Religious Democracy

Three Contending Interpretations among Iranian Political Thinkers

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Abstract

This paper reviews and evaluates three salient interpretations of religious democracy among contemporary Iranian political thinkers. Based on their theoretical frameworks, these interpretations have been: 1) Precedence of religion over democracy, 2) Precedence of democracy over religion; 3) Equal importance of religion and democracy. The description of each interpretation is firstly based on original texts and then their content has been evaluated using logical axioms and objective facts. The main finding of this paper clarifies that the third interpretation, despite some theoretical challenges, has more logical capacity and is more consistent in comparison with the two other competing interpretations.

Keywords

Iran – Religious Democracy – Political Thought – Contending Interpretations

In the early years of the third decade of the Islamic Revolution, the term ‘religious democracy’ came into Iranian political literature as a term to describe the desired political system framed by the ideology of the Iranian Islamic Revolution. From the beginning, the definition of this concept, and its indicators, has been a bone of contention amongst political scholars. This article seeks to clarify the three important interpretations of this concept and to evaluate their logical content. These interpretations, according to their theoretical basics, can be nominated respectively as “The interpretation toward precedence of religion over democracy”, “The interpretation toward precedence of democracy over religion” and eventually “The interpretation toward equal importance of religion and democracy”.

The Interpretation Toward Precedence of Religion over Democracy

A Theoretical Statements

If the theoretical statements of this interpretation could be reconstructed to answer the question of “What is Religious Democracy,” the answer would probably be Religious Democracy refers to a political system in which the right to sovereignty belongs to God, while people participate in the management of society within the framework of divine rules. Based on this definition, three important theoretical statements can be identified.

The first, and perhaps the most important, theoretical statement in the above mentioned definition is that the right to sovereignty belongs to God and, due to the lack of direct relation between God and the people, this sovereignty should be exerted by some persons who represent God’s will. So, it is believed that the best person to exert this right is the prophet of Islam. But there are a variety of ideas as to who has the authority following the period of the prophet. Within this debate, Shi’ites believe that in such a period the infallible imāms have the right to exert sovereignty on behalf of God. However the absence of the twelfth Imam, has led some Shiʿite jurists to assert that the right to sovereignty should be exerted by a qualified faqih (jurist) during this period of his absence (Reshād, p. 101).

In fact, according to this view, the legitimacy of religious democracy depends on the presence of a person at the top of the political system as the representative of God. So the absence of such a person will lead to the political system being an illegitimate government. But the question is: what is the role of people in this system? The bearers of this interpretation answer that people’s involvement is merely confined to the realization of the mentioned system. In other words, the person who has political legitimacy needs people in order to help him to assert actual authority. Therefore, it is the religious duty of the people to help him construct a religious government. M. Kadivar, one of the critics of this interpretation, writes:

[In this viewpoint] the legitimacy of leadership is not more than one [thing]. That thing is the general appointment of just jurists by God for the guardianship of people. If people help the jurist (faqih) who has established the Islamic government to exercise religious rules (shariʿa), and increase his authority, they have done their religious duty. However, the majority of popular support and public votes is not considered as the source of legitimacy. The meaning of this collaboration is people’s submission to their religious duty. A qualified faqih is a guardian who is appointed by God, regardless of whether he secures all the votes or fails to secure a single person’s vote (Kadivar 2002, p. 58).
As noted, in this interpretation the political role of people is defined as assistance in the realization of an assumed theory, which is even a duty and not a right.

The second theoretical statement framed within the first interpretation of religious democracy denotes that if the right to sovereignty belongs to God, so the right to legislation also belongs to God; and there is no right for people in this regard. If there is a role for the people, as it has been mentioned in the stated definition, that role is defined within the frame of divine rules. In other words, bearers of this interpretation view regulation in Islamic society as ordained by God, or by someone who has a divine permission to do so on behalf of God (Mesbāh Yazdi, pp. 287-88). At the same time it is also believed that there is a need to have a parliament in such a society because there are some issues which have not been subject for divine rules. So the representatives of the people are qualified to legislate in regard to such issues in the parliament. However such regulations should not be in contradiction to the religious statements. Therefore, in case of contradiction, the parliament regulation will not have any legitimacy (Mesbāh Yazdi, pp. 161-73; Malekzāda, pp. 90-91; Kavākebiān, pp. 39-116; Reshād, pp. 229-35; Basir, pp. 92-93). Mesbāh Yazdi, an outstanding advocate of this interpretation for religious democracy states:

