LIBERAL ISLAM

A SOURCEBOOK

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Religion and Liberty

Born into a devout family of merchants, Mehdi Bazargan (Iran, 1903–1995) 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. Bazargan was imprisoned several times during the 1960s and 1970s for his nonviolent opposition to the shah's reform 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])1

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 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


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. He argued that the roots of modern liberalism were in the 17th century, when the feudal governments of Europe were struggling to free themselves from the hegemony of the pope and the Catholic 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.

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 role 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 intellectuals could no longer suffer the rigidity, stagnation, and tyranny of the Catholic clergy.

The next step in the *European Renaissance* was the religious reform and *Protestantism* that was ushered in under the leadership of Martin Luther (1483–1546), John Calvin (1509–1564), and others. Protestants rejected the superstructures 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. 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 the 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 injustices. Hence the advent of socialism, communism, and existentialism in the wake of nationalism and liberalism, and the indefinite search for freedom and justice.

**Religious Scholars** 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 omnipotent, omnipresent, 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 the 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 reverence them, and to subordinate reason and science to the revealed commandments.

You realize that this doctrine leaves no room for the freedom and well-being of the people to administer their...
own affairs and co-operation—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 without him but not injustice”—it seems that the absolute rule of religious scholars would be necessary for the salvation of society, unless society resorts religion altogether. Consequently, democracy, science, investigation, expertize, and criticism 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, insurrection, 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 animadversion, criticism, and transgression in matters ritual, administrative, political, and even personal would be considered 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个别化. 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.

Freedoms 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

us the recitation of the Qur’ān 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 to ill-intent and envy. Indeed, many of the fathers of the church seem to have been devout, kind, and innocent of abuse or arrogance. It follows, then, that any religious 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 revert 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 ideal of 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 Does Religion 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 sacking or tying down the youths in the schoolyard of religion, like our late Mirza Baji?

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

8. [Inquisition is contrary to the Qur’ān, which states: "O you who believe, avoid most suspicions; some suspicions are indeed sins. Do not pry into others’ secrets and not backbite." (Qura 49, Verse 12).

9. The Holy Qur’ān, too, states that “there are priests and monks and scholars among them, and they are not arrogant.” (Qura 5, Verse 12.)
prophets and our own shigan. "There is no god but God," is that the mission of the prophets has been to liberate human beings, not to enslave them. But lib-
eration from what and from whom?

First, from the idols or imagined gods, that is, from the illusion of idolatry. Second, from the de-
ception 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 religious laws propa-
gated 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 fre-
quently find the supreme command. "O people of
God, worship none other than God." Noah stated:
"Do not worship anyone but God." [Sura 11, Verse
28] In suras such as 20 and 28 that speak specifically
of Hazrat [his excellence!] Moses, God commands
Moses and Aaron 10 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 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 com-
mand 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 tempta-
tion of the flesh, and to reject the rule of tyrants: "And
so do not follow the squandering." And. "The patterns
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 proph-
ests and messengers. The Qur'an unequivocally an-
nounces: "There is no compulsion in religion." (Sura
2, Verse 256) It even urges the exalted Prophet [him
is, Muhammad] not to worry about the decision 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 advo-
cising, calling to God, and providing a guiding
light. It recommends tolerance in the face of harass-
ment of the infidels and the hypocrites and reliance
upon God. You see, God Himself abhors the imposi-
tion and propagation of religion by force and coerci-
tive measures. Nor does he wish the instantaneous de-
struction 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 sics. He also assists believers
and unbelievers alike on their chosen paths."

God's relationship with people is not based on
coercion, enslavement, enmity or violence, but on
freedom and love. With regard to viruses 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
astonished when you consider that God Himself cre-
ated 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, obstruction, 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

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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 with-
out 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 ancient instincts. We would remain as stationary in our position as ants, horses, and pigeons. Free will and liberty, fraught with weakness, confusion, and errors as they are, prove 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. Whatever takes away this freedom is guilty of the greatest treasun against humankind."

