

LIBERAL ISLAM

A SOURCEBOOK

Edited by CHARLES KURZMAN

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Religion and Liberty

Born into a devout family of merchants, Mehdi Bazargan (Iran, 1907–1995) was a French-trained engineer, a lay Islamic scholar, and a long-time pro-democracy activist. A deputy prime minister when the nationalists came briefly to power in the early 1950s, Bazargan also participated with Ayatollah Mahmud Taleqani (chapter 3) and others in a reform movement in the early 1960s aimed at democratizing the Shi'i clerical establishment.¹ Bazargan was imprisoned several times during the 1960s and 1970s for his nonviolent opposition to the shah of Iran through groups such as the Liberation Movement of Iran, which he cofounded in 1961, and the Iranian Human Rights Association, which he cofounded in 1977. When the shah was forced out of Iran by revolution in 1979, Imam Ruhollah Khomeini appointed Bazargan as provisional prime minister, but he resigned within a year, complaining that radical clerics were undermining his government. He continued to serve in the Iranian parliament for several years, harassed by his radical opponents, then lived in a sort of political limbo until his death in early 1995, a barely tolerated symbol of opposition to the radical-Islamic government.²

O Prophet, We have sent you as a witness and a bearer of happy tidings and an admonisher, and to call [men] to God by His leave, and as a lamp resplendent.

(Qur'an, Sura 33, Verse [45])³

The European Renaissance and the Church

In one of the nights of the month of Ramadan of 1981, we gathered in a friend's house to break fast

1. Ann K.S. Lambton, "A Reconsideration of the Position of the *Marj'a al-Taqlid* and the Religious Institution," *Studia Islamica*, volume 20, 1964, pp. 115–135.

and hold vigil. On that occasion, an old friend and colleague of mine, Mr. 'Ezzatallah Sahabi [Iran, born 1932], delivered a speech on the European origins

2. H. E. Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990); Manochehr Dorraj, "Bazargan, Mehdi," in John L. Esposito, editor, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), volume 1, pp. 211–213.

3. [Translations of Qur'anic verses are taken, with modifications, from *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*, translated by Ahmed Ali, revised definitive edition (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988). Bazargan's slightly different numbering of verses has been edited to conform to the other selections in this collection.—Editor]

of the notion of freedom.⁴ He argued that the roots of modern liberalism lie in the 17th century, when the feudal governments of Europe were struggling to free themselves from the hegemony of the pope and the [Catholic Christian] church. In those days independent and sovereign nation-states did not exist. Every town or principality was under the tutelage of a lord or noble. These nobles and feudal rulers were, in turn, under the influence of the local priests and the Holy See of Rome. The most chaotic of these countries happened to be Italy. Here a philosopher emerged by the name of [Niccolò] Machiavelli [1469–1527], whose book *The Prince* outlined the philosophy that came to be known as Machiavellianism.⁵

Pursuant to the liberation of the states from the hegemony of the Catholic church and the pope, free and scientific thought sought to liberate itself from the terrible hegemony of the Inquisition. As a result, the hold of the religious tradition and authority over people's thoughts and lives was loosened; but it took a toll on the lives of such great scientists as Galileo [Galilei, 1564–1642]. Investigating minds and blossoming intellects could no longer suffer the rigidity, stagnation, and tyranny of the Catholic clergy.

The next step in the European Renaissance was the religious reformation and Protestantism that was ushered in under the leadership of Martin Luther (1483–1546), John Calvin (1509–1564), and others. Protestants rejected the superstitions and religious restrictions of Catholicism. They aimed to return Christianity to its pristine simplicity, spirituality, and liberty. The same was true of the quest for the freedom of art and culture.⁶ The movement culminated in the quest for social and political liberties demanded by the great French Revolution (1789–1799) and other

democratic regimes. The forerunners of this movement were [Jean-Jacques] Rousseau [1712–1778], [François-Marie] Voltaire [1694–1778], [Charles de Secondat, baron de] Montesquieu [1689–1755], and other Encyclopedists [French philosophers of the eighteenth century], who were generally anti-clerical, atheistic, or agnostic.

The speaker went on to propose that Western democracy and individual liberties, their service to human civilization and progress notwithstanding, have been incapable of responding to human needs, economic problems, and social inequities. Hence the advent of socialism, communism, and existentialism in the wake of nationalism and liberalism, and the indefatigable search for freedom and justice.

Religious Scholars⁷ and Freedom

Let us return now to the original question: whether or not the liberal political and intellectual movement that triggered Europe's great leap forward was an essentially anti-religious, anti-church, and anti-clerical movement.

We need to first explore the origins of the church's opposition to freedom. The question is whether this antagonism was due to particular doctrinal and historical circumstances or a result of universal properties of all religions at all times. The answer seems simple enough. Setting aside the question of the truth and authenticity of religion, it seems reasonable to expect that God who, by definition, is omniscient, omnipotent, sovereign, and aware of the good and evil is better qualified to judge what is proper for human beings than human beings themselves. Does this belief leave any other option for believers than unconditional surrender to God's will? Furthermore, the priests and church, considering themselves successors of Jesus and representatives of God—and any religious scholars who consider themselves custodians and guardians of the people of God—would necessarily expect the people to follow and revere them, and to subordinate reason and science to the revealed commandments.

