

RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR THOUGHT IN IRAN

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COURSE JUSTIFICATION

The nature of Middle Eastern politics has increased the demand to understand the current complex structure at work. Any course that gives an in-depth description of the situation in the Middle East will be a step forward to gaining more knowledge about these societies in general. However, given the ways Islam has been intertwined in the lives of people in most of the countries in the Middle East special attention is to be paid to religion in that region. The subject of secularism versus religiosity in all societies is important to work on, yet it is incredibly imperative to study the issue of Islam and secularism. Such courses can illuminate the difficulties of secularization process in Muslim countries.

The debate between secularists and Islamists has started at the beginning of the 20th century, when some Muslim thinkers and social activists tried to adjust Islam to modern time requirements. Secularism had already emerged in the West, and certain contemporary interpretations of religious law were widely spread. Secularism was providing the rational civil society that the development of society as a whole required. It was trying to introduce a universal system of thought and practice, based on its redefinition of the Platonic-Christian civilization, to all societies. However, other societies did not go through the same change. Some nations were more receptive than others and tried to build a local version of it and reconcile it with some values and beliefs from their own culture. In some countries, certain aspects of secularization were enforced by absolute despotism of local governments that had the support of the west. In others, a milder approach was taken. Anyhow, in all these cases of rejection and indigenization of secularism, Islam played a significant role.

In Iran, secularism arrived through intellectuals and social movements as early as 1900. The first debates between secularists and fundamentalists are reflected in the Constitution Revolution in 1906 and its aftermath. The Iranian society has had its own challenges to deal with the religious reformism. Being populated by a majority of Shi'ites, it has got a unique condition. The idea of establishing an Islamic government, based on the Shi'ite teachings, was realized soon after the 1979 revolution that led to the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty. A combination of republicanism and Islamic values was offered to people for their endorsement in a referendum. Once again the confrontation between secularism and religion was articulated in to a political language. This time the religious leaders believing in *Velayat-e Faqih* (the Guardianship of the Jurisconsult in the absence of the Twelfth Imam) could dominate over other interpretations of Shi'ism. The role of clerics in government was defined and enforced to the highest extent.

It took more than a decade to observe the emergence of some dissident voices coming from within the ruling Shi'ite circles. Debates on the role of clergymen in all aspects of government, on democracy and Islam, on reason and intellect, on religiosity and

intellectual intuition, on modernity and tradition, and other relevant issues mark the new wave of revising Islam. Though there is less dispute over the authority of the jurist in Shi'ism, and only the extent of this authority has been questioned the open criticism of it created a space for challenging the status quo. Since the Islamic theologians and clerics have differed on the issues of the leadership and/or advisory role of the jurists a significant number of books and articles have been published since early 90's. This shows the popularity of the subject; however, the debate did not remain only in scholastic circles and gave way to a reformist movement. The women's movement and the students' movement both were influenced by these religious reformist ideas. The reformists participated in the political power and supported the Iranian presidency from 1997 until their recent defeat in 2005. Their participation in the political power escalated the tension between secular and religious values to unbelievable proportions over the recent years. At a time when almost everyone expected religious thought to undergo a slow but steady reform, another surge of fundamentalism is spreading.

This course will examine the social dynamism of both trends and their influence in shaping the life of Iranians. It will particularly focus on the dilemmas seculars and religious reformists face with in terms of survival, expression and practice their beliefs. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the issues, the course will look at different discourses of secularism, fundamentalism, and "religious intellectualism" as discussed in the recent decade. It will also explore the ways by which Islam on one hand, and secularism, on the other, have been intertwined in the contexts of social life and culture. Furthermore, it will also consider how all these discourses use the women's rights to argue their points. Due to the fact that Islam prescribes certain ways to treat women, constructing the ideal image of women and shaping and re-shaping femininity has been at the heart of this debate. Therefore, it is necessary to touch the basic demands posed by "Islamic Feminism" in Iran, and study the way it has been related to the religious reforms of the present time.

COURSE OUTLINE

Part I- Differentiation between Sunnism and Shi'ism

Basic background to concord and conflict between Shi'ism and Sunnism; Shi'ite and Sunni interpretation of the Islamic state; aspects of Shi'i modernism

Main resource:

- Enayat, Hamid. 1982. **Modern Islamic Political Thought**. Austin: University of Texas Press. pp. 18- 51, pp. 69-110, and pp. 160-194.