If democracy in the legislative sphere means the precedence of the votes of people, even though these regulations would be in contradiction with the divine rules, such democracy is rejected in the viewpoint of Islam and Muslims. However if democracy had a different meaning, according to which people, by selecting representatives, can intervene in their own legal and social issues, preserving the Islamic basics, principles and values, and via their representatives, legislate some special regulations concerning certain time and space circumstances; this is the situation in our country we have. . . . but the validity of parliament legislation is contingent on the fact that they should not be in contradiction with Islam (Mesbāh Yazdi, p. 181).

The two above-mentioned theoretical statements confirm the undeniable precedence of religion over democracy, and thus it becomes clear that the legitimacy of both governors and rules depends on the religion. As mentioned before, the role of people in this regard is defined within the frame of religious rules. So, the question is: if the role of people is restricted to this extent, from what perspective can the advocates of this interpretation introduce their scheme as some kind of democracy? The answer to this question can be deemed as the third theoretical statement of this interpretation.
According to the third statement, although the right to sovereignty belongs to God, the divine rules have left a broad groundwork for people to participate in the political sphere in regard to the electing of governors and to the legislation of some regulations. Therefore, people complying with the divine rules have a very important role in such a government.

Within this point of view, the theoretical scheme is also democratic from another perspective. Its theoreticians believe that their assumed system, due to its tendency to meet the true needs of the people, is a democratic system. This tendency leads to people’s satisfaction and some kind of spiritual relationship between people and sovereignty. Hence, in such a system, people view the governors as ones who realize the ideals and demands of the public, and therefore they love the system. (Ettelāʿāt Newspaper, 15 Aug. 2000, quoted in Fayyāz, pp. 36-37)

The outcome of the above-mentioned theoretical statements is the same idea that is apparent from the title of this interpretation, that is, precedence of religion over democracy. In other words, there is no priority for democracy in this interpretation, which is used solely as an instrument in situations allowed by the religion.

B Logical Evaluation
There are a lot of important theoretical challenges to the statements of the interpretation of precedence of religion over democracy, some of which are explained below.

The first point is about the first statement. Some of the Islamic jurists (foqahā) and religious scholars propose reasons by which they argue that God has not appointed anyone as his successor in sovereignty. So people have the right to choose the form of government on their own (Abdel Raziq, pp. 136-156; Kadivar, 1997 and 2001). Therefore, not only is there no consensus on the theoretical basis of the first interpretation among the Islamic scholars, but also there are some important opponents to this point of view.

The second point is about the right to legislation. This right belongs to God in the frame of the interpretation in question. It is clear that this principle cannot be faulted from a religious standpoint. In such a point of view the inferiority of mankind before God is all too clear, including in the field of legislation. But the question here is since the prophet’s era has passed, at the present time nobody can be recognized as the official spokesman of the religion. Indeed, there are many disagreements amongst religious scholars in this regard, hence it is important to question how ‘true divine rules’ can be recognized. Perhaps it can be said that due to the existence of a variety of narratives in regard to divine rules, no narrative can be easily trusted. Therefore if mankind’s
regulations comply with divine rules or, at the very least, there exists no contradiction between such regulations and divine rules, the question is what mechanisms exist to identify true divine rules as prevalent rules? The point here seems to be that instead of divine rule having precedence over the regulations of mankind, these regulations should instead be subject to the interpretations of religious scholars. In which case, the questions arising would relate to the scholars’ interpretation of divine rule and whether their ideas would overrule the demands of the people?

The above-mentioned points are not to deny the necessity of harmony between divine rules and those of mankind. But these points have been referred to in order to criticize the simple mechanisms that are suggested by the bearers of the interpretation in question for reaching this desirable harmony. Anyway it can be said that the second theoretical statement of this interpretation, like the first statement, has encountered some important challenges that have not yet been properly answered.