You realize that this doctrine leaves no room for the freedom and will of the people to administer their

4. [Sahabi, the son of Bazargan's long-time colleague Yadallah Sahabi, had emerged as leader of the left wing of Bazargan's Freedom Movement of Iran. While remaining liberal, Sahabi is more critical of Western-style liberal democracy than Bazargan. A subtext of Bazargan's speech is a defense of liberalism against the left wing of the Freedom Movement, as well as against anti-democratic forces in the Islamic Republic.—Translator]

5. For further information on this thesis and its comparison with other social philosophies, see my book *Be'sat va ide' olozhi* [*Prophetic Mission and Ideology*], part I.

6. The Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries commenced with a renewed interest in the Greek art in Italy, particularly after the advent of the print technology.

7. [The author uses the terms '*ulama*' and *ruhaniyat* interchangeably. Both are translated here as "religious scholars."—Editor]

own affairs and to question—much less reject—the representatives of God who claim immunity from error as successors to the Prophet. Thus it seems that human reason and religious rule are mutually exclusive. Contrary to the Prophet's words—"The government can survive unbelief but not injustice"—it seems that the absolute rule of religious scholars would be necessary for the salvation of society, unless society renounces religion altogether. Consequently, democracy, science, investigation, expertise, and erudition seem to be the necessary results of denouncing religion and the religious scholars, while the acceptance of the sovereignty of God and the stewardship on earth of the church or religious scholars would lead to tyranny, enslavement, inquisition,⁸ and violence. Ironically, then, the "heavenly" rule of God on earth would require surveillance, censorship, arrest, and torture. Violence against insiders and outsiders alike would be deemed the very essence of justice and charity. In such a society, the minutest criticism, discord, and transgression in matters ritual, administrative, political, and even personal would be considered as a transgression against God and His representatives.

According to the foregoing account, religious governments, not unlike Marxist states, cannot tolerate the freedom of ideas and criticism. Free expression and assembly, as well as strikes or demonstrations would be unthinkable; and the ruling party's judgment and execution would be swift and categorical. Both religious and Marxist governments recognize freedom and rationality only for their docile followers. For everyone else, freedom signifies nothing but corruption, confusion, promiscuity, and denunciation of the ruling ideology and regime.

Freedom and Love

Not long ago in our country [Iran], parents used to tightly swaddle their infants (this practice may still persist in the countryside). The idea was to keep the baby from causing trouble and courting danger. In my father's household there was an old compassionate woman from the Kerman region by the name of Mirza Baji, may she rest in peace. She would teach

8. [Inquisition is] contrary to the Qur'an, which states: "O you who believe, avoid most suspicions: some suspicions are indeed sins. So do not pry into others' secrets and not backbite." (Sura 49, Verse 12)

us the recitation of the Qur'an and the prayers. She had many children, none of whom survived. After her children grew too old to be swaddled, she told us, she would tie them down with a piece of rope so they would not wander by the side of the pool and drown, or engage in dangerous games while she was away doing chores.

Restrictions, as this anecdote demonstrates, are not necessarily hostile measures. One should not attribute the oppressive rule of the medieval church entirely to ill-intent and enmity. Indeed, many of the fathers of the church seem to have been devout, kind, and innocent of abuse or arrogance.⁹ It follows, then, that any religion and religious leadership that considers itself responsible for the realization of divine rule over the people, will of necessity become oblivious to human life, rights, and dignity, and will resort to coercion. This will eventually breed ignorance, slavery, and violence. People, in their turn, will sooner or later free themselves from the yoke of religious tyranny. Sometimes they do so without losing their basic belief in God, but often they end up hating religion along with the religious rulers.

That is why—throughout Western civilization, whether under democracy, fascism, or socialism—the idea of the separation of religion and state and the notion of the secular (that is, non-religious, and in a sense, anti-religious) form of government prevails. The more progressive the ideology, the more anti-religious the government.

What Divine Religion Is Really Like

Now, the question is whether all of God's emissaries, particularly the founders of Islam, approved of the medieval Christian practices. Are religion and freedom essentially mutually exclusive? Were God's prophets instructed to instigate bloody revolutions on earth, beheading skeptics, destroying anti-revolutionaries, sowing the seeds of hatred and discord, and swaddling or tying down the youths in the schoolyard of religion, like our late Mirza Baji?

The Qur'an explains the mission of the prophets both directly, through commandments, and indirectly, through the explication of the general divine plan of creation. What we learn from the story of the

9. The Holy Qur'an, too, states that "there are priests and monks and scholars among them, and they are not arrogant." [Sura 5, Verse 82]

prophets and our own slogan, "There is no god but God," is that the mission of the prophets has been to liberate human beings, not to enslave them. But liberation from what and from whom?

First, from the idols or imagined gods, that is, from the illusion of idolatry. Second, from the deception of the devil, or the temptations of the flesh, and in a wider sense, from compulsive worship of worldly goods. Third, from religious imposters, false guardians of temples and religions who propagated idolatry and opposed the prophets. Fourth, from the kings, louts, and possessors of the power and the riches, and the oppressors of the time.

