Al-Islam.org
Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project
Published on *Al-Islam.org* (https://www.al-islam.org)

Reason and Religion

Matters such as the place of religion in our age, the role of people in shaping their destiny, the relationship between religion and modernity and religious government to liberalism, as well as the relationship between religion and democracy, are central issues for us today. If we do not attend to them, it will only be we who are absent from the scene.

A person truly living in his own time is one who understands today's world and tries to offer more innovative solutions to current problems. If we are present physically in time but absent in thought, we cannot claim to be present in our own time. Today, friends of our revolution wish to know what models and plans this revolution offers for life, and foes hope that this revolution fails and fades from the scene. Thus, these are pressing issues present in our time that must be addressed.

Three great historical figures–Imam Khomeini, and martyrs Motahhari and Baqir as–Sadr–have played an important role in our recent history and in shaping the thinking of the current age, especially among new generations of Muslims. Their greatest achievement was their ability to transform the Muslim world culturally, especially Shiism. Imam Khomeini, who was the harbinger of new thinking and a new culture, became the source of a great historical transformation.

These three were exceptional in their knowledge and experience, and no thinker and scholar can ignore or circumvent their insights. For those without formal religious training, heeding the prescriptions of the clergy is necessary in practical matters, but in the realm of thought, no thinker can blindly follow the clergy, however outstanding they are–unless religious leaders are among the Infallibles. That is why I do not believe that great figures such as Motahhari and Sadr had the last word in religious and intellectual matters.

The point to focus on is that these were pioneers who took the first steps with confidence, and in this sense represent models for us to emulate. They are indeed worthy of tremendous respect. But their ideas must be subjected to critique. Did Motahhari and Sadr bring a new discourse to our society? I believe that the new discourse had already begun to permeate our society before the involvement of these figures, arising from our encounter with the West.

Some rigidly traditional parts of our society completely rejected the West, while some Westernized intellectuals sought to dissolve themselves in the West. And there were reformers of religious thought in the Sunni and Shiite sects of Islam such as Seyyed Jamal–uddin Assadabadi, Sheikh Muhammad Abdeh, Iqbal Lahouri, Allameh Naeeni, and great figures such as Motahhari, Shariati and Sadr who wanted neither to dissolve into the West, nor to completely reject it, hoping instead to chart a healthy middle ground. A book by Assadabadi, for example, put forth a critique of materialism that generated lengthy discourse in this tradition.

Before the time of martyrs Motahhari and Sadr, Allameh Tabatabai in Iran and many thinkers elsewhere in the Muslim world had tried to find new answers to these types of questions. What makes Mottahari and Sadr exceptional is their attempt to defend Islamic thought from Marxist and materialist thought so as to be able to usher in a new discourse based on a deep understanding of issues. This discourse must be the focus of all clerics and intellectuals who believe in religion and enlightenment.

The question of the West's deficiencies needs more precise scrutiny. Major differences exist between our religious thought and Western values. Our thinking is based on the existence of an omnipotent, all–knowing God, while the West rejects such ,a being, at least in the sphere of running social affairs. This A great difference between us which implies that in spiritual matters the West has less power than we do.

At present the West possesses economic, technological and scientific power, while we Muslims lag behind in this area. The *Qur'an* prescribes,

'Against them make ready your strength to the utmost of your power' (***Holy Qur'an, 9.60***),

in effect counseling us to attain the material sources of power as well, such that we can demand our rights on the basis of this power. It is here that I want to distinguish foundations from guidelines, for I see civilization as a foundation, not a guiding light. Civilization is built upon the specific beliefs, needs, and concerns of people. As such, a people's beliefs may change and so may civilization.

After the Prophet Muhammad, in the third and fourth Muslim centuries (eighth and ninth centuries C.E.), Muslims created a new civilization on the basis of the teachings of Islam, the *Qur'an,* and what they had learned from Persian and Greek civilizations. But the fact that the golden age of Islamic civilization has passed does not mean that the *Qur'an* and Islam have withered too. We Muslims believe that we must maintain our faith in the *Qur'an* and authentic Islam while searching for new answers to today's questions on the basis of religion. The products of Western civilization are everywhere; but I believe that this civilization, too, is not ultimate because it is a human construct.

All human achievements must be utilized by new generations, j just as Western civilization borrowed heavily from the Islamic world, which in turn had been enriched in its golden age by Persian and Greek culture. My main question is, what should we Muslims do now that Western civilization is dominant and we have lost our previous civilization? If we want to be instrumental in today's world, should we return to

the West's past–which would be regressive–or do we want to transcend Western civilization, or do we merely want to dissolve into the West?

The rigidly traditional want us to return to the past. The Westernized prescribe that we melt into the West, but those who really care about the well–being of their national and religious culture believe that we must incorporate the West to be able to transcend it, remaining aware of our own religious sources, as well as the questions and puzzles of today's world. We must adopt all of the positive achievements of the West, but see them in relation to our own heritage so we can fill in its deficiencies. That is why we must place greater focus on the future of the West than on its past.