The final point is about the third theoretical statement on which they base their democratic political system. As mentioned before, the bearers of this interpretation argue that, for two reasons, religious democracy is a democratic system. The first reason is the participation of people in the management of the society, acting within the framework of divine rules. The second reason refers to the function of this system, which is people-centric. But can a system be called democratic based on these two reasons? It is clear that such reasoning cannot be easily accepted. Of course there is no agreement among political thinkers in regard to the indicators of democracy, but the dominant discourse denotes that the main indicator for democracy is the acceptance of the sovereignty of people as a principle and the existence of some necessary mechanisms for the realization of such a principle (Bashiriya, 2008a and 2008b). Therefore, the fact that bearers of this interpretation view sovereignty as a right belonging exclusively to God, which can also be implemented by those selected by God, makes it problematic for any neutral person to accept this system as a democratic one.

### 2 The Interpretation of Precedence of Democracy over Religion

Like the consideration of the first interpretation, here also the first step will be constructing a definition of religious democracy based on the theoretical statements of interpretation in question. Therefore it can be said that, according to the viewpoints of the bearers of the second interpretation, religious democracy is a political system in which the right to sovereignty belongs to
the people; and the role of religion in the governance of the society depends entirely on the will of the people.

The important theoretical basis of this interpretation of religious democracy has been reflected well in an unpublished paper delivered by Mostafa Malekian at a conference entitled “The challenges of the future of the Islamic Revolution” in 2003. Another version of the paper was published containing some important points from the original version (Malekian). It should be noted, however, that Malekian does not use the expression “religious democracy,” but the conditions and characteristics of this type of government are perceivable within his statements.

Malekian has used an epistemological argument to affirm the “precedence of democracy over religion,” which can lead to some special attitude toward religious democracy. He argues that mankind’s beliefs can be divided into two categories.

The first category includes the beliefs that are not empirically verifiable. These beliefs are related to mankind’s taste and inclination. In other words, it is not possible to consider these ideas as correct or false by empirical testing. Malekian calls these beliefs “subjective beliefs”. For instance if someone says “blue is the prettiest color in the world,” his/her statement denotes a taste and it cannot be empirically examined for judgment in regard to its correctness or falseness.

The second category of mankind’s beliefs includes ideas that say something about the real world. As such it is possible to examine their correctness or falseness through reference to the realities and by using empirical tests. Malekian calls these “objective beliefs”. This category is divided in two parts. The first part includes some objective beliefs that can be tested at the time. For example if it is said that “This mushroom is poisonous,” the statement can be empirically verified at then and there. The second part of this category includes some objective beliefs that could potentially be empirically tested in the future. For example, if someone says that there is a planet in a certain point of some special galaxy in which conditions exist which are suitable for the existence of human beings, although this belief is an objective belief, there is no way to test it empirically in the current situation.

Malekian, after explaining his idea regarding mankind’s beliefs, proposes the second part of his argument. He says that our decisions in regard to anything are based on either subjective beliefs or objective beliefs. However it is clear that if we want to make a decision based on a true scientific consideration,

1 The conference was held at The Research Institute of Imam Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution.
such decision making will be possible only within the frame of the beliefs that belong to the first category of objective beliefs, because only those beliefs are empirically testable. Yet, obviously, a lot of our decisions fall into the category of subjective beliefs or the second category of the objective beliefs. Therefore the question is what is to be done in such cases?

Malekian answers that in such cases the two spheres of life should be separated. The first one is the private sphere because the consequences of decisions made in this sphere impact only the person that has made them, so one should be left free to make such decisions according to his likes and dislikes. But the situation is different in the public sphere since the consequences of decisions made by an individual in this area will affect others and therefore no decision should be left to the sporadic will of the individual. Malekian says that the most reasonable and just way of decision making in this regard is deciding according to the majority, because such decisions are not in the arena of objective beliefs which are actually verifiable. Therefore when the truth is not accessible, the best criterion is justice. Besides, due to the fact that the consequences of decisions in the public sphere will have an impact on others, it is just that such decisions are made by the people engaged in public services. Malekian adds that it is clear that such mechanisms for decision making are available only within democratic systems. Therefore, it can be noted that democracy is the only system which is based upon a reliable epistemological basis.