In Suras 7, 10, 11, 14, 21, 23, 26, 27, 29, 37, and others that recount the prophets' struggles, we frequently find the supreme command, "O people of God, worship none other than God." Noah stated: "Do not worship anyone but God." [Sura 11, Verse 26] In suras such as 20 and 28 that speak specifically of *Hazrat* [his excellency] Moses, God commands Moses and Aaron to say to the pharaoh, "Send the Children of Israel with us (that we may take them to their own territory and nation), and do not oppress them." . . . They were not told to curse or humiliate him but to "speak to him gently, so he may take heed or come to have fear (of God and the consequences of His action)." [Sura 20, Verses 47, 44]

We are told, with regard to Satan: "Did I not commit you, O children of Adam, not to worship Satan who is your acknowledged foe?" (Sura 36, Verse 60) We are commanded to resist the tyrannical temptation of the flesh, and to reject the rule of tyrants: "And do not follow the squanderers." And: "The patrons of unbelievers are idols [and devils] who lead them from light into darkness. They are the residents of Hell, and will there for ever abide." (Sura 2, Verse 257)

God would not liberate us from the darkness and the tyrants to enslave us at the hand of His prophets and messengers. The Qur'an unequivocally announces: "There is no compulsion in religion." [Sura 2, Verse 256] It even urges the exalted Prophet [that is, Muhammad] not to worry about the derision and rejection of the idolaters and those who oppose him and indulge in sin: "And if your Lord had willed, all the people on the earth would have come to believe, one and all. Are you going to compel the people to believe except by God's dispensation?" (Sura 10, Verses [99-100]) In Sura 33, Verses 45-48, the Prophet's office is defined and limited to serving as

witness and example, bearing glad tidings and admonishment, calling to God, and providing a guiding light. It recommends tolerance in the face of harassment of the infidels and the hypocrites and reliance upon God. You see, God Himself abhors the imposition and propagation of religion by force and coercive measures. Nor does he wish the instantaneous destruction of the unbelievers and the hypocrites.

Truly, there is a great difference between God's religion and the religion born of human illusion and ill-intent!

God not only leaves people free to be "either thankful or ungrateful" [Sura 76, Verse 3] and gives a grace period when they sin; He also assists believers and unbelievers alike on their chosen paths.¹⁰

God's relationship with people is not based on coercion, enslavement, enmity, or violence, but on freedom and love. With regard to virtues we have [the Qur'anic phrase] "God loves"; with regard to vices we have "God does not love." If we have troubles, they are the result of our own desires and deeds: "God did not surely wrong them, they wronged themselves." (Sura 9, Verse 70) Certainly there is accountability, but there is no pressure or coercion.

Satan and Freedom

You must wonder why God has given us permission to sin, and whether an Islamic government would give us such a permission! You would be even more astounded when you consider that God Himself created Satan. When Lucifer refused to follow God's will and was expelled from the heaven, God gave him until Judgment Day to try to entice human beings to indulge in rebellion, destruction, and injustice.

The presence and influence of Satan on the human mind constitutes an opposing force or a counter-pole to the power of creation, reason, and prudence. It exposes us to temptation and confusion, that is, it forces us to question and to choose. Free will is a gift that God has endowed upon humanity. The question why humanity is blessed with such a gift cannot be addressed here in the detail it deserves. Suffice it

10. Sura 17, Verse [20]: "We bestow the gifts of your Lord on these and those, for the gifts of your Lord are not restricted." The answer to the first question, whether Islam has left people to do whatever they wish in this world without any obligations or limits, will be addressed at the end of this article.

to say that the ultimate reason and effect of this freedom is the realization of humankind's status as "God's steward" on earth. Freedom is essential for our creativity and spiritual evolution. Had free will been denied to us we would follow an inevitable path guided by animal instincts. Protected against doubt, we would remain as stationary in our position as ants, horses, and pigeons. Free will and liberty, fraught with weakness, confusion, and concerns as they are, provoke us to concentrate, think, decide, and move. As such, they are the tools of extraordinary evolution and progress among human beings as compared to animals. Reason, perception, will, and morality are all results of free will and liberty.

Freedom is God's gift to His steward on earth, humankind. Whoever takes away this freedom is guilty of the greatest treason against humankind.¹¹

Religion and Politics

We have stated that the confrontation of the medieval church and the liberation movements led to the separation of religion and politics in the West. This conflict also accounts for the widespread disenchantment of intellectuals and scientists from religion, which has continued well into the 20th century. The situation has been totally different in the Islamic world.

Among Sunni Muslims [the majority sect in Islam] and under the [Sunni] caliphs, government dominated religion and the religious scholars. The caliphs were the religious as well as the temporal leaders of the society. They were the ones who designated leaders of the Friday prayers, governors, and ministers. Judges too were either appointed by the caliphs, or incapable of challenging their rule. The caliphs were commanders in chief, supreme judges, and treasurers. They considered themselves the embodiment of the Qur'anic verse: "O believers, obey God, and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you." (Sura 4, Verse 62) They thus claimed to be absolute sovereigns and autocrats. The farther we get from the early days of Islam, the more we encounter this kind of tyranny. After the "rightful caliphs" [the first four caliphs of Islam], the right of citizens to criticize and disagree with their leader was abrogated.