Suggested film(s) from Trinity College Library, Music and Media Service Collection:

- **Islam, Empire of Faith**: Call Number: BP50 .I74 2001
- **Beirut to Bosnia**: Call Number: DS119.7 .B457 2002

Part II- The Constitutional Revolution

Historical background in late early 20th century; impact of the west; emergence of new classes; struggle for the Constitution

Main resource:

- Abrahamian, Ervand. 1982. **Iran between Two Revolutions**. Princeton: Princeton University Press. pp. 9-101.

Secondary resources:

- A unauthorized English translation of the 1906 Constitution and its supplement can be found at :http://www.worldstatesmen.org/Iran_const_1906.doc

Part III- Early Conflicts between Secularism and Fundamentalism in Iran

Competitive projects of nationalism, socialism, and Islamism for the development of Iran in modern times; influence of secularization in Turkey in Iran; advisory/leadership role of clerics in government; Pahalvi dynasty and its significance in modernizing Iran; concepts of modernization and westernization

Main resources:

- Abrahamian, Ervand. 1982. **Iran between Two Revolutions**. Princeton: Princeton University Press. pp. 102-149.
- Kasravi, Ahmad. 1990. **On Islam and Shi'ism**, trans. M.R. Ghanoonparvar. Costa Meza: Mazda Publishers.

- Enayat, Hamid. 1982. **Modern Islamic Political Thought**. Austin: University of Texas Press. pp. 111-159.
- Soroush, Abdolkarim. 2000. **Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam**. Oxford University Press. pp. 156-170.

Secondary resources:

- Sayyid, Bobby S. 1997. “Kemalism and the Politicization of Islam” in **A Fundamental Fear**. London: Zed Books. pp. 52-83.

Suggested film(s) from Trinity College Library, Music and Media Service Collection:

- **People of the Wind**: Call Number: VID 2915
(This film is more related to the issues of tradition versus modern ways of life in recent times. It gives a lively image of an Iranian tribe that tries to survive culturally and economically.)

Part IV- Islamic Revolution

Role played by Islam in the 1979 revolution; sources of the revolutionary inspirations; consolidation of Islamic power; Islamization process in the Middle East

Main resources:

- Shariati, Ali. 2003. **Religion vs. Religion**, trans. Laleh Bakhtiar. Chicago: ABC International Group.
- Abrahamian, Ervand. 1982. **Iran between Two Revolutions**. Princeton: Princeton University Press. pp. 497-537.
- Afary, Janet and Kevin Anderson. 2005. **Foucault and the Iranian Revolution**. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. pp.38-66.

Secondary resources:

- Bayat, Asef. 1998. “Revolution without Movement, Movement without Revolution: Comparing Islamic Activism in Iran and Egypt” in **Society for Comparative Study of Society and History**. pp. 136-169.
- Tank, Pinar. 2005. “Political Islam in Turkey: A State of Controlled Secularity” in **Turkish Studies**, Vol.6 (1): pp. 3-19.
- The website of the Iranian Supreme Leader:
- <http://www.leader.ir/langs/EN/index.php>
- *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran can be found at:*
<http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/ir000000.html>

Suggested films from Trinity College Library, Music and Media Service Collection:

- **Century: Iranian Revolution**: Call Number: PPCjl073

- **Iran 1953:** Call Number: PPCjl074
- **Living Icons:** (A *RealPlayer* version of it is attached.)

Part V- Criticism to Islamism from Religious Reformist Perspective

Role of clerics in government; democracy and Islam; Islamic revivalism; religious reform; modernity and tradition

Main resources:

- Soroush, Abdolkarim. 2000. **Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam.** Oxford University Press. pp. 26-69 and pp. 122-156.
- Jahanbegloo, Ramin. 2004. **Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity.** Lexington Books.

