

Session 1: The Most Important Questions in the Realm of Islamic Policy

Introduction

Undoubtedly, one of the achievements of our Revolution and political system is the Friday congregational prayer [*salat al-jum'ah*], which has innumerable blessings for the Islamic *ummah*. Among its secondary benefits is the communication of necessary teachings and information to the people during the two sermons and the lectures before or between the sermons in different cities and towns. Throughout the years after the Revolution, scholars and orators have presented to the Friday prayer congregation, and the rest of people through the media, valuable information on belief, education, economic issues and other academic needs.

I also have the honor of lecturing on the subject, “Monotheism in the Ideological and Value System of Islam” whose transcription has been published as a book and offered to esteemed readers.¹ On the insistence of my colleagues, I am here to deliver a series of lectures on “Islamic Political Theory”. I hope that God, the Exalted, helps me in this important task and inspires me with that which is pleasing to Him and beneficial for the Islamic *ummah*, so that I might eloquently convey the same to this martyr-rearing and honorable nation.

The subject of our discussions is comprehensive and broad in nature, covering many topics on different levels and in various forms—ranging from the easy and simple to the profound and academic. Of course, from the beginning of the movement of the eminent Imam (*q*), i.e. 1341 AHS (1962), up to now, these discussions have been presented in different forms. Articles and books have been written, speeches delivered and talks held. Yet, only a few systematic discussions beneficial for the average person, responsive to the needs of the youth and various strata of people have been undertaken. Thanks to Allah, our nation occupies an eminent cultural position. In recent years especially, it has improved and progressed considerably, understanding many profound and complex issues very well.

Nevertheless, the scientific and technical language is confined to the academic centers, universities and seminaries. The language of conversation with the masses must be devoid of scientific and complicated terminology so that a majority of people can benefit from the discussions. Of course, it must be noted that a discussion under the title, “The Political Philosophy of Islam” can be so extensive that it cannot be covered even in a hundred sessions. As such, considering our time constraint and the sessions taken into account, we have no option but to choose topics for discussion which are needed by society and in connection with which questions and doubts have been raised.

Since the topic “The Political Philosophy of Islam” consists of three terms, each of them could be studied and examined separately. “Political philosophy” has numerous equivalent terms such as “the philosophy of political science” and “political philosophy vis-à-vis political science”. However, in brief, what we mean by “political philosophy” in these discussions is the elucidation of the Islamic theory on government and politics that is based on specific principles, and the Islamic philosophy of the Islamic government can only be explained and justified according to these principles.

Islam and Political Theorizing

Once we say that Islam has a particular point of view about politics and governance founded on principles acceptable to Islam, this question is posed: Must religion have a particular viewpoint about politics and government for which Islam has to present a political theory? This is the same serious and known question which has been posed for centuries in various countries and societies. In our country this question has also been raised since the time of the Constitutional Movement² onward and many discussions have been conducted along with it.

Of course, the statements of the late Imam (‘a) and the famous slogan of the late Martyr Mudarris³—“Our religion is our politics and our politics is our religion”—played a role in fortifying our political thought, and this question has already been answered for our people. However, to elucidate the political theory of Islam and the manner of involvement of religion in politics requires in-depth study and discussion.

In Western culture, religion is not comprehensive in nature; it is defined in a manner that does not encompass the domain of sociopolitical issues; it only bespeaks of the relationship between man and God, and depicts the personal and individual communion of the former with the latter. Accordingly, sociopolitical and international issues, state–people relationship and international relations are beyond the domain of the relationship between man and God, and are therefore alien to religion. On the contrary, according to Islam, religion is universal in nature; encompassing all individual and social issues of man, including man’s relationship with God and his fellow creatures; and all domains of sociopolitical and international issues.

The reason for this is that according to Islam, God is the Ruler of the world and mankind. Thus, the political, economic, educational, and administrative spheres and other issues related to the life of man

are within the totality of the laws and values of religion.

Islamic Political Theory being “founded” by Islam

After accepting that Islam has a viewpoint about governance and politics and attributing a specific theory about it to Islam, some questions regarding the nature of this theory can be raised. Is this political theory of Islam initiated, i.e. “founded” [ta’sis/] by Islam, or something just approved and emulated by Islam? In other words, has Islam itself initiated this theory and presented it as a theory revealed by God like religious ordinances, “sent down by Allah”? Or, has Islam only approved a theory in this context?

