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The New Religiosity in Iran

Secularization theory frequently focuses on politics or social issues in relation to religion, but daily life and, in particular, leisure play a major role in the secularization process. The author focuses on the religious feelings of young men and women in Iran, particularly in Qom, a holy city with a strong traditionalist background. The post-revolutionary generation is developing new attitudes towards religious commandments, especially in relation to leisure, and more specifically, music.

Key words: *individualized Islam · leisure · “Los Angelesi” music · music · new religious subjectivity · secularization · Shi’ite Islam*

Les théories de la sécularisation se focalisent souvent sur les dimensions politiques ou sur les problèmes sociaux en relation avec la religion. Toutefois, la vie quotidienne, et en particulier les loisirs, jouent un rôle important dans le processus de sécularisation. L’auteur se concentre sur les sentiments religieux de jeunes hommes et femmes en Iran, en particulier à Qom, ville religieuse avec une culture traditionaliste fort développée. La génération postrévolutionnaire développe de nouvelles attitudes à l’égard des commandements religieux, notamment en ce qui concerne les loisirs, et plus spécifiquement, la musique.

Mots-clés: *islam chi’ite · islam individualisé · loisirs · musique · musique “Los Angelesi” · sécularisation · subjectivité religieuse*

The Paths to Secularization and the Iranian Model

Historically, there have been different paths to secularization.¹ One of them is revolutionary, in the manner of the French Revolution of 1789. This is a rather exceptional one. The other path is much more widespread and consists of the gradual separation of the Church and the State, with some vestiges of the mutual relationships between the two. The Church can preserve its symbolic meaning through the headship of the Monarch (in the Church of England, for instance) but has no hegemony over society.

Between these two models, there are many intermediary paths that combine them to various degrees. The Iranian case is relevant insofar as Iran underwent a “religious” revolution in 1979, imposing Shiite Islam as the

official religion and basing the political system theoretically on the supremacy of religion and its legal code (*fiqh*). Two considerations are relevant here.

First, the “adaptations” of Shiism to this new situation have introduced, according to many researchers, a hidden form of secularization.² Instead of “religionizing” society, the transformations of the political system have introduced a secularization of Islam in order to bring it into line with modern life and the new situations for which traditional Islam had no rules.³ The new political system in the name of Islam has paradoxically occasioned the reinterpretation of religion according to the secular world, even though this has been done in the name of Islam.

Second, the application of the Islamic system has introduced deep changes within Iranian society, transforming the institutional system: the school and the judicial and political systems among others. A new generation of Iranians has grown up, whose pattern of behaviour departs strongly from the requirements of the official religious system. This new generation, whose culture and worldview are in part the result of the deep mutation of Iranian society after the Islamic Revolution, displays a new type of attitude that is not at all in accordance with the mottos of the Islamic forefathers who promoted the religious revolution in Iran.⁴ It is to this second aspect, namely, the new patterns of “religiosity” that this article is devoted.

The New Religious Subjectivity

There is a new trend in Iran that reflects the new generation’s attitude towards religion. This can be summarized in terms of four types of attitudes. The first is the renewal of traditional Islam in a neo-orthodox way. Many people in small traditional towns, particularly in the desert areas, hold on to tradition, changing some aspects of it but maintaining many of its features intact. They are not politically motivated; they simply cling to an “Islamic way of life” that reproduces many features of what tradition transmitted to them. This can be termed “neo-traditional religiosity”. This kind of subjectivity is marked by the denial of secularization insofar as it rejects questioning of tradition and reproduces what was done in former generations, although some transformations were introduced without conscious recognition.

This attitude is not usually dominant in cities where the transformations produced a second type of new attitudes based on a “revisiting” Islam. The transformations in the educational system, the generalization of schooling in Iran even in the remote rural areas, the participation of girls in the school and university system and the high number of students in the universities in Iran (around 2 million), have all contributed to major changes in religious subjectivity, particularly among young people.⁵ In a city like Qom, most of the new generation has developed a new set of attitudes towards religion and leisure that are consciously different from the “unconscious” transformations characteristic of the first group. The latter is “non-reflexive”, whereas the former is “reflexive”. This transformation brings

about profound consequences in the realm of the self and its capacity to shape one's religious world. Whereas in the first case, music, for instance is seen as "impure" and is not listened to, in the second case, although people feel that music is forbidden by the religious authorities, they agree to listen to it because they have to decide about what is "forbidden" or "authorized", at least in this matter.