Secondary resources:

- Abdolkarim Soroush's official website at <http://www.drSORoush.com/English.htm>
- There is a video film of one of Soroush's lecture in the US at this address: http://digitalmedia.cua.edu/events/event_dsp.cfm?event=582
- Ghamari-Tabrizi, Behrooz. 2004. "Contentious Public Religion: Two Concepts of Islam in Revolutionary Iran" in **International Society**, Vol.19 (4): 504-523.
- Sadri, Mahmoud. 2001. "Sacred Defense of Secularism" in **International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society**, Vol. 15 (21): pp. 257-270.
- <http://freethoughts.org/>
- <http://www.kadivar.com/Htm/English/E-Index.htm>
- http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_softlink.php/ c-360/ lkm-2881/i.html
- <http://www.iransecularsociety.com/index.html>
- <http://www.secularism.org/>

Suggested film(s) from Trinity College Library, Music and Media Service Collection:

- **Iran, the Broken Soul:** Call Number: JC599.I65 I79 2003

Part VI- Women's Movement and Islamic Feminism

Status of women in post-revolutionary Iran; patriarchy, women, and Islam; "indigenous feminism"; Islamist women's reformism and its demands

Main resources:

- Afary, Janet and Kevin Anderson. 2005. **Foucault and the Iranian Revolution.** Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. pp. 106-162.
- Shahidian, Hammed. 2002. **Women in Iran: Gender Politics in the Islamic Republic.** Westport: Greenwood Press. pp. 161-261.
- Shahidian, Hammed. 2002. **Women in Iran: Emerging voices in the Women's Movement.** Westport: Greenwood Press. pp. 67-109.

- Moghissi, Haideh.2002. **Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism**. London: Zed Books. pp. 125-148.

Secondary resources:

- <http://www.wluml.org/english/index.shtml>

Suggested films from Trinity College Library, Music and Media Service Collection:

- **Women and Islam:** Call Number: VID 2096
- **Under One Sky:** Call Number: VID 2988
- **Virgin Diaries:** Call Number: HQ1791 .V57 2002
- **Zinat:** Call Number: VID 3667
- **Divorce Iranian Style:** Call Number: VID 2770
- **Runaway:** Call Number: HQ1735.2 .Z9 F37 2001 & Call Number: VID 3616
- **Ladies:** Call Number: HQ1735.2 .Z9 T44 2003
- **Under the Skin of the City:** Call Number: PN1997 .Z58 2004

COURSE PRE-REQUISITES

The course on Religious and Secular Thought in Iran should be offered to the senior university students that have already gained some basic knowledge on Islam and/or Middle East. Besides, this course excludes debates on religion and secularism as emerged in the west. Therefore, taking courses on the history of Enlightenment and/or religious reforms prior to this one enables students to gain better understanding of the secular challenges in the Islamic countries.

Class Organization

The class will be run as a lecture but certain time will be allocated to group discussion. The concept of the secularism in the West will be discussed during the first week of the course. Then the lectures will focus on the basic required knowledge on Islam, especially on Shi'ism. Finally, the course will deal with the challenges between religion and secular thought in contemporary Iran.

- Rodinson, Maxime. 1980. **Muhammad**. (With a New Epilogue by the Author Maxime Rodinson Translated from the French by Anne Carter). New York: The New Press. (MR)
- Jahanbegloo, Ramin. 2004. **Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity**. Lexington Books. (RJ)
- Lewis, Bernard. 2001. **What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response**. Oxford University Press. (BL)
- Shariati, Ali. 1993. **Religion vs. Religion**. Abjad Book Designers and Builders. (ASH)
- Soroush, Abdolkarim. 2000. **Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam**. Oxford University Press. (ASO)
- Enayat, Hamid. 1982. **Modern Islamic Political Thought**. Austin: University of Texas Press. (HE)

Concept of Secularism in the West

Week 1

Hobsbawm, Eric. "Ideology: Religion" in *The Age of Revolution*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

- ✓ Hobsbawm, Eric. "Science, Religion, Ideology" in *The Age of Capital*, New York: Scribner.
- ✓ "The Relevance of the Past" (HE)

Basic Knowledge on Islam and Shi'ism

Week 2 and 3

- ✓ "Introduction" (MR)
- ✓ "Introducing a World" (MR)
- ✓ "Introducing a Land" (MR)
- ✓ "Birth of a Prophet" (MR)
- ✓ "Birth of a Sect" (MR)
- ✓ "Shi'ism and Sunnism" (HE)
- ✓ "Epilogue" (MR)

Secularism in Middle East

Week 4

- ✓ "Social and Cultural Barriers" (BL)
- ✓ "Modernization and Social Equality" (BL)
- ✓ "Secularism and the Civil Society" (BL)

- ✓ Sayyid, Bobby S. 1997. "Kemalism and the Politicization of Islam" in *a Fundamental Fear*. NY:Zed Books. pp. 52-83.

