

Secularism in Iran:

Clarification of Some Possible Misconceptions

Ali Paya

15 March 2019

Overview of the Presentation

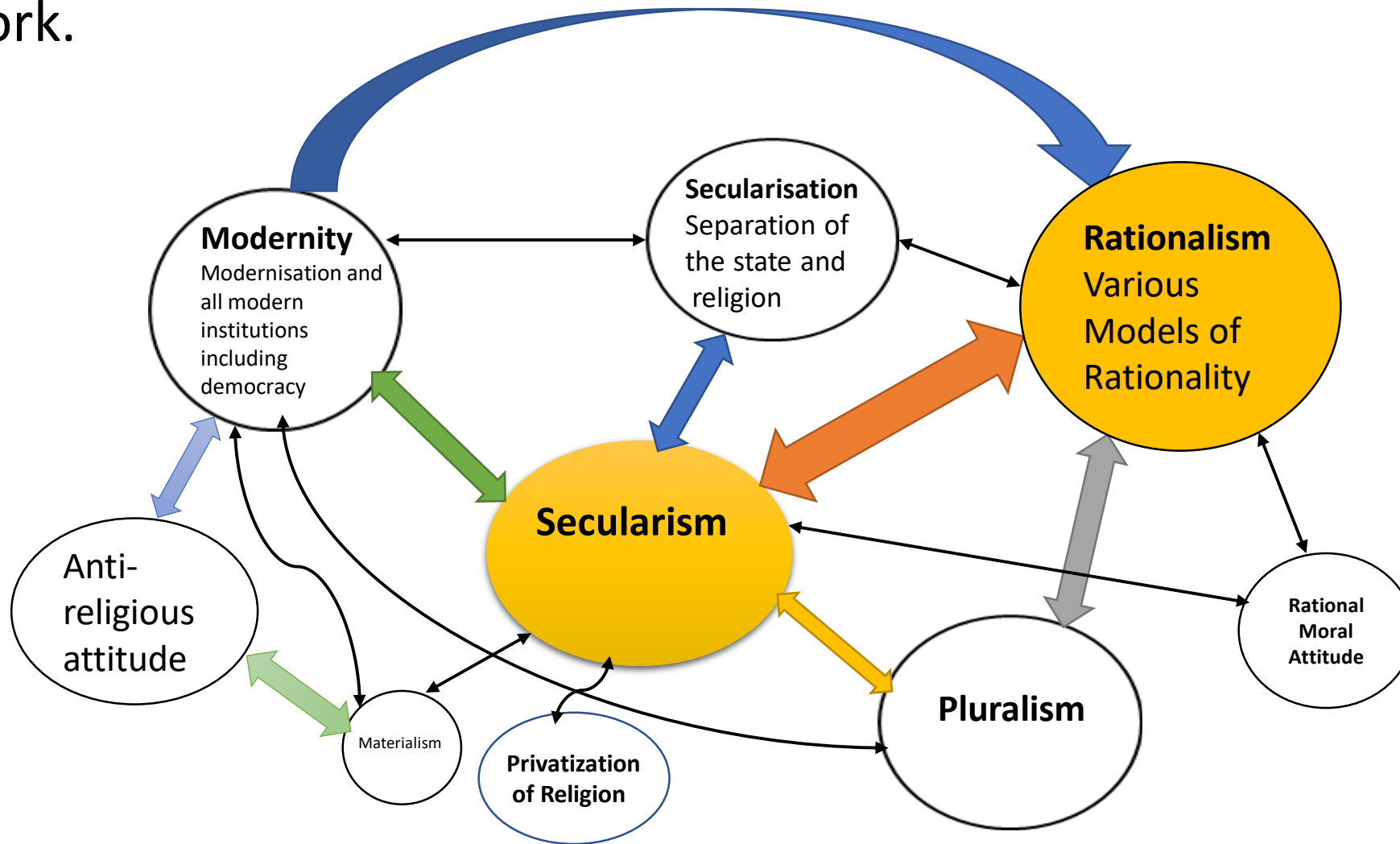
- My aim in this short presentation is threefold:
 - 1- To say a few words concerning the theoretical content of ‘secularism’;
 - 2- To briefly discuss a history of secularism in the Islamic thought and in Iran;
 - 3- To make a few critical remarks with regard to the main arguments of the ‘working paper’ of the workshop.
-
- Acknowledgement:
 - In completing this short paper I have greatly benefited from a discussion with Mr Hossein Paya, the Director of the Tarh-e Nou Publications in Iran. I thank him for his interesting contributions.

Secularism: A Hotly Contested Concept

- Secularism, as a term/concept, is used in many different senses by different social actors for the purpose of arguing (often) for opposing positions.
- The use of this term as a homonym has been a root cause of many animated, even hostile, discussions in many societies, including Iran.
- It seems the first step towards clarifying the current confusion concerning the use of this term/concept is to suggest a plausible meaning for the core sense that this term/concept represents.
- Like many other concepts/terms with a rich history, 'secularism' with all its various 'shades of meaning' forms a unique 'Network of Meaning'.