Among the Shi'i scholars it was different different. As long as they were an oppressed minority, they did not address questions of government and politi-

cal rule. In the wake of the rebellions against the Umayyad and 'Abbasid caliphs [reigned 661–750 and 750–1258, respectively], and in the course of the gradual independence from the regime of Baghdad, the Sunni and the Shi'i governments in Iran reverted to the ancient regime of absolute monarchy. Although a number of monarchs, such as Mahmud Ghaznavi [971–1030] or the Deylamis [also known as Buyids], Safavis, and Qajars [Persian dynasties, reigned 945–1055, 1502–1736, and 1794–1925, respectively] were religious-minded and ostentatiously righteous, and although they generally held religious scholars in high esteem, religion and politics remained, for all intents and purposes, separate. The leaders of the Shi'i religion were independent of the state and inattentive to social, administrative, and political affairs. They received their tithes and other religious contributions directly from the people and the merchants. Up until the Iranian Constitutional Revolution [1906], religious scholars seldom engaged in juridical functions. A handful of them executed religious penalties within their jurisdiction. However, they largely concerned themselves with education, scholarship, and the issuing of edicts. Since the supreme religious leaders were the recipients of many complaints from the people, they would occasionally protest and lecture the government, or else, they would briefly interfere in the executive functions of the state. Other than these episodic events though, the separation of the religion and politics remained a practical reality. Even in our days, the religious handbooks known as "Explanation of Questions"¹² devote entire chapters to the ritual details of prayers, fasts, and pilgrimages to Mecca, but ignore discussion of morality and education, much

11. The charter of the Freedom Movement of Iran, May 15, 1961, declares: "The servitude of God requires refusal of servitude of any other master. Gratefulness to God is contingent upon gaining freedom and utilizing it to attain rights, justice, and service." The question arising from this proposition, whether Islamic government should refrain from checking corruption and decadence in society, will be addressed at the end of the article.

12. [Such compilations of religious opinions are a relatively modern phenomenon in Shi'i ritual observance. Akin to the Jewish tradition of "Responsa," these essays are authored by independent religious scholars who aspire to be a "source of imitation" for other Shi'i Muslims. Those who choose to follow the religious edicts of a particular "source of imitation" seek his views on specific subjects in these essays.—Translator]

less social and political issues.¹³ Kings had no right to interfere in the affairs of religion, and religious scholars did not concern themselves with the affairs of government.

Religious scholars had a prominent, if temporary and partial, role in the Constitutional Revolution. They helped draft the constitution and participated in the first terms of parliament, and in the ministries of education and justice. But they soon withdrew. In the struggles after September 11, 1941 [the installation of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi by the British], in the nationalist movement and the nationalization of the oil industry [in 1951], only a handful of religious scholars were enthusiastically engaged. In the wake of the coup d'état of August 19, 1953, and in the activities of the movement of national resistance, these gentlemen had a limited role and little aspiration for leadership.¹⁴

After [the religious protests of] June 5, 1963, the "Movement of the Religious Scholars," with the decisive and unequivocal arrival of Imam [Ruhollah] Khomeini [1902–1989] on the scene of struggle and politics, seized the initiative and leadership of the [1979 Iranian] revolution and the Islamic Republic [instituted in 1979]. Young religious scholars, politically active intellectuals, and revolutionary seminary students were particularly attuned to his message. The separation of religion and state, explicitly rejected in the struggles of nationalists as well as Islamic intellectuals since the 1940s, was condemned and nullified during the [1979] revolution. The doctrine of "Mandate of the Jurisprudent" was explicitly introduced into the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a paramount principle. The religious scholars cast their shadow upon the government.

13. The late martyr Muhammad Baqir Sadr [Iraqi religious scholar, 1935–1980] states in one of his essays, translated [from Arabic into Persian] under the title *Hamrah ba tahavol-e ijthad* [Accompanying the Evolution of *Ijthad* (Islamic Interpretation)]: "the move toward *ijthad* among the Shi'is was almost coeval with their withdrawal from politics . . . and this departure from politics . . . gave rise to the idea that the proper arena for religious thought is . . . bringing the individual—not the society—into compliance with religion. Thus it was that in the opinion of religious jurisprudence, *ijthad* came to be applied to the Muslim individual rather than Muslim society."

14. [The author played a crucial and well-documented role in these events.—Translator]

The "Mandate of the Jurisprudent" or the sovereignty of religious scholars that is now being propagated with the help of the state propaganda, is an important and subtle issue that needs to be scrutinized from religious, legal, historical, social, and political viewpoints. It should be implemented in such a way as not to violate the authenticity of Islam and human freedom, as outlined in the Qur'an and the tradition.

Religion and the Nation

Let me now turn to the question of the relationship of religion to government and, by implication, the question of Islamic government.

The relationship of God and people has been outlined. We have established that the monotheistic religions and Islam, in particular, have lavished great respect and care on individual rights. They all consider mankind as free, responsible, and autonomous. The question is whether an Islamic government would set certain limits on individual and group freedom; or whether it would sanction unconstrained liberty? If there is to be a measure of constraint and discipline, then how and by whom would it be implemented?

The Qur'an and *sunna* [the practice of the Prophet] clearly answer this question. With regard to the essence and precepts of religion and the laws of creation, God is the only lawgiver: "There is no rule but that which belongs to God." From this point of view, the prophets and holy books explicate the evolutionary path and fundamental imperatives that God has laid out for humanity. They inform us of our final destiny and responsibilities. The exalted Prophet did not consult anyone concerning divine commandments. Muslims, the people of the book, the hypocrites, and the idolaters were equally excluded from the sacred realm of revelation: "a Book whose verses are set clear and distinct, which comes from God most wise and all-knowing" (Sura 11, Verse 1); and elsewhere: "So judge between them in the light of what has been revealed by God, and do not follow their whims[. . .]." (Sura 5, Verse [49]) In a country with an Islamic government, God is the undisputed and absolute sovereign: "Have they taken others beside Him as protectors? It is God who protects; it is He who gives life to the dead, for He has power over every thing. In whatever matter you disagree the ultimate judgment rests with God." (Sura 42, Verses [9–10]) The world-view and the ideology, the philosophical anthropology, and the constitutional laws—

that is, the foundations of the government—should be based on, and inspired by the Book and *sunna*. Ordinary laws, too, should not contradict those ordinances. It is entirely proper, even necessary, that the parliament of an Islamic country is comprised of people's representatives who are acquainted with the tenets of Islam, and who are God-fearing, reasonable, prudent, and trustworthy; so they legislate in accordance with Islam's fundamental tenets and ultimate goals. (Iran's previous constitution [of 1906] stipulated that five first-tier religious scholars, selected by the religious leadership, should be present to ascertain that the laws were in accordance with religious principles. However, this provision was never implemented.)