Following these discussions, Malekian presents the third part of his argument, which is the outcome of the first and second parts of his reasoning. He states that lots of religious beliefs are subjective, and that even though some of them are objective statements, verifying them empirically is impossible within the current situation. Hence if it is asked whether, in regards to public affairs (e.g. economic, legal, political, educational, etc.), we can make decisions based on religious beliefs, according to Malekian's point of view, the answer is that it depends on the vote of the people. He believes that if people agree with the issue in question, some “religious democratic government” will be formed, and if people do not agree, it is clear that the construction of such a government will not be a just act. Therefore it can be said that the realization and establishment of a religious democratic government is entirely dependent on the people's will.

It should also be added that a full commitment to justice in this arena requires that the religious government be determined by the people on both the general and the detailed levels. Malekian, based on the afore-mentioned argument, summarizes the necessary conditions for constructing a religious government or a religious democracy as follows:
With three characteristics a religious [democratic] government can be constructed:

All or majority of people in society accept that the religious statements and beliefs are not actually verifiable [empirically]. They accept that although these statements are not verifiable, but they should be the basis for their decision making. Those statements which people want to adopt as the basis for their decision making in public life should be [applied] according to an interpretation which they prefer in regard to such statements; It should not be [some ones] show them an apparent figure of a statement and they [approbate] and desire either; but afterwards it be anything else in the practice (Malekian, 257-258).

A Logical Evaluation

As has been seen, the essence of the second interpretation refers to: 1) if a decision is taken among members of a community in the area of subjective beliefs, the principle of justice requires that such decisions should be taken via the participation and voting of the same community. 2) Due to the fact that democracy makes available the background of such participation, it has a reliable epistemological foundation. Finally 3) the sovereignty of religion within the social realm is possible only via the people’s vote. Also the type and extent of this sovereignty is dependent on the people’s will.

Regarding the evaluation of theoretical statements from this interpretation, at least three points can be singled out. The first point is that the boundaries of subjective and objective beliefs are very ambiguous. It is true that the criterion of being empirically verifiable helps a lot in this regard, but there are naturally some extensive disagreements amongst experts of the humanities in regard to what constitutes as concrete samples for verifiable and non-verifiable beliefs in reality. Therefore how can it be possible to introduce all of the religious beliefs as non-verifiable beliefs, and concede their presence in the public sphere to the willingness or unwillingness of people?

The second point refers to a question according to which it can be asked whether the utility of democracy itself is a subjective belief or an objective one. This belief, however, seems to be a subjective one, because there are a lot of contending orientations and theories in regard to democracy (Catt; Paehlke; Buultjens; Legters et al; Girvetz; Green; Shari‘ati; Mills; Arblaster; Bashiriya; Cunningham). If so, the next question to be raised: Is democracy itself voted for by the people regularly? It is clear that the reality is not so. In fact despite democracy being a subjective belief, the principle of democracy, as a framework for the construction of a political system, is treated as an objective belief in democratic countries.
It may be said that such orientation of current democratic systems towards democracy is a mistake and the principle of democracy should also be conceded to by public election. In which case, the question would be: if people didn't vote for a democracy, would such a choice be accepted by the leaders?

On the other hand it could be argued that once people vote for the principle of democracy, the legitimacy of democracy is established forever. In that case it can be asked: is it also possible to concede the permanent legitimacy of other issues to the public vote or not? If this approach is permissible for democracy, on what logical basis should it be denied concerning other issues? For instance, is it possible that “the necessity of religious control of the mankind regulations” having been conceded to public election once, now be forever as a principle like the principle of democracy? And once the people vote positively concerning this principle, do social functions continue forever more without paying attention to the continuation or non-continuation of people’s positive orientation toward such a principle? In other words, if democracy can construct a sustainable structure and identity of a political system based on reaching a majority vote of people on one occasion, why can such a concession cannot be given to other issues, like the presence of religion in the public sphere? If not, what is the reason for preference of Democracy in comparison with religion in this regard?