Secularism and Its Network of Meaning

- The concept of secularism is a major node in a scale-free network of meaning whose structure (i.e. the internal relations between its various nodes) is dynamic and constantly changing. The following is a sketch of *some* of the nodes in this network.



Secularism and Models of Rationality

- Rationality (not to be confused with the faculty of reasoning, which is associated with the field of logic) belongs to the realm of epistemology.
- Models of rationality, with respect to their outlook on religion/the sacred, form a seamless spectrum specified, on the one extreme by anti-religious attitudes and on the other by pro-religious attitudes and in between with other possible shades of attitude towards religion including intellectual neutrality.
- It should be noted that even irrational/non-rational models, as long as they present conjectural outlook about reality and argue for it, can be included under the general category of 'Models of Rationality'.
- The irrationality/non-rationality of such model consists in their attitudes towards making decision and taking action, and *not* in their arguing for the superiority of their positions.
- Thus for example, Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith' is irrational because it is based not on rational assessments but on a pure existential commitment.

Secularism In Islam & in Iran

- With the above explanation in mind, it can now be argued that many varieties of secular (rational) attitudes/outlooks can be found in the Islamic thought past and present.
- Examples:
- The history of secularism and the introduction of secular ideas in modern Iran can be traced back to the late nineteenth century and publication of the first translations of the modern European thoughts and the first indigenous works of Iranian intellectuals.
- Examples:
- Secularism had, mostly, a negative connotation among the religiously-minded individuals during the Pahlavi period.
- After the Islamic revolution, however, a new discourse of secularism was elaborated by the Muslim intellectual.
- This discourse, with its emphasis on the role of the critical and rational reason, was part of a much wider project.

The Project of the Iranian Muslim Intellectual

- Iranian Muslim intellectuals have collectively contributed to the development of a project, or if you like, ‘a research programme’ (in the Popperian/Lakatosian sense of the term) whose aim is to help various socio-political and religious actors in Iran, including those who run the apparatus of the state, as well as influential religious figures in seminaries and outside of it, to get acquainted with modern rational and critical ways of understanding Islam and interpreting the Islamic teachings.

The Project of the Iranian Muslim Intellectual

- What Soroush has introduced in his model of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge, or Shabestary has promoted by his hermeneutical approach to the understanding of the religious text, or Hajjariyan has presented by means of the contrast he has highlighted between the notions of the sacred and the temporal spheres in the context of a religious society in modern times, or Kadivar has explored through his discussion of the idea of the human rights, or yours truly has argued about the epistemological status of fiqh as a technology and the role of faqih as an engineer, and also through his explanations concerning the futility of the projects of producing 'Islamic sciences', are just a few examples of a large number of important issues which are developed and elaborated by the Iranian Muslim intellectuals with respect to the main goal of their project/research programme.
- It is in the context of this research programme that the incisive critiques of Prof. Matsunaga should be critically examined.

Matsunaga's Two Main Criticisms

- It seems the 'working paper' of the workshop contains two main criticisms of the views of the Iranian Muslim intellectuals:
- 1- They have adopted a rather naïve approach in their dealing with the sovereign power of the state;
- 2- They have resorted to a misleading analogical argument in defence of their advocacy of 'an independent and democratic presence of religion in the public sphere'.

Matsunaga's Final Conclusion

- I would submit, however, that when they relate 'secularism' to a issue/strategy of 'separating religion from politics', the reformist 'religious intellectuals/new-thinkers' of contemporary Iran tend to employ the category 'politics' without a clear sense of the need to distinguish between what state does and what non-state actors do. Consequently, when they claim that they are only in favor of an institutional separation but are opposed to a 'complete' separation of religion from politics, they appear totally oblivious of the role of the sovereign power of the state to define and regulate what forms of religion—with their corresponding values, sensibilities, and embodied practices—are allowed to enter the public sphere and what other forms are to be vanished to the private sphere.
- Since the state would need to be a 'theologian' of sort to be able to do this, there is no such thing as a purely religiously neutral state.
- The corollary of the above is that just as one would need to have not a 'secular' state (like the one in the U.S.) but a 'secularist' state (like the one in France) if one wants to see a 'liberal' regulation of religious sensibilities as private reason (i.e., the privatization of religion), if one would like to see 'religious new-thinker'-type tolerant religious values, sensibilities and embodied practices to prevail, one would need to have a sovereign state that enforces that state of affairs. Given this regulatory dimension of the modern sovereign state, the market analogy that some Iranian religious intellectuals employ (e.g., 'an independent and democratic presence of religion in the public sphere' [Hajjarian 2012 cited above], and 'religiosity in civil society in free, competitive space' [Kadivar 2017 cited above]) is grossly misleading.

Is the Political Discourse of the Iranian Muslim Intellectuals Naïve?

- Modern state, as Hegel and in his wake many others, have shown is like a a semi-god on earth. It has, as Matsunaga has pointed out, its own ‘values, sensibilities, and embodied practices’.
- How can a group of intellectuals, with a very limited power, convince this semi-god to reconsider and revise its ‘values, sensibilities, and embodied practices’?
- Here is a possible answer:
- To show to it that adoption of certain practices would be greatly beneficial to the consolidation of its own position/legitimacy vis-à-vis those who are ruled by it.
- Moreover, to convince it that the above move is entirely in line with its own values and sensibilities.
- It seems to me that the above course of action, far from being naïve, is the best possible approach towards any modern state with respect to its entrenched policies.