But as regards the administration of the country, the text of the Qur'an undeniably proposes that the affairs and governance of the nation be based on *shura* [consultation]. In Sura *Shura* (Sura 42), Verses [36–38] and 41–43 describe the commonwealth of the faithful as solidary and cooperative, in keeping with the motto "their affairs (the management of affairs) are settled (by) consultation among them." (Sura 42, Verse 38)¹⁵ Even the Prophet himself, who was the fulcrum of revelation and the beloved of the faithful was ordered to "take counsel with them in the affair" (Sura 3, Verse [159]) even with the rude individuals at the bottom of society who sought pardon upon the exposure of their transgression.

The practice of the Prophet and 'Ali [ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's son-in-law, reigned 656–661], who consulted their disciples and followers and implemented the majority's opinion, even where it was against their own convictions,¹⁶ is a clear illustration of the Islamic system of government. It signifies the principle of people's participation in their own affairs, their self-determination, and, to use the contemporary parlance, the national sovereignty. The *hadith* [tradition of the Prophet] that states: "Every one of you is a shepherd (of the community),

15. The word "among" means among those who are members of society and responsible and the owners of the property in question, not those without work and responsibility, for instance employees and laborers. . . .

16. The same verse that states "and consult them concerning the affair" [Sura 3, Verse 159] advises the following: (after consultation and the soliciting of opinions), once you have reached a decision, then place your trust in God. That is, have confidence in the virtue of its [the decision's] outcome.

and all are responsible for their dependents and herd." also expressed a reciprocal social responsibility and public involvement, and in a different manner announced the principle of democracy, "sovereignty of the people over the people" (11 centuries before Europe). Islamic government cannot help but be at once consultative, democratic, and divinely inspired.

Thus, in Islamic government the relations among individuals and the administration of society are predicated upon relative shared freedom and mutual responsibility. The religious duty to "call others to virtue and to warn them against vice," to stand for justice and truth, presuppose freedom of opinion and criticism. It is the same for [the duty of] guiding the perplexed, educating the ignorant, defending the oppressed, and finally advocating truth, patience, and mercy, which appears throughout the Qur'an, the *sunna*, and the prayers.¹⁷ In emphasizing the freedom of expression and belief, it is enough to listen to the opinions of others and select the best of them. . . .¹⁸ Islam permits difference of opinions even within the realm of the tenets of religion, let alone in administrative and governmental issues. Shi'i theology, under the rubric of *ijtihad* [Islamic interpretation], has left the gate of such debates open until the end of the time and the resurrection of the messiah (may God hasten his rise). This has been the Shi'i position throughout history.

There are two issues that need to be clarified at this juncture: Whether following a religious authority or a "source of imitation" in the Shi'i faith means blind and unquestioning emulation, and more importantly, whether the opponents of Islam and the opponents of Islamic government have the right to express their opinions. Concerning the first issue, it should be stated that, based on the Qur'anic verses and Islamic commandments, the relationship between God and the people is direct and unmediated. The role of the prophets, *Imams* [in Shi'i theology, the infallible heirs of the Prophet], and infallible saints is merely

17. In the dawn and dusk prayer called "The Manuscript of Imam Sajjad" [Zayn al-'Abidin 'Ali ibn al-Husayn, circa 656–714], we read: "O our nurturing teacher, grant us success in this day and this night and in all our days so we can practice goodness, avoid evil . . . defy falsehood, serve the truth, guide the confused, and help the weak. . . ."

18. Sura 39, Verses 17–18: "So give glad tidings to My creatures. Those who listen to the Word and follow the best it contains, are the ones who have been guided by God, and are men of wisdom."

to call people toward God and to make them responsible before Him.¹⁹ There is no doubt that one should learn from those who are better informed and more virtuous. But this does not mean relinquishing individual responsibility and free will. The Qur'an states: "Do not follow that of which you have no knowledge. Verily the ear, the eye, the heart, each will be questioned." (Sura 17, Verse 36) In a similar vein, the Ruler of the Faithful ['Ali] advises his governor in Egypt: "Never use the excuse that you are just obeying orders with closed eyes. You are personally responsible before God." Also, the Prophet is quoted as having said: "There is no obedience of a mortal in disobedience of God." 'Ali even held his subjects (that is, citizens) responsible for advice and sympathetic criticism of their leaders.

