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On ‘Secularism’ as a Buzzword and a Strategy in Contemporary Iran: A Critique*

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Given the time limitation, I will limit myself to making the following three points.

1. As a social-media and public discourse buzzword, the term ‘secularism’ is predominantly used normatively in contemporary Iran, and therefore often in opposite ways, depending on one’s position vis-a-vis the secular and secularity.
2. 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.
3. 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, 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 is grossly misleading.

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I

‘Secularism’ (‘sekularism’ سکولاریسم in Persian) seems to be a social media and public discourse buzzword in Iran today.¹ It appears more so than, say, twenty years ago, when Mohammad Khatami was in office as President for his first term. (Back then, it was more a technical term employed for serious analytical discussions than a public discourse buzzword.)

A case in point. In mid-January 2019, a Tehran daily *Qanun* carried a headline ‘The Different and Cast-out Clergy: The Defrocking of Seyyed Hasan Aqamiri Has Had Reactions and Annotations’ on its front page.² The news report was about a popular, young cleric, known also as a ‘rouhani-ye telegrami (telegram cleric)’, having been sentenced to permanent defrocking and a two-year suspended jail term for his comments published earlier in an interview with the *Hamshahri-ye Javan* (Hamshahri Youth) paper. Aqamiri had announced his verdict on his instagram account which had 1.8 million followers. He ended his announcement with a message to his followers, and perhaps also to the Special Court of Clergy, that sentenced him, “Khub, movaffaq bashid. Du’agu-tan hastam” (Okay, good luck. I will pray for you), which prompted more than 700,000 likes.³ Then another cleric with an active social media profile, a certain Aboul Fazl Najafi-Tehran, tweeted the following:

Clashing with “independent-minded thinkers” (*digar-andishan*) started 40 years ago when one person in the name of religion came to power and said that only my narrative of religion (*velayat-e faqih* [the rule of the jurispudent]) is correct. And anyone who acted against his view was clashed with. As a result, a religious state (*hokumat-e dini*) is at work and the sufferings of this nation and country are to continue. The only way [out] is secularism (سکولاریسم).⁴

In this example, ‘secularism’ is seemingly hailed as a solution for the perceived impasse. It also appears that ‘secularism’ here is a code word for dismantling the *velayat-e faqih* state (or *faqih*-headed state) that Iran has had for the last four decades.

In another example, both the Islamic seminaries and universities are publicly blamed for spreading ‘secularism’ in Iran. Hasan Rahimpour-Azghadi, a Leader-appointed member of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, a state cultural body headed by the President, stirred contention in August 2018 by remarking the following in an address at the Feizieh Madrasa in Qom:

Jurisprudence with no relevance to life, life with no relevance to jurisprudence, *kharej* [advanced-level jurisprudence] lectures that instead of theorizing rulership and religious

¹ This may not mean much but there is a twitter hashtag ‘#سکولاریسم’.

² ‘روحانیت متفاوت و مطرود: خلع لباس سید حسن آقامیری و اکتش‌ها وحاشیه‌ها بی در پی داشته است’, <http://www.ghanoondaily.ir/fa/news/detail/92410/>; also <http://www.pishkhaan.net/news/128563> (accessed 14 January 2019). Hereafter, all translations from Persian sources are mine.

³ <https://www.instagram.com/p/BsiNqFanS8g/> (dated 12 January 2019), accessed 14 January 2019.