Rectitude is one of the pillars of all religions, especially Islam, and we need a specific interpretation of the term. Unfortunately the idea of rectitude in the history of Islam has been limited to the realm of the individual, because the truly pious of the Shiite faith have never governed society.

This has also been true of the Sunnis; the only people who were allowed to govern were the powerful, while the people were kept away from the reins of power. Social rectitude has no precedent in our history. The same Muslims who believed in rectitude committed many social injustices in the Muslim world, and individual rectitude has not been able to overturn these inequities.

Thus if we say that we possess rectitude and the West does not, we have to know exactly what we mean by rectitude. To religious believers, the relationship between God and humans is clear, but the relationship of subjects to their rulers, individuals to their society, and various constituents of society to one another have not been scrutinized deeply enough to enable us to know the requirements of this–worldly rectitude.

Westerners believe that their culture is based on liberty. Before the advent of modern civilization, the issues of social, political, and civil liberties did not exist in the West because pre–modern Muslims and Westerners of the Middle Ages believed in salvation. Today, salvation is conceived as living free of restrictions, but in the Old World it meant freedom from internal restrictions and deficiencies such as worldly lust.

Some sects in the Islamic world went so far as saying that salvation can only come from self–denial and *shunning* all material objects, including even society. Farabi viewed Sufis, who prescribed such denial, as ignorant. He believed in salvation, too, but he felt that salvation can only come through immersion in a civil society guided by freedom from internal restraints and defects.

But liberty, as conceived in the West, is the exact opposite of this because it rests on freedom from external intrusions into one's life, such that one's life is governed by no one other than one's self. The Western idea of individualism gives primacy to human understanding and desires, and a free person is

one whose search for the fulfillment of needs is not hindered by anything. Of course, liberty has limits, and that is the liberty of others.

This liberty has also had positive effects as people have taken their destiny into their own hands, and government has become a servant of the people and accountable to them, not their master. In contrast, in previous autocratic regimes, rulers were above the people and thought of them as mere pawns at the complete mercy of their rulers. But when people were freed from the shackles of this domination, they collectively gained power over their rulers.

Liberty is freedom from external bonds. In contrast, the premodern idea of salvation rested on freedom from inner bonds oblivious to social and political liberties and rights. Both of these visions are incomplete. Modern liberalism ignores internal freedom, and while it is not concerned with whether or not humans are slaves to their passions, it requires that humans not be subjugated to the whims of their rulers.

We, on the contrary, have tried to prevent people from falling prey to their desires, even though tyrants governed and enchained Muslim society. My prescription is that we try to attain both kinds of freedom, as we refer to the *Qur'an* and our society. We may reject many aspects of Western liberalism, but we cannot deny its many achievements. As we discern the faults and strong points of the West, we must also direct this form of critical thinking at ourselves.

Reason can be defined in various ways, and we must specify what kind of reason we mean: Platonic, Aristotelian, neo-Platonic, the reason envisioned by Muslims and the Sufis, the reason of Ibn-Roshd, or that of Descartes, Kant, or Hegel.

In my view, reason is the common bond of all humans, a means of connecting to the world and to others, the same reason through which Plato and Aristotle communicated their views. Reason and intellect represent the only way of understanding this world, even though this understanding is too relative to guide us to ultimate truths. Our great thinkers, while aware of the indispensability of reason, knew that reason alone could not discover all of reality. Our religious tradition claims that it is ultimately faith of the heart, not the intellect that comprehends the whole of reality.

If we think of reason and faith as contradictory and opposed to one another, because reason achieves more instrumental impact in this world, faith will be sidelined. It is important to note that the faith I am talking about exists alongside and parallel to reason, not in opposition to it.

Reason can merely take us to. the gates of the afterlife. Even though it is aware that the world is not limited to the material, it cannot go farther than this world. It is here that faith must step in. Humans cannot do without reason in their lives as they encounter practical matters, and if they have to choose between faith and reason, they will choose the latter. Interpretations of the world based on reason are

relative, a relativity that also permeates our perceptions of religion. But if our understanding of religious tradition and the *Qur'an* gets moribund and in need of transformation, this does not mean that tradition and the *Qur'an* have aged them. Our intellect is capable of adapting to the current world while also remaining attuned to tradition and the Qur'an, such that the solid essence of religion is not harmed. Our religious thinking is bound to evolve.

Humans instinctively seek God, a reality present in the direct experiential contact with the divine. Unfortunately, many of our anachronistic interpretations of religion have assumed the veneer of sanctity and are viewed as being immutable.

It is certain that humans will take further steps toward spiritual fulfillment, for a narrow and materialistic existence will inevitably torment them. We believe that religion does not oppose material well being, but invites all humans to a grander, more exalted place than the material world.

As a believer I am certain that the future belongs to religion; as an advocate of reason, I can already see the signs of the eager reception awaiting religion in today's world.

Source URL:
https://www.al-islam.org/islam-dialogue-and-civil-society-sayyid-muhammad-khatami/reason-and-religion#comment-0