The second issue is more delicate. Unfortunately our Shi'i jurisprudence and religious scholars, having been excluded from governmental affairs in the past, have not elaborated on the principles and rules of Islamic government, or the limits of freedoms such as are discussed these days. Thus it is hard to provide a definitive answer to this question. While religious manuals and books have sometimes discussed these issues . . . Shi'i scholars have generally ignored these issues. We have one book, *Tanbih al-umma wa tazhiz al-milla (A Reminder and a Cleansing for the Faithful)*, by Mr. [Muhammad Husayn] Na'ini [1860–1936], and other lectures and books after September 1941.²⁰ Furthermore, there is no practical model for a flawless Islamic government, except for the 10 years of the exalted Prophet's rule in Medina, peace be upon him [622–632]; five years of the tumultuous rule of 'Ali [656–661]; and the five months' rule of Imam Hasan [son of 'Ali, 661], culminating in a peace treaty with Mu'awiya [reigned 661–680]. It is indisputable, though, that the struggles and the mission of all prophets, including those of the last Prophet, involved debating the idolaters and enemies.

19. Sura 12, Verse 108: "Say: 'My way, and that of my followers, is to call you to God with full perception. All glory to God, I am not an idolater.'" See also Sura 41, Verse 5.

20. For instance, *Hokumat dar Islam [Government in Islam]*, by [Haydar 'Ali] Qalamdaran; *Be'sat va ide'olozi [Prophetic Mission and Ideology]*, by [Mehdi] Bazargan; *Hokumat-e Islami [Islamic Government]*, by Yahya Nuri; and *Medina-ye fazeleh, ya sistem-e hokumat dar Islam [Learned Medina (Utopia), or the System of Government in Islam]*, by 'Ali Tehrani. Also, Imam Khomeini has presented his own opinion of Islamic government in his *Velayat-e faqih [Mandate of the Jurisprudent]*.

They heard their opponents' arguments calmly and never heaped invectives and threats on them. They tolerated and welcomed debate. This was the practice of the Prophet of Islam, when he was weak in Mecca as well as when he was strong in Medina. The Qur'an commanded him to be kind and tolerant. Verses revealed in Medina bid the Prophet to give refuge to the idolaters who were in a state of war with him, so they would have an opportunity to hear God's message. If they were not persuaded, then they were to be returned, unharmed, to their homes.²¹ The infallible *Imams* debated a host of critical, even derisive opponents. Nevertheless, they never mistreated or abused them in any way. The leader of the faithful ['Ali] during his rule waived the oath of allegiance and those who refused it continued to enjoy full civil rights and privileges. He did not banish the "hypocritical" groups, even though he was aware of their conspiracies and enmity. All his battles were defensive. He never initiated a battle. Nor did he ever tire of admonishing his enemies. The extent of freedom of opinion and criticism in the early days of Islam was such that when the second caliph, 'Umar [ibn al-Khattab, reigned 634–644], asked during a public address, that the faithful correct him if he ever wanders from the straight path, an ordinary citizen rose and told the short-tempered commander: "If you wander from the straight path I will straighten you with my sword!"

Certainly apostasy—that is, the denial of God and departure from the nation of Islam—has a severe penalty, up to and including death. Professor Marcel Boisard, professor of the college of law at Geneva and author of the book *L'Humanisme de l'Islam (The Humanism of Islam)*, suggests that the cause of this severity may have had to do with the political aspect of the act, not the religious nature of it.

The most regrettable consequence of wrapping personal opinions and political and administrative decisions in the garb of religiosity and then presenting them as pure Islam is that to oppose these decisions would be to fight with God! In this manner, the inevitable blending of politics and spirituality exposes Islamic society to the tyranny of the medieval church, with the concomitant eclipse of freedom.

21. Sura 9, Verse 6: "And if an idolater seeks protection, then give him asylum that he may hear the word of God. Then escort him to a place of safety, for they are people who do not know."

truth, virtue, progress, health, and prosperity. In the words of the exalted Prophet: "A community in which the rights of the weak cannot be enjoyed without a stuttering tongue (a certain difficulty and fear) will never be cleansed of corruption." . . .

Islam—based on the Qur'anic principle, "Some of us should not take others as our guardians"—recognizes no person, whether actual or legal, as an absolute sovereign qualified to usurp the divine rights of human beings to freedom and honor.

The Qur'an declares: "You have indeed a noble example in the Prophet of God." (Sura 33, Verse 21) It is edifying to note his protective attitude and behavior toward individuals, even the Hypocrites. In a dark and inclement night, the Prophet, peace be upon him, while returning from the battle of Tabuk, reached a dangerous precipice. Accidentally (or miraculously!) a flash of lightning revealed a group of the Hypocrites, who were lurking to scare the Prophet's camel and send him hurtling to the bottom of the valley. Although this conspiracy was foiled, the Prophet did not publicize the conspirators' plans and did not seek revenge. He even made the camel driver Huzayfa ibn Yaman, who had witnessed the event, take an oath not to recount the event for as long as he lived. Another tradition has it that the son of 'Abdallah ibn Ubai [died 631], the leader of the Hypocrites, who had caused numerous problems for the Prophet and his companions, came to the Prophet and asked for permission to kill his own father. The Prophet reminded him that he was duty-bound to respect and protect his father at all times. 'Abdallah, however, continued to conspire against the Prophet until the end of his life. After 'Abdallah's death, the Prophet said, "Had God not commanded it, I would not pray on his body."²² "You have indeed a noble example in the Prophet of God"!

Freedom as a Vital Necessity for Government and Religion

Let me reiterate: freedom means freedom to oppose, criticize, and object—even if the criticism is untrue and unjust. Where there is freedom there are oppo-

22. These two narratives are taken from *Mosir-e enqelab-e Islami* [*The Course of the Islamic Revolution*], notes dated September 12, 1980, by Ayatollah Hajji Sayyid Abolfazl Zanjani.

nents and currents that disturb routine stability and normalcy. Otherwise, freedom would be meaningless and useless.