A third type of attitude towards religion that occurs in Iran is based on the rejection of any interference between politics and religion. Whereas in the first case the person is non-political and clings to his view about what is pure and impure as decided by the religious authority of his choice (his *marja' taqlid*), the second case is marked by some acceptance of the interference between politics and religion, at least as stipulated by the prevailing law in the country. In the third case, we see the conscious refusal to give legitimacy to any law that claims its legitimacy through religion. In this case, we have an individualization that is very advanced and leaves no room to any interference between the two realms, politics and Islam. In summary, the first attitude is "apolitical" by traditional bent; the second is "political" by the recognition of some realms in which politics and religion can have a common denominator, and the third is one in which there is no room for the religious justification of politics. The latter can be achieved by reinterpreting Islam, as is practised by new religious intellectuals such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Mojtaba Shabestari, Mohsen Kadivar, Youssef Eshkavari, and some others. The most widespread interpretation amounts to saying that Islam forbids the intermingling of the two realms and that one should "contract" religion instead of "expanding" it as was done after the Islamic Revolution when all realms of social life were placed under its aegis.

The fourth attitude is that of lay people who refuse to accept any religious view as legitimate and who see their identity as shaped by ignorance of religion and not by any kind of recognition of it. Among the people in this category one can distinguish those who are "lay" by a transgressive attitude: they reject what they see as the negative results of the Islamic Revolution and they are, in a way, "anti-religious" rather than "non-religious". A second group of people, mostly among the modern middle classes, are deeply secular.

Most of these categories existed before the Islamic Revolution. What is new is the scale of change among those who used to display a militant Islamic religiosity but who have now renounced it in a name of a secular and more tolerant version of Islam as well as among those who permit themselves to reinterpret religion in their own way, remaining, on the whole, deeply "religious". Their attitude, more than the "transgressive secularism" or the deep secularism of the new middle classes, seems innovative within the religious realm.

Religious Changes in Iran

Among the new generation of people who identify themselves as genuine Shiite believers and who still do not automatically recognize the authority of the *marja' taqlid* (the source of imitation: a religious authority, usually

an ayatollah, who gives *fatwas* and religious advice, to believers about their behaviour patterns in regard to the judicial or ritualistic problems of daily life), this source of authority is in many respects probably something very new in Iran, in its scope and its depth. Two decades ago, many people were either secular in the large cities or they followed Islamic rules and infringed them quietly, without questioning the authority of Shiite religious leaders. Now, this new phenomenon has gained momentum, and the change seems overwhelming in a “holy city” like Qom, the main Shiite religious centre in Iran for training religious authorities, a city known for its traditionalism and its dominant ritualistic attitude. The 50 in-depth interviews that I conducted jointly with Amir Nikpey (see Khosrokhavar and Nikpey, forthcoming) with young people from all walks of life show the extent of the change in the subjectivity of believers.

A second point is the change in the religious feeling of women. In the past, either they belonged to the small minority of modern middle-class and secular people or they were more traditional than men. In the second generation after the Revolution, the change in their religious sentiment is very deep and reflects the wish to take charge of their own life and to question religiously inherited norms and family restrictions. Of course, this does not happen in all spheres of life at the same time and with the same intensity, but still, the change is there and calls into question some of the most deeply rooted aspects of religious life among men and women. The diversification of daily life through sport or other activities lessens the importance of religion, even in remote rural areas; and this, too, puts into question the hegemony of religion, as the Islamic regime intended to implement it.

Change in Relation to Leisure: Music as an Epitome

One new aspect of the change concerns the practice among young men and women of reading religious books by themselves. This was not the case before, when people followed the rulings of the *marja'* they had chosen (or most of the time, the family had chosen for them). The Koran was read in Arabic by pious people without understanding it (its mere reading was deemed religiously commendable in the Arabic language whose alphabet is the same as in Persian). Now, the search is to read religious texts in Persian in order to understand them oneself, before bowing to any religious authority. This is the case of this young student:

Question: How do you spend your leisure time?

Answer: Mainly books, I buy books like those about Salah eddin Ayyubi, Ganj al Arsh and rather religious books. I try in particular to read the Koran, and this calms me down.