The final point is in regard to the last part of Malekiān's argument, which refers to the public voting as a basis on which the presence of religion in the public sphere and the extent of its impact can be determined. In this regard it can be asked that if the religion plays its role via a public positive vote, isn't it better to call such a political system a pure democracy? In fact in all democratic governments, legislation and political decisions are, to some extent, impacted by people’s religious beliefs and sentiments, but nobody calls such democracies ‘religious democracy’ (Mojtehed Shabestari, 2002, p. 37).

If the presence and the extent of influence of religion is dependent on people's willingness, what is the necessity to call it a religious government? In a case in which the decisions are taken based on human reason, do we have to add a suffix to such democracy and call it rational democracy? According to this critique, it might be asserted that in the framework of this interpretation, giving precedence to democracy over religion, ‘religious democracy’ acts as a title without any proper content. This is equivalent to the work through which the bearers of the first interpretation do the same, giving precedence to religion over democracy.

In sum, paying attention to the aforementioned points, it can be said that the theoretical statements of the second interpretation have been encountered by serious criticisms too. Hence juxtaposing this result and the result which
has been taken after consideration of the first interpretation, it can be said that there is not much of a difference between these two interpretations in regard to their logical consistency. It should be added immediately that the second interpretation is newer and to some extent more consistent and nuanced.

3 The Interpretation toward Equal Importance of Religion and Democracy

A Theoretical Statements

The third interpretation is as follows: religious democracy is a political system in which the right to sovereignty, through God's willingness, belongs to the people and people exert this sovereignty complying within the divine rules.

This definition involves a variety of theoretical statements. These statements have been extensively discussed in the works of the writers of this interpretation. Three of these statements, through which the theoretical capacity of this interpretation is considered, have been selected. The selected statements are: 1) accepting of people's right to sovereignty as a condition for the system to be democratic; 2) complying with the divine rules in the exertion of sovereignty as a condition for the system to be religious; 3) equal importance of commitment to the people's vote and commitment to complying with the divine rules as a condition for the establishment of religious democracy.

1 Accepting People's Right to Sovereignty as a Condition for the System to Be Democratic

In the framework of this interpretation the right to sovereignty has been granted to the people by God. Based on this statement, people have the right to self-determination. Commitment to the people's vote is the condition for the government to be democratic. Hence the bearers of this interpretation believe that one cannot claim a system to be a religious one if people's right to vote has been hindered. It is clear that this position distinguishes this interpretation from the first one, in which the right to sovereignty belongs to God and is exerted by the individuals who are appointed by God.

Belief in the people's right to sovereignty has been accompanied by two other theoretical beliefs. The first one is the necessity of commitment to the democratic values, and the second one is the necessity of the establishment of democracy as the most desirable political system. According to the first belief, it has been accepted that in religious democracy “Individuals are equal politically and legally, regardless of their religion, sect, sex, color, race and political ideas. Civil equality rejects any special concession for Muslims or jurists etc.
All of the citizens are equal regarding the right to governing and intervening in the public affairs and they have equal opportunities” (Kadivar, 2001, p. 6)

It has been accepted that “no decision is authentic without the people’s participation. The participation of people should be provided in all levels of decision making and decision building at the highest form, the deepest way and the broadest range” (Kadivar 2001, p. 6). According to this viewpoint, in a religious democracy, “Power is not concentrated under any title in the hands of any class, guild and group. In this type of democracy, there may be some groups whose values are different from those of the faithful, but faithful people are not permitted to resort to some kind of violence for exerting their own values. They try to preserve their own values like others, complying with the democratic ways and complying with the rules of the [democratic] game (Mojtahed Shabestari, 2001, p. 8).