Replying to the above question, we have certain cases where the conduct and behavior of certain men of wisdom has been approved by Islam. Technically, Islam’s approval here is called “approval of the way of the wise”. For example, there are transactions which people undertake—including buying and selling, renting, trading and others which are recognized as rational behavior conceived by the people and approved by religious law.

We need to know whether men of wisdom have compiled their views on governance and politics which Islam has approved and affirmed, or, presented and advanced its own theory formulated on divinely ordained Islamic rules vis-à-vis other theories and views. In reality, Islam has initiated and founded a theory in relation to politics and governance with a set of sociopolitical principles and modes of application, and not merely approved and affirmed the views and opinions of the wise.

Those who are familiar with the various problems related to government and political philosophy know that there are different opinions in this regard. One of them is called “theocracy”, which means “divine rule”. This theory was utilized during the Middle Ages in Europe by the Church. The Church, Roman Catholic in particular, claimed that it was ruling the people through authority granted by God. On the contrary, some Christian sects held that the religion of Hadhrat ‘Isa (Jesus Christ) (‘a) had nothing whatsoever to do with political issues, and so they advocated the separation of church from state.

However, the Catholic establishment, in particular during the Middle Ages, was a proponent of the involvement of religion in politics and governance, regarding the government as rightfully belonging to the Papacy. They believed that the Church had been given the authority by God to rule over people according to divine ordainment, while the people were duty-bound to obey the orders of the Pope as authorized by God. This form of government was called “theocratic government”.

When it is said that except the governments established by people, does Islam have a particular theory and point of view and when it proposes the divine government, does the Islamic government mean the same “theocratic government” established in the West, and does “divine rule” also mean the same?

Has God granted extensive prerogatives to the ruler to rule over people however he likes, and are people obliged to act upon his will and desire? According to the divine rule and guardianship of Islam,

Islamic political thought, and, the theory of *wilayah al-faqih*, can the jurist-guardian [*wali al-faqih*] rule over people in whatever way he likes? Does he have the right to propose and implement any law and decree according to his opinion? Are people obliged to act upon his orders? This is a very serious question which requires proper study and analysis so as to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

In brief, the reply to the above question is that the divine rule we believe in and Western theocracy are poles apart. It is hereby repeated that divine rule according to Islam is not the same theocratic government which Christianity, Catholicism in particular, held as granted to God and the ecclesiastical authorities.

Most of political theorists divide governments into two types, viz. dictatorial and democratic each of which has different variation. The first type refers to a government in which the ruler interferes in all affairs whenever he wishes; authoritatively orders; resorts to various means based on terror, violence and military force in order to exact obedience from the people. Opposed to this type of government is the democratic government, which is formed according to the will and approval of the people. People choose rulers of their own freewill, while rulers are duty-bound to act upon the will and desire of the people. In fact, their legitimacy emanates from the will and desire of the people.

The Nature and Essentials of Islamic Government

Those who have accepted the above classification by the West and believe that governments are classified only into two—either dictatorial, or democratic and popular, ask: Is the Islamic government dictatorial? Does he who attains power, e.g. in our time the *wali al-faqih*, impose his authority on the people by force and rule according to his whims and caprice? Or, is it the democratic government of the West which is the opposite of dictatorship? Or, is it a third form of government?

According to the twofold classifications that have been accepted, the Islamic government is one of the two above mentioned types which is either dictatorial or popular. In case it is a popular government, it has to follow the same methods and ways existing and acted upon in Western countries and democratic governments. Or, it is not an Islamic, popular government and it is dictatorial and is based on the desire and will of an individual, and there is no third option. It is expedient for us to answer this important question and declare whether the Islamic government is dictatorial, akin to Western democracy, or follows a third option.

Among the questions being raised are the following: What are the preliminaries and main pillars of the Islamic government? Which elements must be preserved and observed in ruling and managing society so as to actually realize the Islamic government? Those who are familiar with our culture and jurisprudence know, for example, that there are some essentials of prayer which if abandoned intentionally or unintentionally, invalidate the prayer, for, without them, the essence and identity of prayer cannot be realized.

The Islamic government is also founded on certain pillars. In the presence of those pillars and columns, we call a government “Islamic”. If there is some defect or deficiency in those pillars and columns, the Islamic government will not be realized. Now, in view of the vital role of these pillars and columns, it is necessary for us to be aware of them, because unless we recognize the criterion and basis of the Islamic nature of government will be not be able to distinguish the form and nature of an Islamic government from non-Islamic governments. It is therefore necessary to answer to this serious question.