Another way in which secularization occurs is through diversification and the shift of focus from religion to modern leisure, in particular football matches. This young man from a rural area puts it crudely:

- Q: What do you do in the holy month of *Moharram* [in your village]?
A: We follow [the ceremonies], of course!
Q: What is more important, the football matches or the religious ceremonies of mourning in this month?
A: The young people go at the “appropriate” time to religious ceremonies of Ashura and Tasu’a and then do sport; they have nothing else to do and they do these things.
Q: You mean football?
A: Yes.
Q: Between the mosque and football, what do they choose?
A: If it is between the mosque and football among the youth of our district, believe me, they will choose football but then, at night, they go to the religious ceremonies.

A field in which a new type of personal preference is preponderant over the religious rulings of the ayatollahs is music: its performance as well as listening to it. In traditional Islam, music, apart from the recitation of the Koran (*talawa*), is deemed impure. This was the dominant view among traditional religious authorities in Iran even after the “liberalization” of music in the Islamic Republic, which started with revolutionary Islamic music and then moved, progressively, to include Iranian classical music and since the second half of the 1990s—especially after the election of the reformist Khatami in 1997 as President—“pop music” sung by men. In this field, many of the precepts of the religious authorities have been questioned by young observant Muslims, in the name of their own ruling: the individual can, in this respect, have a say in his religious life, in spite of the banning of something by the *marja’ taqlid* whom he follows in all the other aspects of his life. In this respect, religious young people are aligned with non-religious people.

An interesting case is that of a young man in Qom whose father is a religious authority. Not only does he listen to music, but he also performs it. He reached a compromise with his father regarding the performance of music in Qom:

I have tried to prove to my father (he is a mollah) that music is not bad, but so far I haven’t been able to prove to him that it is good . . . I have agreed not to play in public, otherwise, it would be a hard blow to him. I work therefore in the manufacture of musical instruments and I teach music; and this is more acceptable to him.

In order to overcome the institutional difficulties, he has recourse to some “cheating”, and the authorities seem to play the game:

What is a problem (in Qom) to the authorities is something called music. For instance, if the word music is announced, it is a problem to them. If we call [a musical occasion] “chanting” [*sorud*], this is more acceptable to them. If you want to do something publicly as music, you won’t get authorization. If you call it “revolutionary songs” you’ll get it. Hiding behind that word, you can do what you want. One of my friends wanted to organize a concert. I told him: don’t call it a concert, but he refused [my suggestion]. They did not give him the authorization. They told him: call it a night of poetry accompanied by music and we’ll accept it. The word “concert” is too heavily loaded.

One way to avoid breaching religious norms openly consists in referring to the diversity of *fatwas*: since different religious authorities have different and sometimes contradictory views on music (its legal or illicit character), the individual is free to have his own opinion on it. This casuistical explanation of listening to music although it is forbidden by some *marja'* opens the way for personal initiatives.

Another way of questioning the impurity of music is by referring to one's own state of mind and subjectivity when listening to it: since one is not put in a state of such excitement that one might trample on religious norms, the music becomes religiously acceptable. Here, the individual sets the religious norms himself, in spite of the rulings of religious authorities:

In our religion there is no prohibition of music because the music that I listen to does not push me towards calling religious norms into question. Most of those [*marja'*] who forbade music did not feel the need for it mentally . . . But from my point of view, there is no incompatibility between our religion and music.

In the past, those who contravened the norms about music in Qom did it on the sly, but now the new generation tries to discover a rationale for this ruling and puts forward arguments that tend to make listening or even performing music religiously acceptable.

The problem is the contradiction between personal aspiration and the institutional framework. What is accepted and even authorized in the large cities is forbidden in Qom where the religious authorities' power is paramount over that of the government. This makes musical performance very difficult indeed but it also reveals the new subjectivity which does not retreat in the face of prohibition:

Q: You play flute, what are your difficulties in Qom?

A: From the point of view of the authorities, it is impure and they don't allow you to play it [in public] [I go to Tehran] in order to learn singing, I learn singing classical music and one of my friends is the pupil of Shajarian [the famous singer of classical Iranian music]. I go twice to Tehran [it takes one hour and a half by the motorway] to learn it.