Also, in regard to the second belief, i.e. the necessity of establishing democracy, the writers of the third interpretation emphasize this necessity with a variety of arguments. For example, the writings of Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari can be referred to. In one of his articles, entitled “What is the Religious Democracy?” he argues that democracy can be accepted from a purely religious position. He presents some arguments in this regard:

[Due to the fact that] democratic system is the only system in present era through which two great truths, namely mankind deserved justice and freedom, can be relatively substantiated, and humans can realize their humanity in the extent of that substantiation…and cope with their responsibility before God, we accept that (Mojtehed Shabestari, 2001, pp. 7-8).

In the framework of the third interpretation, religious democracy is a system in which the indicators of democratic government are presented transparently. Regarding this issue Kadivar writes:

[In the religious democracy] via God’s willingness, the only source for the legitimacy of government authority is the public will. Governments come to power based on the public will and [also] put aside from power based on public will…. In the religious democracy all of the public managements undertake their responsibilities as delegates and representatives of people based on their election. All powers of the Public Service agents are bound to the law and no one’s authority is absolute. Government officials are all temporary, and responsibilities are transferred to the next elected one in [a] specified time period. So no one has a [political] post
forever or as long as his or her qualification is remained. . . . [And also] the most important condition for taking responsibility as public authority is efficiency and honesty, so that qualified individuals can reach the public trust through a free and fair election (Kadivar, 2001, p. 6).

According to the above-mentioned points, it seems that the first theoretical statement of the third interpretation has been explained. However this does not mean with any certainty that the bearers of this interpretation accept democracy in all its models, because they reject secular and liberal models of democracy. In fact they accept democracy when it has no prefix. But if this political system should, in practice, accept a prefix, they argue that the most proper prefix for democracy is a prefix through which democracy turns religious. Therefore they prefer religious democracy in comparison with other models. This point will be explained more fully in the next theoretical statement of this interpretation.

2 Complying with the Divine Rules in Exerting the Right to Sovereignty as a Condition for the System to be Religious

The writers of the interpretation toward equal precedence of religion and democracy believe that complying with the divine rules is a condition for a democratic system to be religious. This statement is the defining characteristic of this interpretation, distinguishing it from the first interpretation and separating it from the second one. It should be noted in this connection that, according to the first interpretation, regarding the precedence of religion over democracy, the main condition for a political system to be religious is that of being governed by the peoples who are appointed by God. But, according to the writers of the third interpretation, the only condition is compliance with the divine rules.

The difference between the third interpretation and the second one, namely the interpretation concerning the precedence of democracy over religion, is somewhat complicated. Apparently the bearers of both of these interpretations say that the condition for religiousness in the level of the political system is public willingness to comply with the divine rules, but there are some important differences among them. In the frame of the interpretation toward the precedence of democracy over religion, the first point is that people are the final judge in regard to religious and non-religious norms. People choose some norms as religious norms as well as the desirable interpretations of them; and based on the orientation of the people, the government becomes a religious government or not. Secondly if people reject the religious norms within the governmental arena, it will not produce any problem regarding the legitimacy
of such a government because religious norms are not in the realm of objective beliefs and the legitimacy of their presence in the political system solely depends on people’s willingness.

In the frame of the interpretation toward equal importance of religion and democracy, the judgment regarding what is religious and what is non-religious is a specialized work and is the duty of some qualified experts. People select and support some of the existing viewpoints of religious scholars and give political power to such viewpoints. So if people prefer an interpretation of religious rules which have not been set by any religious scholar, their preference will not give religious character to the government. Moreover, if people eliminate the divine rules from the governmental arena, although these rules will not be imposed on people, the merit of such a decision will be questionable. In other words, such a government will not only no longer be a religious government, but it will also fail to be a desirable government (Kadivar, 2001, pp. 5-6).

It seems that the two points mentioned above, namely, complying with the divine rules as the condition for the system to be religious and the necessity of this compliance as a condition for the efficiency and desirability of the system, need to be explained more.

Regarding the first point, the theorists of the third interpretation believe that religion does not have a specific political theory. The form and method of government is determined based on the rational and scientific findings. Determining some special form and method for governing in any time and every space is certainly an obstacle to rational and scientific progress; and this is something that any true religion would not do. So, even if there are some statements in the religious texts in regard to the form and method of governing, these statements do not inherently belong to religion. Such statements belong to the formal part of religion which has been used based on the requirements of some special time and space. Therefore, whenever new circumstances arise that necessitate change, they should be modified or culturally translated (Soroush, 1999, pp. 65-81).