This notion of freedom is hard for many zealous—if sincere—people to digest, as they consider such a freedom unwise and deleterious to the survival of the nascent Islamic Republic [of Iran]. They may even consider it a blunder on their part to have allowed this notion of freedom to prevail in the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

However, omniscient, compassionate God has not only sanctioned freedom in many affairs, he has made it the very foundation of survival and revival in the world. Let me elaborate on this point.

Opposition, the Cause of Movement and Life

In general, an object in a given force field will, of necessity, behave in a calculable and predictable way. For any object, whether a stone, a plant, or a human society, force means movement. For example, a piece of metal that is released within earth's gravitational field will fall in a straight line. Its position and velocity are calculable at every moment. Similarly, the behavior of a human being who is motivated only by the demands of his or her appetite is predictable. However, if in the place of one force, two or more forces are introduced—for example if a powerful magnet is placed in the path of the falling piece of metal—its trajectory and velocity will change. It will, to use a poetic expression, be freed from the slavery of a single cause of motion. The scenario is most intriguing when the affected object has the power to choose its level of susceptibility to the external influences. That is, when it has "free will." In this case, the person whose choice is not readily predicable and calculable for others—or even for oneself—could be said to possess "free will."

Therefore, freedom requires, as the case of Satan's temptations teach us, the existence of an oppositional force, along with a power of choice on behalf of the individual or the society. Opposition promulgates movement and change, which may, in turn, lead to decline or progress, depending on the choice of the agent involved.

Motion and change in the case of inanimate objects, even constructed objects such as machines, lead to erosion and deterioration (in the jargon of thermodynamic theory, the increase of entropy). In other words, inanimate objects aim at final rest and quiet.

However, objects endowed with life, particularly human beings, thrive on movement and opposition. They acquire new capabilities and aptitudes and accumulate experience and virtue because of opposition and change. Movement, a result of need, agitation, and love, is a blessing and a source of survival and evolution, while rigidity is a cause of stasis, decline, and death. Animals and human beings, once they feel need, danger, or attraction, tend to move, willy-nilly, either toward the object of their desire or away from the source of danger. Therefore, without opposition, as a source of motivation or agitation there would be no progress.²³ The oppositional motivator can lead to reform and revival.²⁴

Our Islamic Revolution, our nationalist struggles, revivalist Islamic associations and movements, the earlier Constitutional Revolution of Iran—the awakening and activism of the Eastern countries in general after several hundred years of slumber and humiliation—were all the result of the encounter with Western civilization. The wondrous European Renaissance too was a result of conflicts, dissatisfactions, and objections to medieval Christian hegemony.

Similarly, the missions of the prophets were in the past the source of conflicts that revolutionized towns and tribes that were wallowing in the darkness of idolatry and the cesspool of corruption and inequity.

Conflict, one of whose quintessential representations for human beings is Satan, is the cause of a plethora of blessed events, from the natural cycle of life here on earth to the higher cycle of resurrection in the hereafter. The Qur'an frequently compares the colossal events of Judgment Day with seasonal rain and the revival of life on earth. Rain itself is the result of atmospheric disturbances and opposing forces of cold and warm weather systems. The science of meteorology has established, through hourly reports from weather stations, that rain-bearing continental weather fronts are comprised of successive fronts of dense clouds. These clouds are the result of expanding, rising, and condensing warm tropical weather

and its collision with the cold and heavy weather systems that flow from the northern regions. The heavy winds occupy the lower areas and push the warm humid weather up.²⁵

The Opponents of Freedom

The opponents of freedom resort to the adage: "A head that does not ache does not need to be wrapped." Their argument goes like this: We know we are on the true path. We believe in Islam and possess good will and proper judgment. What need is there for further inquiry and learning? We can simply devote ourselves, body and soul, to the realization of the true doctrine. The entire nation and its leadership support this endeavor. Why should we let the enemies of God and the republic, the supporters of America, or those who do not follow our line—in short, people of suspicious intent or judgment—to muddy the waters, confuse minds, disturb society, and weaken the government? Such freedom and criticism will provide fodder for foreign radio propaganda which will, in turn, cause our youth to hesitate or deviate from the straight path. It is thus better to remove all the impediments from the path of the revolution and to conduct our affairs quickly and effectively—that is, without the nagging distractions of free expression and opposition.

These gentlemen, even if they are sincere, are deluded and naive about their own monopoly of the truth and about the notion of freedom. Freedom is not a luxury; it is a necessity. When freedom is banished, tyranny will take its place.

In the first place, those whose belief system is based on reason and truth are not afraid of opponents' criticism and propaganda. In the words of Sa'di [Persian poet, 1184–1292], "He who has clear accounts, has no fear of accountants."

Secondly, freedom of expression, opposition, and criticism awakens the negligent and holds back treason, monopoly, and tyranny. If the objections are unjustified, let the accused respond and thus dispel the clouds of suspicion and slander. This will strengthen the national resolve. The Qur'an considers such examinations as the means of separating

23. See my *'Eshq va parastesh, ya termodinamik-e ensan* [Love and Worship, or the Thermodynamics of Humanity].

24. It is obvious that opposition in this context is an external force, different from materialist-dialectical opposition, involving an internal antithesis that is said to be inevitable, global, and social.