Is the Political Discourse of the Iranian Muslim Intellectuals Naïve?

- But of course, the above general suggestion is not enough: one needs to explain how one is to carry out the seemingly impossible task of persuading a semi-god to change course.
- In encouraging a theologically and jurisprudentially (*fiqhi*)-oriented state to support religious pluralism and to allow rational (secular) modes of deliberation and/or reaching practical decisions to succeed literal methods of understanding of the sacred text and the teachings of Islam, the Iranian Muslim intellectuals have taken a leaf from Ayatollah Khomeini's works and also made use of arguments that have been upheld and endorsed by some eminent Ayatollahs such as Sistani and Montazeri.
- The point which the Iranian Muslim intellectuals learnt from Ayatollah Khomeini was that in his efforts to curtail the influence of the traditional *fuqaha* and 'ulama (who, like Ghazzali, claim that the task of *faqih* is to discover God's will) he introduced certain measures to make *fiqh* ever-more reliance of 'urf (common-sensical understanding of the ordinary man in the street).
- Against the more traditional 'ulama, Ayatollah Khomeini had repeatedly emphasized that in dealing with the affairs of the state it is the state itself, and its expediencies, which reigns supreme and NOT the whims and subjective views of *fuqaha*.

Is the Political Discourse of the Iranian Muslim Intellectuals Naïve?

- The same point, with regard to giving prominence to *'urf* when it comes to jurisprudential (*fiqhi*) rulings has been emphasized by Ayatollah Sistani (in the context of his discussion of justice) in his *al-Ijtihad va al-Taqlid* and by Ayatollah Montazeri (in the context of his discussion of the human rights) in his *Hukumat-e Dini va Hoquq-e Ensan (Religious Government and the Human Rights)*.
- The two Ayatollahs have argued that:
- Fiqh ought to be fully compatible with justice/human rights, as understood by *'urf* (i.e. the common-sense and sensibility of the man in the street):
- If the conscience of the public considers a particular ruling as unjust/against the basic human rights, then that ruling is NOT God's command.
- The argument which has been propounded by Iranian Muslim intellectuals, in line with what they had learnt from the revolutionary or progressive Ayatollahs, is as follows:

Is the Political Discourse of the Iranian Muslim Intellectuals Naïve?

- 1- The state is a technology (a machine) and like all other technologies, it can only function optimally if it adjusts and attunes itself to the requirements of the context in which it is operating. This is because all technologies are contex-sensitive.
- 2- For the machinery of state to be supported by those over whom it rules, it would be greatly beneficial if it appears to be acting according to the best interest of its citizens.
- 3- The best factor which could garner citizens' support is the adherence of the state to an objective measure which could be appreciated by all its citizens.
- 4- Perhaps the single most important factor in regard to the above point, amongst various factors which states could employ, is “justice as understood by ‘urf”.
- 5- This justice is objective, since both religious and non-religious people, each by their own canons of judgment, could appreciate it: for religious people it is God who has endowed all human beings with a shared sense of justice; for non-religious people, the shared sense of justice has emerged in us through a long period of evolutionary changes which has culminated in the discovery of what is called ‘the natural right’, or the invention of the convention of ‘the social contract’.

Is the Political Discourse of the Iranian Muslim Intellectuals Naïve?

- In either case both groups can reach common understanding and consensus vis-à-vis the notion of justice in the public arena.
- The reason for the above is that justice, as understood by common-sense is, in Rawlsian parlance, 'free-standing' and as such it is capable of producing 'overlapping consensus'.
- This point can be better understood if we use a thought experiment based upon a modified version of Rawls's famous thought experiment.
- Let's call this new experiment , A half-drawn Rawlsian veil of ignorance'.
- Here, individuals are coming from different religious or non-religious backgrounds but they all share the common-sensical view of justice. It is not difficult to see that for them a justice on which all can agree would be the best choice.

Is the Analogical Argument of the Iranian Muslim Intellectuals Misleading?

- With respect to the last point of the paper, i.e. the misleadingness of the analogy of the market it should be borne in mind that:
- The actual market, as it is operating in modern societies, is not entirely free from the regulations imposed on it by the states. The idea of the market, which is nothing but a 'regulative ideal' (in Kantian parlance) is something towards which we aim to proceed but we may never reach it.
- In this respect, therefore, the analogy with the actual free market appears to be defensible.
- It is in the light of the above rationale (i.e. their project is a research programme for educating the social actors) that the Iranian Muslim intellectuals have presented their model of preserving the public status of religion while at same time have kept emphasising and highlighting the role of critical reason (as against the literal/dogmatic reading of religious teachings) in managing the affairs of the state.
- Said Hajjariyan's insistence on the importance of the model of 'double sovereignty' is a case in point: through the preservation of such a model, the public sphere could express its preference for justice more effectively.