In addition to the above-mentioned logical reason, the writers of the third interpretation argue that if the holy Koran is to be considered as a source, it must be clear that there is no condition for religiousness of a political system, except the condition which refers to the necessity of complying with divine rules. Hence, according to the Mojtahed Shabestari:

In Koran the forms and systems of governments have not been emphasized. What has been emphasized is the necessity of governing justly. It seems that, according to the Koran, specifying the governmental methods and systems is not a function of religion and revelation. But, based on
Koran’s content, specifying the values regarding government is a function of religion and revelation. So if in some era people, based on their knowledge and experiences, want to have an elected and consultative government and believe that justice will be reached via such systems, then their religious duty will be the establishment of an elected and consultative system (Mojtahed Shabestari, 1996, p. 56).

Thus, according to this author, what is necessary for the establishment of an Islamic system is complying with the Islamic values in the political and governmental arena; and there are no particular forms or methods to achieve this. Like Mojtahed Shabestari, Kadivar states:

Islam in the frame of some constant and permanent rules has paid attention to some things to which most of the people in the most era cannot reach easily; therefore, the things to which humans can reach via common wisdom and mankind experience have been conceded to the people on their own. So the purpose of Islam, Koran and the tradition of prophet was not to state the criteria of empirical sciences or the basics of political, economic and social systems; although Islam is not compatible with every political, economic and social structure. But it is clear that Islam has refrained from offering a particular political, economic or managerial system, which is applicable in all times and places. It only has ensured to recommend some general practices and principles, meaning that it has given opportunity to mankind’s experience, common reason and some innovations proportionate with different time and place situations (Kadivar [n.d.], p. 2).

A further explanation for the second point, regarding the necessity of complying with divine rules as an indicator for political system correctness, is offered by the writers of the third interpretation who believe that if in some political system based on the people’s votes the religious values are eliminated, the desirability of such a system will be in serious doubt. According to their ideas, the societies in which a full scale democracy exists but in which mankind’s spiritual capital and heritage is forgotten, people find themselves in a moral and spiritual crisis. For example, Mojtahed Shabestari asserts that:

The crisis of spirituality and morality, losing the meaning of life, detaching of mankind from the unseen world and occurrence of rupture among human being and God in the Western countries, is a curse, harm and loss, which the great people and suffering thinkers in the world today
admit to. The crisis reached a peak when politics was totally separated from morality. The source of trouble became clear World Wars I and II. Nowadays, this wave has again been reined in to the point that politics shall not be separated from morality. Politics shall not be separated from a set of spiritual values (Mojtahed Shabestari, 2001, p. 8).

The bearers of the third interpretation believe that lots of problems will be solved when religious values, morality and spirituality enter into the political sphere. According to their viewpoint, the elimination of religion from the social sphere and the paying of undue attention to mankind's origin and resurrection in both theory and practice, gives the arena totally to the rationale of the human being. In turn this matter, despite its few useful outcomes, has far more harmful consequences. Abdol-Karim Soroush explains:

Interest is the criterion and pivot for rational calculations. If someone does not pursue his/her interest, he/she is out of his/her mind. However, when such selfish people confront each other, they turn life into hell.... [Where religion is eliminated,] people who just claim and pursue their own rights and know only their own interest, when in confrontation, rip each other apart. Rationality has nothing to do with altruism. This is a thing what modern man lacks. Any motivation for altruism is surely religious or quasi-religious one, which means such motivation should be given to rationality from somewhere else. If the world is still bearable and livable, it is only because of a few people who have had a bit of altruism and humaneness in their life (Soroush, 2002, pp. 94-95).

According to the mentioned points, in the framework of the third interpretation, the presence of religious values and regulations in all fields of social relations, including government, is a necessity. Absence of such values and regulations is incorrect, and even the people’s vote cannot justify its legitimacy. In the following part, the third theoretical statement of the third interpretation will be taken into consideration.