25. See [my] book *Bad va baran dar Qur'an* [Wind and Rain in the Qur'an] where many verses (more than 115 passages) are quoted that bear witness to this argument. [A series of citations follows.—Editor]

the good from the bad.²⁶ Conversely, suppression of freedom is an indication of a fundamental weakness or flaw in the government's intentions or actions. Consider the following Qur'anic debate: a believer in the pharaoh's family reasons with his affluent and powerful kin to listen to the message of Moses: "If he is a liar, his lie will be his own loss; but in case he speaks the truth, some of what he predicts will befall you." (Sura 40, Verse 28) In response, the pharaoh reiterates the argument of all dictators, tyrants, and zealots: "I show you only what I see (is right); and guide you but to the right path." [Sura 40, Verse 29] How can people exercise their religious obligation to call others to virtue and to warn them against vice in an Islamic society, without the freedom of conscience and expression, and in the absence of political and legal security? These are duties that Muslims are recommended to fulfill lest evil-doers dominate them and their prayers remain unanswered.

Thus the survival of a just system and its progress on the path of virtue and excellence is guaranteed by the freedom of expression and legal opposition. The protection of religion against abuse, ignorance, superstition, and deviance, too, requires that the mace of excommunication and compulsion be removed from society and the media. It is necessary to avoid painting a varnish of religiosity and godliness on human affairs, save that which necessarily and authentically belongs to religion. It is also necessary that some room is left for reflection and maneuver in all debates.

We have established, under the rubric of "Religion and Nation," that God addresses people themselves immediately and directly, without intermediaries. Everyone is directly responsible, and people's reason, knowledge, thought, perception, reflection, and will are the ultimate arbiter. We have the Qur'anic injunction, "If you do not know, then ask the keepers of (knowledge and) remembrance," (Sura 21, Verse 7) which indicates that it is proper to inquire, and to augment one's knowledge. In the meantime, the Qur'an has envisioned, without censure, the existence and expression of disagreements and differ-

ences of opinion among the faithful. It recommends the disagreements with the rulers to be referred to the Prophet and to God; which in our days, would mean the body of religious knowledge.²⁷

Disagreement becomes unacceptable and disruptive only when it takes place at the executive level and when the responsible managers, instead of harmony and disciplined cooperation, engage in discord and in-fighting, each playing their own tune and doing their own thing. The principle of division of powers and their mutual non-interference and orderly checks and balances pervades Iran's old and new constitutions, and those of other parliamentary democratic systems. People and their representatives have a right to discuss, investigate, supervise, and decide public affairs within certain limits and without interfering in the progress, rigor, and effective management of the executive affairs as determined by the legislature. And now let me address the questions that were posed earlier:

The First Question

Has Islam abandoned people to do whatever they please? Is there no responsibility and restraint in this world?

Being free and autonomous is one thing, and being responsible for one's beliefs and actions quite another. God has given us freedom of opinion and action within certain parameters, but He has given us plenty of warning through His messengers and holy books, that rebellion, disbelief, and injustice will have dire results that will follow from our actions both in this life and in the hereafter. The consequences may be heeded and avoided beforehand, or they may be understood only after they have materialized, as stated in Sura 30, Verse [41]: "Corruption has spread over land and sea from what men have

27. The text of Sura 4, Verse [59], is as follows: "O you who believe, obey God, and obey the Prophet and those in authority among you; and if (mutual opposition occurs and) you are at variance over something, refer this (matter and disagreement) to God and the Messenger.[. . .]" It is noteworthy that on five or six other occasions the faithful are told to obey God and the Prophet; only in this occasion is the phrase "those in authority" added, and that is qualified by the phrase "among you" (which could mean elected rulers). It is further stipulated that in case there appears a disagreement between the people and the rulers it should be referred to the other two authorities {God and the Prophet}.

26. Sura 3, Verse [141]: "This is so that God may try the faithful and destroy the unbelievers." Sura 3, Verse [154]: "God had to try them to bring out what they concealed in their breasts, and to bring out the secrets of their hearts, for God knows your innermost thoughts."

done (and do) themselves that (God may let) them taste a little bit of what they have done: They may come back [to the right path].”

God bestows both freedom and guidance concerning the consequences of actions. His mercy is infinite and His vengeance great. Thus freedom exists; so do responsibility and restraint. The choice is ours.

The Second Question

Should the Islamic government and the religious scholars in the leadership not check crime and treason? Should chaos and license rule?

First, the issue of individual liberty in violation of others' rights has been addressed in the first question. Absolute freedom of choice, as we understand it in the Qur'an, prevails in the relationship of God and man—not in that of society and the individual, where mutual rights and responsibilities are at stake. God may forgive transgression against His laws but, as we know, God cannot forgive people for transgressing against the rights of people. We do not enjoy

the same level of freedom in our dealings with other people as we do in our personal relationship with God.

Second, religious scholars, as religious scholars, have no rights or responsibilities save those delegated to them within the democratic system of the Islamic government.

Third, self-defense and the prevention of injustice and corruption in an Islamic society are not only warranted but required. The principle of “neither inflicting nor suffering harm” is paramount in Islam, both on the individual and the societal level. Since everyone is entitled to enjoy a measure of freedom and honor, the freedom of all is necessarily limited. Furthermore, being a beneficiary of social privileges creates mutual responsibilities that the Islamic government, derived from people's will, is duty-bound to supervise.

The details of this issue and the form of intervention of the state and participation of the people, which should be exercised with utmost justice and mercy, are a separate discussion that should be analyzed under the rubric of Islamic government.

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