Religion and Politics

We have stated that the confrontation between the mediavcal church and the liberating 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 among the Shi’i 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 one who designated the leaders of the Friday prayers, governors, and ministers. Judges 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 the absolute sovereigns and autocrats. The further we get from the early days of Islam, the more we encounter this kind of tyranny. After the “rightful caliphate” (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. As long as they were an oppressed minority, they did not address questions of government and political rule. In the wake of the revolutions 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 Bagdad, the Sunni and the Shi’i governments in Iran reverted to the ancient regime of absolute monarchy, although a number of monarchs, such as Ahmad Shah Qajar [1791–1830] or the Deilamis [also known as Buyids], Safavids, and Qajars [Persian dynasties, reigned 953–1055, 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 were right to social, administrative, and political affairs. They received their riches and other religious contributions directly from the people and the merchants. Up until the Iranian Constitutional Revolution [1906], religious scholars settem 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 scholars were the recipients of many complaints from the people, this would occasionally proceed to lecture the government, or else, they would briefly interfere in the executive functions of the state. Other than these episodic events, the separation of the religion and politics remained a practical reality. Even in our days, the religious handbooks known as “Explanation of Question” 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, 1906, declares: “The sovereignty of God requires refusal of servitude in any other master. Credibility to God is constant upon gaining freedom and allowing it to grant rights, justice, and service.” The question arising from this proposition, whether Islamic government should return from checkin corruption and illegality 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 “Respuesta.” 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. 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 Mohammad 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 activism 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 semi- nary students were particularly attuned to his message.

The separation of religion and state, explicitly rejected in the struggles of rationalists as well as Islamic intellectuals since the 1940s, was condemned and nullified during the [1979] revolution. The term Imam's "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.

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 traditions.

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 sanctity upon 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 Sunnah [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 2, Verse 49) In a country with an Islamic government, God is the undisputed and absolute sovereign: "Have they taken others besides Him as protectors? It is He who protects; it is He who gives life to the dead, for He has power over every thing. It 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 law—

13. The late martyr Muhammad Baqir Sadri [Iraqi religious scholar, 1935-1960] states in one of his essays, translated [from Arabic into Persian] under the title: Kendah ba lihaq-e jihadih [Accompanying the Evolution of Jihad (Islamic Interpretation)],: "The move toward jihadih among the Shi'a was almost geared with their withdrawal from politics... and this departure from politics... gave rise to the idea that the poper arena for religious thoughts is... bringing the individual—not the society—into compliance with religion. Thus it was that in the opinion of religious jurisprudence, jihadih 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]
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 parliaments of an Islamic country is comprised of people of good repute in the eyes 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 sharia [consultation]. In Sura Shura [Sura 42], Verses 36–38 and 41–43 describe the commonwealth of the faithful as a cooperative and collective body, as keeping with the motto “their affairs (the management of affairs) are settled (by) consultation among them.” (Sura 42, Verse 38) 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 [the 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,” 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,” 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 freedoms and mutual responsibility. The religious duty to “call others to virtue and to warn them against vice,” 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. In emphasizing the freedom of expression and belief, it is enough to listen to the opinions of others and select the best of them. “In Islam permits difference of opinions even within the realm of the tenets of religion, let alone in administrative and governmental issues. Shi’a theology, under the rubric of ijtihād [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 consultation, 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 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

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 In [the decision’s] outcome. . . .

