must acknowledge the authority of lower-ranking scholars for political reasons. In the process of obtaining political power, the seminaries have been radically transformed from housing a strong independent class of scholars who adjudicated themselves according to internal religious standards to functioning as an extended branch of the government where politics ultimately trumps religious concerns.

All in all, Ghobadzadeh has written a highly insightful account of an important and neglected movement in contemporary Islamic political thought that challenges the conflation of religion and state. Nevertheless, there are two major weaknesses in the book that merit some attention. The first is Ghobadzadeh’s frequent reference to the Western experience as a measure by which this Islamic movement can be evaluated (for example, 43–44, 71, 177). At one point, in a discussion of Locke and Rousseau’s arguments for secularism and popular sovereignty in place of the divine right of kings, he writes, “This chapter of Western political history is mirrored by the current situation in Iran” (43). Given the major differences between these respective contexts, such a comparison is unhelpful at best and anachronistic at worst. Yet more importantly, scholars like the late Saba Mahmood have exposed the Western call for a reformation in Islam as a distinctly uneven and potentially violent political project.<sup>2</sup> In my view, this should caution writers like Ghobadzadeh from unwittingly presenting his protagonists as the good, enlightened Muslims, juxtaposed with the bad ones who are politicized and thus extremists and radicals.

2 Saba Mahmood, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 323–47.

Another limitation is that Ghobadzadeh for the most part presents the reformists' ideas with minimal critical analysis or engagement. For example, in discussing Soroush's statement that the people's right to oversee their rulers is justified by the sheer fact of being "human beings" (64), Ghobadzadeh could quite easily point out the weakness and dubiety of such an argument. Does the sheer fact of being human entail certain political rights, and if so, what would be a compelling Islamic rationale for such a view? In the context of the contemporary Muslim world, these are hugely important questions to interrogate before simply extolling the virtues of democracy. Elsewhere, he discusses Soroush's analogy of the art of governance to that of sciences like medicine and engineering (119), which is a hallmark of much modernist Muslim thought. Yet the scientific view of governance, exemplified at its worst by the fascist regimes of Europe and China in the twentieth century, has been shown to be extremely dangerous and can be linked to the rise of the modern disciplinary nation-state. In this vein, the general lack of an engagement with contemporary critical writings on the modern nation-state is a marked weakness in the discourse of Ghobadzadeh and the reformists he discusses. Where blame is put on the politicization of religion alone, these writers would benefit from a simultaneous understanding of the inherent paradoxes and dangers of the modern state (here, Wael Hallaq's *The Impossible State* would be a good counterweight to these reformist thinkers<sup>3</sup>). To be fair, Ghobadzadeh does add much more of an authorial voice in the second half of his book, particularly in his last chapter, but his contribution would have been a much more meaningful one for this particular movement if he would have exposed its weaknesses as much as he applauds its strengths.

Before closing, I must comment on the broader intellectual movement within which Ghobadzadeh's study is situated. His book is clearly written in the tradition of An-Na'im's *Islam and the Secular State*, which presents itself as a challenge to the politicization of Islam. In my view, this intellectual movement is one of critical importance; yet there remain many ambiguities and gaps in their arguments. The distinction of politics from the state, to take just one example, is one that remains unclear to me. One might think here of the major role that special-interest lobbies play in governments around the world, which blurs any sharp distinction between adjudication in the civil-public sphere and the policies issued by a state. There is also a serious problem in the religious-secularity approach to religion and secularism, which is based on a naïve understanding of the latter. For them, it is possible to envision a neutral secular state that can simply forgo the question of religion. History has shown time and again, that this is simply not the case. Take, for example, the 1997 soft coup in Turkey that ousted the prime minister at the time, Necmettin Erbakan, for violation of the "secular" character of the constitution (although his party hardly promoted a religious vision for the state). This instance reveals the many dangers inherent to the secular state's control over defining religion, which is a concern utterly missing from this religious-secularity discourse. The religious-secularity movement must deal with this complex history, particularly within the Muslim world, and engage with the current critical discourse on secularism (which is notably absent from their work).

As an example, scholars like An-Na'im and Ghobadzadeh would benefit from the recent work of the anthropologist Hussein Ali Agrama, who has demonstrated how secularism, rather than settling the question of religion and politics, continuously raises the question of the boundaries of religion and politics, which allows for the further entrenchment of the state into the lives of its subjects.<sup>4</sup> For

3 Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

4 Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

Agrama, secularism is not simply a political doctrine or system but a form of power that is paradoxical. Exploring the case of “secular” Egypt, Agrama reveals how religion is treated as a problem of public order (specifically in the case of Nasr Abu Zayd and the law of *hisba*), which can be resolved only by the state, whose sovereign power is then further expanded. To be fair, writers like Ghobadzadeh and An-Na‘im do not naively call for a secular state patterned on the French *laïcité* model; however, their engagement with the question of Islam and secularism is wholly one-sided, with little awareness of the vast critical literature that has arisen in the wake of the clear problems associated with secularism in and outside of the West.

Aside from these critical points, Ghobadzadeh’s book is a valuable addition to the current literature on Islam and secularism. His book will be useful to students and scholars interested in Iranian political history and thought and modern Muslim reformist thought more generally. Perhaps his greatest contribution is in writing a highly readable book that shows modern Muslims not as simply passive subjects of tyrannical regimes but as critical thinkers who are pushing the envelope of Islamic political thought into a more promising future.

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