3 Equal Importance of Commitment to the People's Vote and Commitment to the Divine Rules as the Requirement for the Establishment of Religious Democracy

According to this theoretical statement, if commitment to the people's vote is required in order to have a democracy and if commitment to the divine rules is required for it to be religious, then it will be necessary to have these two requirements simultaneously for the establishment of religious democracy.
These two requirements have equal importance; and neither of them can be preferred to the other. In Kadivar’s words:

Two factors are necessary for the survival of religious democracy: the first one is religious validity, or at least the lack of contradiction with the religious instructions, the other is securing public trust, consent and vote of the majority of people. Negation of each of these two components leads to the termination of religious democracy. With negation of the first and preservation of the second, the government will be democratic, but it will not be religious; with negation of the second and the preservation of the first, the government will be religious, but not democratic (Kadivar, 2001, p. 6).

As has been illustrated, based on the theoretical framework of this interpretation, there should be an equality and balance between religion and democracy in the structure of the sovereignty.

**B Logical Evaluation**

Comparing the theoretical statements of the three mentioned interpretations, it can be said that the third interpretation has more reliable foundations and logical basics.

This interpretation, due to its emphasis on the people’s right to sovereignty, distances itself from the critics, who challenge the first interpretation on these grounds. Also, due to its simultaneous emphasis on the necessity of complying with divine rules in the political arena, as well as its requirement for desirability of a political system, it distances itself from the critics of the second interpretation. Moreover, the emphasis of the third interpretation on the equal importance of commitment to the people’s vote and the necessity of complying with divine rules gives a theoretical balance to this interpretation’s content. However this does not mean that this interpretation is perfect, theoretically speaking. There are at least two important theoretical challenges. The first of which is raised due to its lack of deep theoretical foundation: the theoretical basics of this interpretation, including its epistemological and anthropological foundations, are not explained clearly. The works produced on it consist of a few articles and lectures. There is not even one extensive study devoted to this subject. Some of the bearers of this interpretation have referred to this weakness as well. For example, Mojtahed Shabestari believes that if any given political system wants to comply with the divine rules, the extent and boundaries of these rules are not clear. According to his point of view:
There is a solved issue and an unsolved issue for us regarding the relationship between faith and politics. The solved issue is that it is not necessary to define politics based on faith; it is also not necessary to tend towards political secularism (the politics in which there is no commitment to spiritual-religious morality)....The unsolved issue, however, is that we have not clearly formulated those strategic-moral, general principles, to which our politics should be committed: The principles which are defendable morally, on one hand, and do not endanger the main cores of human rights, on the other hand (Mojtahed Shabestari, 2002, p. 35).

The second challenge is how to convert the theoretical statements of this interpretation into applicable techniques. In other words, if a theory is to be the basis for practice, it needs to be adaptable to some political strategies and legal mechanisms. Such work has received less attention in the literature referring to the framework of the third interpretation. In fact this interpretation has not yet dismounted its philosophical throne.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to describe the three contending interpretations regarding religious democracy and to evaluate their theoretical content. Based on the first interpretation, religious democracy refers to a political system in which the right to sovereignty belongs to God, while people participate in the management of society within the framework of divine rules. According to the second interpretation, religious democracy is a political system in which the right to sovereignty belongs to the people and religion's role in the governance of the society is totally dependent on the people's will. Lastly, according to the third interpretation, religious democracy is a political system in which, by God's willingness, the right to sovereignty belongs to the people, and people exert this sovereignty complying with the divine rules.

Based on the discussion of the theoretical statements of each of these three interpretations, it was demonstrated that the first and the second interpretations finally lead to either a non-democratic religious government or an irreligious democratic government respectively. Therefore regardless of desirability or non-desirability of these models of government, such models cannot logically be introduced as a proper model for religious democracy. But it seems that due to a balance between religion and democracy in the framework of the third interpretation, this interpretation, despite existing theoretical challenges,
has more logical capacity to provide the theoretical requirements for religious democracy.

References


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