⁴ فقیه تیلو (من تیاور فقط گفت و دیسر تردقه به نید مانده یکنفر مکینامز شد عورش پیش لاس ۴۰ نامه زاناشیدنارگد# با دروخرد’

همادا روشک و ملت نیا مصائب تاسا راکسر بری نید حکومت تا بشد دروخرد و با درک عمل یو نظر فلاخکس هر و تاسا تسرد تشاد دهاوخ

راه #سکولاریسم است.‘
و تنها https://twitter.com/najafi_tehrani/status/1084370348869586944 (dated 13 January 2019), accessed
14 January 2019.

civilization, practically give birth to 'secular' jurisprudence, [that is] individual jurisprudence about worship, ritual purity and impurity. But they speak nothing about economy, politics, bank and international relations. Secularism (سکولاریسم) means this. Everybody says that secularism is in the university. Let me say that the root of secularism is in the Islamic seminary (howzeh). Secularism (سکولاریسم) means the separation of religion from the state, government and civilization. Theoretical separation occurs when you have nothing to say [about those matters]....⁵

Four months later in an address at the Theology Faculty of the Ferdousi University in Mashhad, Azghadi levelled his criticism, this time, against universities:

Today's secular university and Islamic seminary must be reexamined. In secular university, only the empirical method is cited. And in all scientific matters, non-religious and secular perspectives are employed....⁶

In this example, 'secularism' symbolizes the perceived 'malaise' that is seemingly on the rise in the Iranian society, with the relevant governmental officials and religious scholars in the Islamic seminary taking no action to address this perceived 'danger'.

In yet another example, 'secularism' stands for a coming danger. In a January 2009 question and answer session at a meeting organized by The Baran Foundation that he leads, former 'reformist' president Mohammad Khatami remarked the following:

The Reforms (اصلاحات) want to prevent a condition that gives birth to the establishment of secularism (سکولاریسم) from materializing. I will say that the biggest causal factor behind the emergence of secularism in society is the sovereignty of petrified thinking [i.e., dogmatism] over it (*hakemiyat-e tahajjor bar an*). For this reason, we are opposed to dogmatism and literalism (*tahajjor wa qeshri-gera'i*). And, for the same reason, reforms have to be present on the scene of religion as well.⁷

In this example, 'secularism' seems to be a code word for the decline of genuine religiosity. Such concerns, often termed '*daghdagheh-ha*' (worries; genuine concerns and unease), about losing hearts and minds of the pious have been common among the self-styled 'religious intellectuals' (*roushanfekran-e dini*) and 'religious new thinkers' (*nou-andishan-e dini*), at least since the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Famed thinkers and public figures such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, Mohammad Mojtahed-Shabestari, Mohsen Kadivar and Hasan Yousefi-Eshkavari have voiced similar concerns.⁸

⁵ <https://www.isna.ir/news/97053016111/> (dated 21 August 2018), accessed 8 March 2019.

⁶ <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1397/09/28/1903286/> (dated 18 August 2018), accessed 8/3/2019.

⁷ <https://news.gooya.com/politics/archives/2009/01/081780.php> (accessed 11 February 2019). Tellingly, the headline of this news as originally reported by the ILNA (Iranian Labor News Agency) was 'dogmatism and literalism will end up with secularism' (تجرب و قشری گرای به سکولاریسم منتهی می شود).

⁸ See, for example, Mohsen Kadivar, *Daghdagheh-ha-ye Hokumat-e Dini* [Worries about the Religious State] (Tehran: Ney, 2000); Ezzatollah Sahabi, *Daghdagheh-ha-ye Farda-ye Iran* [Worries about the Iran's Future] (Tehran: Qalam, 2006).

In a nutshell, ‘secularism’ is a buzzword in the Islamic Republic of Iran today. The ‘conservatives,’ particularly, the hardline rightist group who call themselves *osulgarayan*, use the term as an all-purpose epitome of ‘clear and present’ danger. For their turn, the self-styled ‘reformists’ use the term either as an epitome of what their opponents are giving birth to or an all-purpose solution to the perceived impasse.