Islamization in Middle East

Week 5 and 6

- ✓ "The Concept of the Islamic State" (HE)
- ✓ "Nationalism, Democracy and Socialism" (HE)
- ✓ Bayat, Asef. 1998. "Revolution without Movement, Movement without Revolution: Comparing Islamic Activism in Iran and Egypt" in *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History*. pp. 136-169.

Evaluation

Week 7

- ✓ MID TERM EXAM
- ✓ MID TERM PAPER

Revival of Islamic Thought in Iran

Weeks 8, 9, and 10

- ✓ "Aspects of Shi'ie Modernism" (HE)
- ✓ "Islamic Revival and Reform" (ASO)
- ✓ (ASH, the whole book)
- ✓ Foucault, Michel. 2005. "Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit" in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, ed. Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. pp. 250-260.
- ✓ Ghamari-Tabrizi, Behrooz. 2004. "Contentious Public Religion: Two Concepts of Islam in Revolutionary Iran" in *International Society*, Vol.19 (4): 504-523.

Secularism vs. Religion Thought in Iran in the Last Decade

Weeks 11, 12, 13, and 14

"The Sense and Essence of Secularism" (ASO)

- ✓ "The Idea of Democratic Religious Government" (ASO)
- ✓ "Tolerance and Governance" (ASO)
- ✓ "The Three Cultures" (ASO)
- ✓ "Life and Virtue" (ASO)
- ✓ Sadri, Mahmoud. 2001. "Sacred Defense of Secularism" in *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 15, No. 21 Winter, pp. 257-270.
- ✓ Mahdavi, Mojtaba. 2005. "Max Weber in Iran: Does Islamic Protestantism Matter?" (University of Western Ontario)
- ✓ (RJ, the whole book)
- ✓ Shahidian, Hammed. 2002. "Patriarchy Blessed: Gender Teleogy and Violence" in *Women in Iran*, Westport: Greenwood Press.
- ✓ Shahidian, Hammed. 2002. "From Mother's Bosoms: Patriarchy Vacillating between Private and Public" in *Women in Iran*, Westport: Greenwood Press.

Evaluation

- ✓ FINAL PAPER
- ✓ FINAL EXAM

MID-TERM EXAM

PLEASE CHOOSE FOUR OF THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- In Marx's phrase (as quoted in Hobsbawm, Eric. "Ideology: Religion" in *The Age of Revolution*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.) "religion is the heart of a heartless world". How do you explain this statement regarding the situation in Europe in the 19th century?
- How did anti-clericalism grow in Europe and how was it related to the modern science?
- From what you have read and heard about the Prophet Muhammad, how do you portray him? What were his charismatic features? What was his strength in bringing people together?
- In what ways Shi'ism and Sunnism are related to each other? How do you justify the attempts for reconciling these two sects in the recent century?
- Summarize the social and cultural barriers that Bernard Lewis considers for the development of Islamic societies. In what ways does he see a difference between "modernization" and "westernization"?
- What are the main specifications of an Islamic State, as it has been discussed among Muslim clerics?

FINAL EXAM

PLEASE CHOOSE FOUR OF THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

1. What are the crucial themes of Shi'i culture? And which of them has inspired Ali Shariati the most?
2. Some scholars believe that the "fundamental essence of Islam makes it incompatible with modernity and democracy". Argue for or against this statement.
3. What is significance of Soroush in Muslim theology? What are his critiques of Islam as a state ideology? Which aspects of his religiosity did you find appealing?
4. In what ways do you think secularism can protect religious minorities, non-believers, and women?
5. How do you assess the effect of the Islamist women in Iran? What are their achievements and shortcomings, in terms of change in gender relations in favor of women?
6. What various reactions were caused by the encounter of ancient empires (of Turkey and Iran) with the West? How can you relate them to secularism, on one hand and to the emergence of Islamism, on the other hand?