The form of Islamic government and the scope of prerogatives and duties

Another question raised is: Has Islam determined a specific form of government? As you are aware, there are many forms of government extant today, e.g. absolute and constitutional monarchy, presidential and parliamentary republic, and theocracy.

Has Islam accepted one of these forms, determined a specific form of government which is different from the abovementioned forms, not determined a specific form, or only determined a set of values and criteria of government which must be observed anytime and in every form of government? Islam has ordained that a government must observe justice, but the form observed depends upon the circumstances of time and space. Islam is not concerned with a specific form, as the proper form of government, according to Islam, depends on the observance of the criteria.

Assuming that Islam has determined a specific form of government, is this form of government according to Islam fixed and unchangeable, or a form which is more or less changeable? These kinds of questions are raised in relation to the form of Islamic government which must not remain unanswered.

Another question which is posed in connection with the philosophy of government is: What are the prerogatives and responsibilities of the ruling body or the ruler, in the Islamic government? Governments differ from one another in terms of prerogatives and responsibilities. In some governments, the prerogatives and duties of the government are limited. The government is only obliged to perform certain functions. The overall function of preserving the system is delegated to the government while other functions are given to the people.

In some forms of government, however, the government has vast prerogatives and equally heavy responsibilities. It assumes important responsibilities which it has to discharge. It can neither delegate them to the people nor shirk its duties because it is the people’s right to demand the performance of those responsibilities and duties from the government. It must be clarified that in the political philosophy of Islam, what prerogatives and duties dose Islam have set for the government. Undoubtedly, the performance and duties must be proportionate and balanced. It is not correct to delegate a duty to a person without providing him the necessary grounds to discharge the duty. So, the next question is: What duties and prerogatives does the Islamic government have?

The role of people in Islamic government and some other questions

Among the very serious questions which are raised today in society and periodicals is this: What is the role of the people in the Islamic government and what are their duties and prerogatives? Finally: What was the form and structure of the government during the early period of Islam, such as the time of the Holy Prophet (s),⁴ the time of the Commander of the Faithful ('a) and the initial part of Imam Hasan al-Mujtaba's ('a) time? Similarly, to what extent were the governments of the Umayyads and the 'Abbasids that ruled over Muslim territories Islamic; and, which of the abovementioned governments we can present as the Islamic government? How has the formative course of Islamic governments throughout history led to this form of Islamic government, which finally materialized in Iran by the blessings of the Islamic Revolution?

Of course, alongside the aforesaid questions, secondary questions are also raised, some of which are as follows: Is our government one hundred percent Islamic, and does it fulfill all Islamic standards and essentials of an Islamic government? In case this government possesses all the essentials of an Islamic government, has it discharged all its duties, fulfilled its mission and faithfully observed all values? Finally, what are the defects and deficiencies of this government?

Methodology of discussing Islamic political theory

Before answering questions, clarifying doubts and discussing the political philosophy of Islam, it is necessary to state which mode and method we shall choose to examine and tackle the subject. Technically speaking, what shall be the methodology of this discussion? Since this discussion is introductory in nature it must be addressed at the outset. Will the method of our discussion be intellectual [*ta'qquli*] with us offering rational foundations and proofs to elucidate the Islamic theory?

Or, will the method of discussion be purely devotional [*ta'abbudi*] and narrative [*naqli*]? In other words, shall the presentation of the structure, principles and policies of the government be based on a set of religious accounts, Qur'anic verses and traditions [*ahadith*]? Or, is Islamic polity also basically a trial-and-error phenomenon whose correctness or otherwise must be examined in the practical experience? Our method of discussion will be an empirical one and the criterion of judgment and opinion will be the experience of Islamic governments.

Since our discussion has rational and intellectual dimensions, its method and manner can be divided into two, viz. (1) polemical method [*shiveh-ye jadali*], and (2) evidential method [*shiveh-ye burhani*]. Once we want to examine an issue from a rational point of view, we agree upon a set of preliminary principles and discuss it on the basis of the same commonly accepted principles so as to solve the issue.

On the contrary, in the evidential method all the preliminary points are utilized in the argument so that

the discussion is based on original cases, certainties and axioms for which firm argument and solid proof are established. Undoubtedly, to choose this method will prolong the discussion. For example, if we try to prove the need to observe justice in an Islamic government by using the evidential method, we will begin by explaining the essence of justice, which will instantly be followed by a long list of questions: How will justice be implemented? Is justice reconcilable with freedom or not? Who is supposed to determine the criterion of justice? Should the criterion of justice be determined by God or the people's intellect?