That the same term stands for fatal, deadly symptoms and an all-purpose solution at the same time is interesting, but is perhaps not unique to Iran. As pointed by a German philosopher of religion and theologian Ingolf Dalferth, this ironic state of affairs occurs because it is used as a normative term. He notes that:

[t]he normative use is ambiguous because the term(s) can be used in strictly opposite ways. Thus *secularism* is the position of those who evaluate the secular or secularity positively and whatever is opposed to it negatively; or it is used in the opposite sense by the non-secular as an invective for what they consider to be an a-religious or anti-religious ideology.’⁹

Analytically speaking, however, we could distinguish at least four different ways to use the adjective ‘secular’ as the opposite of different connotations of the adjective ‘religious’:

	Religious (دینی)	Secular (سکولار)
Objects (or material sense)	sacred/worship-related/ consecrated (سندقم یا قدسی)	non-worship-related/ mundane/profane (غیر قدسی یا عرفی)
Lifeworlds (or social sense)	exclusively worship-related domain (e.g., monastery)	Regular or everyday lifeworld (منطقه زندگی عادی یا روزمره)
Knowledge (or epistemological sense)	transcendental knowledge (وحی و علوم نقلی)	Science/empirical knowledge (علم عقلی و تجربی یا عرف بشری)
Authorities (or political sense)	ones with divinely- derived legitimacy (دار با مشروعیت الهی) (قدرت)	ones with humanly- derived legitimacy (دار با مشروعیت بشری) (قدرت)

II

⁹ Ingolf U. Dalferth, ‘Post-secular society: Christianity and the dialectics of the secular’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 2 (2009): 317-345 at 325. The emphasis is in the original.

As Abdolkarim Soroush pointed out almost two decades ago, defining secularism in terms of 'separation of religion from the state' is rather superficial. But it is also a clear and tangible symbol of secularism.¹⁰

In this connection, I would submit that the oft-discussed distinction in contemporary Iran between the so-called 'political' secularism and 'philosophical' secularism, although useful, masks something important. It is typically the reformist 'religious intellectuals' who bring this distinction out. By 'political secularism', they refer to an Anglo-American, 'separation of church and state'-type institutional arrangement, and by 'philosophical secularism' they refer to an epistemological stance or a world view that does not rely on 'religious concepts' or transcendental knowledge, such as humanism and materialism. And they typically embrace the former and flatly reject the latter.¹¹

On the so-called 'political secularism', or an Anglo-American, 'separation of church and state'-type institutional arrangement, the separation at issue is often understood in contemporary Iranian discussion as 'separation of religion from politics' (*joda'i-ye din az siyosat*).

On a general level, one notable difference between the two conceptions is that while conceptualizing in terms of an amicable or mutually beneficial separation, the Anglo-American conception of separation is still *state-centric* (it is the state that should keep [more or less equal] distance from all religions while guaranteeing their free exercise--the assumed 'neutrality' although in practice it seems difficult to be 'neutral' at the end of the day, as pointed out, among others, by Partha Chatterjee¹²); whereas the Iranian formulation is broadly about the proper place of religion (and therefore is *prima facie religion-centric*), and more specifically about whether it should be allowed in the political sphere or not.¹³

In this juncture, it is notable that the Iranian "religious intellectuals" (*roushanfekran-e dini, nou-andishan-e dini*) argue that they are only in favor of institutional separation, but are against banishing religion from the public sphere altogether. In other words, they embrace the Anglo-American model and reject the French model.

¹⁰ Abdolkarim Soroush, 'Sekularism', in *Sonnat va Sekularism: Goftar-ha'i az Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammad Mojtabeh Shabestari, Mostafa Malekian, Mohsen Kadivar* (Tehran: Serat, 2002), 70, 92.

¹¹ See, for example, Abdolkarim Soroush, 'Roushanfekran-e Dini va Chahar Ma'na-ye Sekularism' [Religious Intellectuals and the Four Meanings of Secularism] (dated 23 August 2004), http://www.dr.soroush.com/Persian/News_Archive/F-NWS-13830602-The_Meanings_of_Secularism.html (accessed 10 March 2019).

¹² Partha Chatterjee, 'Secularism and Tolerance', in *Secularism and Its Critics*, edited by Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 345-379 at 353-358.