Another young man ignores the ban on music, although he is religiously minded and has a *marja'*:

Q: You go out sometimes with your friends to dance at night in their places?

A: Not at night [it is too obvious] but during the day, that happens to me sometimes.

Q: But to sing, to dance and these things is a sin from the religious view, isn't it?

A: I don't think so.

Q: Do you have a source of imitation (*marja' taqlid*)?

A: Yes, ayatollah Sane'i.

Q: What does he say about music?

A: They all say that it is impure, but I don't listen to them. Now [on the radio], they play so-called Islamic music, but it is worse than other music. They say, for instance, that if you play drums [*dombak*], it is as if you were slapping the holy Fatima [the daughter of the Prophet]; but they say things they don't believe themselves.

In this case, we see the individual ruling taking precedence over the views of the religious authority. This can be compared to the attitude of many young Catholics who do not heed the Pope's prohibition of abortion or of sexual relations in spite of the fact that they are deeply religious. Individualization here means choosing one's own way of following or not the religious authority who is supposed to have the last say on matters in which religion has a say, according to customs.

A young girl, very religious otherwise, follows the same path:

Q: What about music?

A: I listen to whatever is beautiful [to my ears], authorized or not.

Q: Your mother doesn't object to that?

A: No!

Q: Isn't that against the [rulings of] religion?

A: I didn't say I don't do anything against religion. It is forbidden, but I do it. I couldn't accept that it is a bad thing.

Q: Religion says that it is bad.

A: Can you tell me why it is bad?

Here, the girl who happens to be from a religious family in Qom and who, otherwise follows the religious commandments rather strictly refuses to submit to the ban on music and asks for rational arguments as to why it should be banned. This individualization is the beginning of a deep secularization in which leisure plays an important role, perhaps more important than politics. In this respect, many young people from Qom who happen to be politically conservative (they don't follow Khatami, and the Reformists in general are culturally liberal). This is one of the facts on which the interviews throw a strong light: one can be politically conservative (on the side of the religious conservatives in Iran) but still have culturally "liberal" attitudes towards leisure and many other aspects of daily life. Leisure, here, plays an important role in secularizing religion and in opening up new vistas for the exercise of personal ideas and attitudes. This young girl performs the five daily prayers rather assiduously, follows many of the religious commandments and nevertheless expresses a personal view about matters that were, a generation ago, a matter of indisputable authority for the *marja'*, in the religious city of Qom.

Another young person has the same attitude:

Q: Do you listen to music?

A: Yes.

Q: What kind of music?

- A: Calm music, as well as “Los Angelesi” music [pop music made by the Iranian diaspora in the USA and illegally reproduced in Iran].
- Q: You are a pious Muslim, a *motesharre'* [as you said], how come you listen to music, isn't it a sin?
- A: No, my religious views [are not at stake], I have faith in my daily prayers but I also believe in these sorts of thing [like listening to music]
- Q: Even though religious texts ban music you keep on listening to it?
- A: Yes.

This young man from Qom, who plays guitar, declares that in his view there is no incompatibility between music and Islam in spite of the opinion of many ayatollahs in this respect:

- Q: Some Ulamas say that listening to music is sinful, what is your opinion?
- A: I do not accept it at all. I don't think that music has anything nasty in it and it has never been the case. Perhaps a specific type of music might give rise to problems but I don't think that Islam has any problem with music.

Here too, in the individualized version of Islam, music is declared permissible, against the views of many prominent *marja'* who ban music in the name of religion.

Nevertheless, some breach religious norms but have a feeling of guilt, the individualization process showing its limits. This young girl from Qom is a good case:

- Q: Do you listen to music?
- A: I try to listen to music that is not too cheerful, and not a song either.
- Q: Why? Do you think it is a sin?
- A: Even if it is not, it leaves its imprint on my mind. When I listen to songs at weddings or at home for one or two weeks, then I sing them in my head and that makes a negative influence on me.
- Q: Do you listen to the songs of Hayedeh, Gougoush [women singers of the Shah's regime, very famous in Iran] and the others?
- A: I listen to them at weddings.
- Q: Don't you think it is a sin?
- A: I try not to listen to them and at weddings, I try to sit far away [from the loudspeaker] in order not to hear them.