After addressing the above questions, it will be asked: In these cases, to what extent does the intellect have the right to judge? Are the judgments of the intellect relative or absolute? The discussion will continue in this manner until finally the primary principles and epistemological issues will also be raised which will need settling, too. For example, what in essence is intellect? What is its approach and indication? In what method does the intellect make inference? To what extent are justice and its decree credible? Naturally, if we want to address all these issues as well as primary issues, we have to discuss and examine an array of different sciences.

The evidential method of discussion is honorable, certain and respectable, but as we have said, in applying it many issues pertaining to numerous sciences must be referred to. In addition to the fact that only a few individuals are well-informed of a set of sciences, and experts in every field can master only a set of limited information, it is an onerous task and many years would be spent in examining each of these issues via this method. In examining and explaining our subjects also, choosing the evidential method in all cases and following up each of the issues until we arrive at the axiomatic foundations and principles, will not be possible within the limited time we have.

As such, we shall resort to the evidential method only in cases where it is possible to present simple, uncomplicated and less extensive proofs, and employ the polemical method in other cases. The polemical method is the most appropriate method and in reality it is the shortest way to obtain results. It is a general and comprehensive method to convince others. In some places of the Qur'an, God, the Exalted, has resorted to it in convincing the enemy by presenting His firm and solid proofs, and He has also invited us to talk and dispute with others by using the same method:

﴿ادْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحُكْمِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ﴾

“Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good advice and dispute with them in a manner that is best.”⁵

¹. Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, At-Tawhid or Monotheism in the Ideological and Value Systems of Islam, trans. N. Tawhidi (Tehran: Islamic Propagation Organization, n.d.). [Trans.]

². Instigated by a proclamation issued by two religious authorities (Ayatullah al-'Uzma Muhammad Kazim Khurasani and Ayatullah al-'Uzma 'Abd Allah Mazandarani) which reads, “The constitution of each country limits and conditions the will of the ruler and the offices of government so that the divine ordinances and common laws based on the official religion of the

country are not transgressed,” what has become known as the Constitutional Movement, Constitutional Revolution or simply Constitutionalism (1905–11) took place due to the chaotic situation in Iran at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the popular protest over the tyranny of the governors and agents of the dictatorial regime and the unruly officials of the government, the weakness and ineptitude of the then king Muzaffariddin Shah, and finally the rising awareness among the people and revolt of the clerics and ‘ulama’. Years of struggle by the people culminated in the victory of the Constitutional Revolution in 1906. [Trans.]

[3.](#) Sayyid Hasan Mudarris (1859–1938) was one of the greatest religious and political figures in the recent history of Iran. He received his elementary education in Isfahan and then traveled to the cities of the holy shrines (in Iraq) where he received further education from prominent scholars and after attaining the level of *ijtihad*, he returned to Isfahan and began teaching Islamic jurisprudence [*fiqh*] and its principles [*usul*]. In 1909, at the time of the Second National Assembly, he entered Parliament having been chosen by the *maraji’ at-taqlid* and the ‘ulama’ of Najaf as one of the five *mujtahids* who were to oversee the law-making procedures. At the time of the Third National Assembly, he was chosen as a Member of Parliament. When Rida Khan carried out his coup d’état, Mudarris was arrested and sent into exile, but after being freed he was again chosen by the people and again entered the Parliament. In the Fourth National Assembly, he headed the opposition majority against Rida Khan. At the time of the Fifth and Sixth National Assemblies, he opposed the proposal for the establishment of a republic, which Rida Khan was in favor of, to replace the constitutional government, and he dissuaded the Parliament from approving it. He was resolute in his stand against the stubborn Rida Khan, such that the Shah hired an assassin to kill him and when he escaped the attempt, he sent him first into exile in the remote town of Khaf near the Afghan border, and later in Kashmar, where eleven years later in Ramadan 1338, the agents of the Shah poisoned him. In this way, one of the greatest political and religious personalities of Iran was martyred in the way of Allah. Mudarris possessed outstanding qualities, and even though he was a man of great political and religious influence, he led a very simple life. [Trans.]

[4.](#) The abbreviation, “s”, stands for the Arabic invocative phrase, *sallallahu ‘alayhi wa alihi wa sallam* [may God’s salutation and peace be upon him and his progeny], which is used after the name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (s). [Trans.]

[5.](#) Surah an-Nahl 16:125. In this volume, the translation of Qur’anic passages is adapted from Sayyid ‘Ali Quli Qara’i, *The Qur’an with a Phrase-by-Phrase English Translation* (London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies Press, 2004). [Trans.]

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