¹³ The reason why almost all religiously-inclined reformists in contemporary Iran defend the inclusion of religiosity in the public sphere, I suspect, is because, although they are reformists and thus 'post-revivalists', they come from the tradition of and share the fundamental values of those religious revivalists who were defensive nationalists, such as Hasan Modarres and Ruhollah Khomeini. The religious revivalists were 'defensive nationalists' in the sense that for them, Islam was 'the solution', or the means by which to revive their perceived 'weakened' or 'challenged' society. For the notions of 'revivalist' and 'post-revivalist' in the Iranian context, see Yasuyuki Matsunaga, 'Mohsen Kadivar, an

advocate of postrevivalist Islam in Iran’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 3: 317-329 at 320-321.

For example, self-exiled religious ‘new thinker’ Mohsen Kadivar remarked in November 2017 in his speech before a group of Iranian students overseas:

Religious new-thinking (*nou-andishi-ye dini*) defends secularism in the sense of separating religious institution from the government. And it recognizes that [doing so] is to the benefit of both religion and the government. The requirement of secularism is to negate any form of religious government and to deny any veto right of religious people or a corporate body such as jurists in judicial decision or any supreme supervision right over legislation, executive matters or even cultural matter of the society. It pursues religiosity in civil society in free, competitive space, not with the coercion of government’s political power.¹⁴

Similarly, Saeed Hajjarian, a famed reformist theoretician, noted in his interview with Mohammad Qouchani in the *Mehrnameh* monthly in late 2012:

Religious intellectuals do not defend political secularism [as such] because, as I said, its meaning is not clear or correct. Religious intellectuals won’t defend separating religiosity from politics either. Rather [they will defend] the independence of the institution of religion from the institution of government, and the independence of the institution of religion from the institution of power. Religious intellectuals will not drive religion into the private sphere. They will defend an independent and democratic presence of religion in the public sphere, while they are in favor of democratizing the institution of religion itself. However, both secularists and laicists are against any presence of religion in public spheres and drive it into the private sphere. [But] that is practically impossible [in Iran?].¹⁵

To recap, within the ‘separation of religion from politics’ perspective, they typically distinguish ‘separation of *religiosity* from politics’ (*joda’i ye diyanat az siyasat*), on the one hand, and ‘separation of the *institution of religion* from the institution of power or the state’ (*jodai’i ye nahad-e din az nahad-e qodrat ya hokumat*). On the basis of their argument, the former amounts to the privatization of religion and they oppose it; the latter remains an amicable and mutually beneficial separation between religion and politics only on an institutional level, and they embrace it as a desirable political objective.

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.¹⁶

¹⁴ <https://kadivar.com/16262> (dated 4 November 2017), accessed 14 February 2019.

¹⁵ *Mehrnameh*, no. 27 (azar 1391), p. 75.

¹⁶ Here my argument informed by Talal Asad’s contention that what modern secularism does is to

redefine ‘religion’ as a matter of private belief, which amounts to the forced relocation and resizing of what

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.¹⁷

III

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.

was previously understood as ‘religion’, which most likely was something more amorphous and enchanted and at the same time, as embodied practice, had strong public and social dimensions. Asad argues, ‘Secularist ideology, I would suggest, tries to fix permanently the social and political place of “religion” ... that in the political realm this requires particular institutional separations and arrangements that are the only guarantee of a tolerant world, because only by compelling religion, as concept and practice, to remain within prescribed limits can the transcendent power of the secular state secure liberty of belief and expression’, (‘Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith’s *The Meaning and End of Religion*’, *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (2001): 205-222 at 221. See also his *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993), 207; and *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003), 8.

¹⁷ See Chatterjee, ‘Secularism and Tolerance’. For a fuller discussion, see Yasuyuki Matsunaga, ‘(Theological and institutional soul-searching aside) will re-problematizing Iran’s Islamic state à la “religious secularity” require another Islamic state?’ *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 3, no. 1-

2 (2017): 84-87.