Another woman answers the same question in an ambivalent manner, displaying an internal tension between the feeling of guilt and the wish to listen to music:

- Q: You said you listened to Gougoush and Abi. You are a believer and you do your daily prayers [as you said before], isn't that right?
- A: Yes, it is true.
- Q: Isn't that a sin?
- A: It is true that it is a sin but I think that in certain circumstances, it is a lesser sin!

Another young person justifies listening to music by referring to self-control. If one remains in self-control, listening to music is not forbidden:

Q: What type of music do you listen to?

A: Any sort.

Q: Don't you think all of it is forbidden by religion?

A: No, because I know that we have a principle in Islam: if the music causes me to lose control over myself, the prohibition is OK [it is forbidden], but it is rare to be in that situation; and then there is no problem. And beyond that, things have changed from the past.

For secular people, the religious restrictions have become meaningless, even in Qom:

Q: What kind of music do you listen to?

A: Pop music and traditional [Iranian] music. I didn't like traditional music, but for some time my colleagues were listening to it, and I liked it.

Q: But people say it is a sin from the religious point of view.

A: I reject it totally. We shouldn't be sad, miserable and mentally stressed, particularly young people. We should be happy, and I believe that there is nothing like music for making us happy.

Here the norm is happiness, and no religious consideration is deemed legitimate. This radical secularization leaves no room for feeling guilt or any attempt at finding some religious grounds for vindicating music.

Another youngster denounces the clergy and their hypocrisy:

Q: What kind of music do you listen to?

A: Whatever I find—pop, traditional, rather traditional, I like Shajarian. Among the new bands I like Nasser Abdollahi and I also listen to the singers of “Los Angelesi” music.

Q: Some say that the Los Angelesi music is banned by religion.

A: The Mullahs say this sort of thing, and I reject it totally because these people say something and do something else, and those who behave that way, I don't take them seriously.

Nowadays, as a result of the secularization of the Iranian society,⁶ listening to music does not necessarily mean that one is either religious or non-religious. This young woman from a traditional family who wears a chador in order to satisfy her parents and who says she is a pious person, plays a musical instrument belonging to Iranian classical music and disregards any ban on music:

Q: What instrument do you play?

A: I play *se-tar* [an Iranian instrument] and *dombac* [Iranian drum].

Q: Can one play them and wear the chador (as you do)?

A: I did not choose the chador myself . . . I wear it because my parents like it . . . I think that one can wear the chador and play music. At school [girls' school], I even sang.

Q: Don't you think the voice of a Muslim woman should not be heard by men [as religion stipulates it]?

A: I don't believe that either.

Q: What does music give you?

A: Music brings everything to human beings, it brings religion and the world together [alluding to the proverb "*din ou dunia*"] as things which are normally opposed to each other, but here, significantly, they are put together as mutually congenial. Music opens up doors even if you feel all doors are closed. This one is open because you have chosen it yourself, your hands have chosen it [you play music], this is a world that is interesting to me.

Conclusion

Leisure—as much as politics, if not more so—seems to contribute to the secularization of Iranian society. Music is a good case in point, particularly because it is banned by many traditional religious authorities, even in Iran today. Among the younger generation, some people reject this prohibition outright. Others, who believe, rationalize their need for music and establish a limit beyond which religious authority (*marja' taqlid*) has no say, and the individual decides what is right and wrong. Some others, although torn by a feeling of guilt, nevertheless breach the ban and *de facto* reject the religious rulings (*fatwa*) of traditionalist authorities, even though some may follow them.

NOTES

¹. For a general view of secularization, see Beckford (2003).

². For more on this aspect of religion, see Kian-Thiébaud (1998); Khosrokhavar (1998); Amir-Moezzi and Jambet (2004). Adelkhah (1999) shows how the involvement of religion in economic activity contributes to the desacralization of religion and not to the "Islamization" of society.

³. Many Iranian intellectuals stress this fact, see Shabestari (2000); Eshkavari (2000); Jalae-Pour (2000); and Mottaghi (2004).

⁴. For a panoramic view of these changes, see Hooglund (2002); Khosrokhavar and Roy (1999).

⁵. For statistics on these areas, see Ladier-Fouladi (2003).

⁶. For the latest developments in Iran, see Djalili (2005); Kian-Thiébaud (1998); Ansari (2003); and Nikpey (2003).

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