17. In the dawn and dusk prayer called “The Manuscript of Imam Sajjad” [Zayn al-Abidin ‘Ali ibn al-Husayn, circa 656–674], we read: “Our revered teacher, grant us success in this day and the night and in all our days so we can practice goodness, avoid evil . . . free falsehoods, 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." 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. Verify the ear, the eye, the heart, each will be questioned." (Sura 17, Vers 36) In a similar vein, the Prophet of Faithful [Ali] advised his governor in Egypt: "Never use the excuse that you are just obeying orders with crossed eyes. You are personally responsible before God." Also, the Prophet is quoted as having said: "There is no excuse 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'ah jurisprudence and religious scholars, having been excluded from governmental affairs, in the past, have not elaborated on the principles and rules of Islamic government, the limits of freedoms such as are discussed these days. Thus it is hard to provide a definitive answer to this question. While religious scholars and books have sometimes discussed these issues... Shi'ah scholars have generally ignored these issues. We have one book, Taashih us-sunnah tanchil al-madara, Reminder and a Clarifying for the Faithful, by Mir. [Hammadu-Huyayn] Na'moon [1860-1956], and other lectures and books after September 1941. Furthermore, there is no definitive model for a flawless Islamic government, except for the 10 years of the exiled Prophet's rule in Medina. Peace be upon him [p.22-632]; 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'awiyah [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 to God with full perception. All glory to God. I am not an idolater.' " See also Sura 21, Verse 5.


They have their opponents arguments calmly and never heeded invectives and threats on them. They tolerated and welcomed debate. This was the practice of the Prophet of Islam, when he was weak in Meccah 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, unarmed, to their homes. The infallible Imams debated with a host of critical, even divisive opponents. Nevertheless, they never misdirected or abused them in any way. The leader of the faithful [Ali] during his rule was able to collect 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 [bn al-Khathub, reigned 634-644] asked during a public address, that the faithful correct him if he ever wandered 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 apocryphal—that is, the denial of God and departure from the natural of Islam—has a severe penalty, up to and including death. Professor Marcel Boussaid, 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 at odds 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 with-
out a surting 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: "Ye have indeed a noble
example in the Prophet of God." (Sura 33, Verse 21)
It is referring to his protective attitude and be-
havior toward individuals, even the Hypocrites. In
a dark and inexact moment, the Prophet, peace be
upon him, while returning from the battle of Tabuk,
rushed a dangerous precipice. Accidentally (or miscal-
curously) a flash of lightning revealed a group of the
Hypocrites, who were backing to scuttle the Prophet’s
car 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
Hazzaa bin 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
Ahmad ibn Uthair [faced 93111, 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. "Abdullaah,
however, continued to conspire against the Prophet
until the end of his life. After Abdullaah’s death, the
Prophet said, "Had God not constrained 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-
sents and criminals 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
mosque 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 ve-
cocity 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 simple cause of motion. The scenario is most
intriguing when the affected object has the power to
choose its level of susceptibility to the external in-
fluences. That is, when it has "free will." In this case,
the person whose choice is not readily predictable 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 teaches us, the existence of an oppositional
force, along with a power of choice on behalf of the
individual or the society. Opposition propitiated
movement and change, which, in turn, lead to
development and progress, depending on the choice of the
agent involved.

Motion and change in the case of animate ob-
jects, even constructed objects such as machines, lead
to erosion and deterioration (in the jargon of thermo-
dynamic 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. The oppositional motivation can lead to reform and revival.

Our Islamic Revolution, our nationalistic struggles,, and popular 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 wonderful 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 colosal 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.

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 muddling distractions of free expression and opposition.

These gentlemen, even if they are sincere, are decided and naive about their own monopoly of the truth; and about the notion of freedom,Facism is not a luxury; it is a necessity. When freedom is vanished, 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 treachery, monopoly, and tyranny. If the objections are unjustified, let the accused respond and then 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 ‘Eshgh va parasteh, zahm va mizban-e manzol (Love and Worship, or the Thermodynamics of Humanity).

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

25. See my book Bud va haam dar Qur’an (Wound and Ruins 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)
ne adage: "A be wrapped," w we are on ood good i is there for in view on of the true ship support miles of God ica, or those cre of sus be waters, wen the gov will provide rich will, in it from the th the impe an and to com and, is, with- ression and move, are pol of the fin is not s vanishished, system is oppone Sardi Per acounts, proposition, tells backjection and then This will inq pointi paring. 26. Sara 3, Verse [44]: "This is so that God may try the faithful and destroy the unbelievers." Sara 3, Verse [154]: "God had to try faith 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 injustice 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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