

Introduction

In the late 1990s and early 2000s a sociopolitical movement emerged in the Islamic Republic of Iran that flirted with notions of pluralism, democracy, and associated ideas such as freedom of thought and expression, gender equality, and choice in matters of religion and which rejected the monosemous rigidity propounded by a powerful clique known within Iran as “Principlists” (*osul-garāyān*).¹ This reformist movement encompassed secular thinkers, lay religious intellectuals, politicians within the governmental structures, and recognized political parties which began to emerge at this time. More significantly, one of the strongest roots among reformists developed within the seminary (*hawza*), and clerical supporters in this movement regarded their aim as a legitimate expression of Islam. Ultimately, the various groups coalesced and became associated with the Green Movement, which emerged as a result of the perception that the presidential elections of 2009 had been rigged.

This book investigates the ideas of this reformist movement from the perspective of arguably the most radical of all seminarian reformist thinkers, Ahmad Qābel (d. 2012). Herein lies the need for such a monograph; while the worldviews of secular and lay religious Iranian thinkers

¹ Some scholars use the term “hardliners” which refers to those individuals who have called for a traditional and literal understanding of Islamic texts, a strict implementation of Islamic commands (such as the execution of the *qesās* penalties), and who have also endorsed social modesty through the hijab for women. They have also rejected a rapprochement with the West. Given the lack of political parties and therefore the absence of a “political whip” to ensure loyalty to a particular cause, it is problematic to make generalizations about political trends in Iran. The use of descriptors such as “hardliners” (in Persian, *tondraw*) should be understood with some caution. However, the term is accepted by many leading scholars of modern Iran including Arjomand, 2009; and Ansari, 2019. In this work, however, we stick with the Principlists, who have also been known as the Conservatives and also Rightists. Yet even this term is problematic, given that it can be used to describe individuals of differing political persuasions, such as Khāmenei and Ahmadinejad. The Principlists emerged in response to the “pragmatism” of the presidency of Rafsanjāni in the 1990s and one of their goals (as cited by Arjomand, 2009: 66) is “guarding the principles of the revolution and spreading principal-orientated or what I shall call Fundamentalism (*osulgarā'i*), and to fight deviation.”

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have been adequately considered by Western scholarship,² the voices from the seminaries that propound a systematic and wide-ranging reform of jurisprudence among other dimensions of the modern worldview are far less frequently heard.³ As a proponent of “New Religious Thinking” (a school of seminarian thought that emerged in Iran after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989) Qābel’s writings are of interest because his views stretch across a wide range of topics that are reflected in this book. Thus, there are chapters devoted to jurisprudence, politics, religious history, gender, apostasy, society, and superstition. His views are discussed within the context of the sociopolitical changes that were sweeping across Iran in the wake of Khomeini’s death and the end of the destructive eight-year war with Iraq.⁴ Qābel’s controversial ideas on the aforementioned topics, which crossed so many redlines, and his criticisms of the Principlists, who as stated before have often been equated with fundamentalists or conservatives, resulted in him serving jail sentences between 1998 and 2012.⁵ Moreover, this study on Qābel contributes to the exceedingly sparse literature in English of the worldview (not just jurisprudential) of a modern reformist seminarian.⁶

² Secular views are typified by Ganji, 2008: 25–41, who argued for the removal of the current “religious” structure of government. Ganji spent several years in Tehran’s Evin prison for challenging violent methods to maintain a stranglehold over society, during which time he engaged upon a widely reported two-month hunger strike in 2006. Religious thinking from a lay perspective has been articulated by Abdolkarim Soroush. Soroush writes from a philosophical and ethical orientation, and his views have become increasingly secular (although not devoid of religious content) over the years. See Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2008; for Soroush in his own words, see Soroush, 2000; 2009.

³ Studies that have examined reformists among the seminarian thinkers include Ghobadzadeh, 2017. Ghobadzadeh’s work does not highlight any one particular individual, and it adopts a thematic approach on the topic of religion and secularity in modern Iran. More recently Ali Akbar and Abdullah Saeed have coauthored a work which focuses on the ideas of several seminarians among others on Qur’ānic interpretation (Akbar & Saeed, 2022). The book provides an excellent summary of several of the reformists, although the end result is a rather thin investigation of their more general worldview.

⁴ Other works have investigated the sociopolitical context, such as Arjomand’s book, which “draws on the sociology of revolution with a view to its long-term consequences to offer an explanation of the political development of Iran over the past two decades” (Arjomand, 2009: 4). Arjomand’s otherwise outstanding sociological work lacks a jurisprudential and religious studies focus. Likewise, Ansari, 2019, and Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2019, are excellent works from a historical-political perspective but lack the lens of seminary thinking. Mention should also be made of Mavani, 2013, which is a major contribution to seminarian conceptions of political power.

⁵ It needs to be stated that Qābel rarely identified his opponents by the term.

⁶ Other individuals from the *hawza* that have frequently been linked with the reform movement and who have been studied with varying degrees of sophistication include Mohsen Kadivar and Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari. Their ideas and broad worldviews, however, have yet to be studied in depth. Kadivar’s views have not been the subject of a single monograph although his ideas have been the focus of several articles, such as Vahdat, 2000; the best introduction to his thought in his own words is Kadivar, 2011a;

The relative absence of studies that deal with jurisprudential reform which ties in with political and social change and historical reevaluation in Iran is surprising, given the strikingly original perspectives from many of the New Religious Thinkers. Their writings are significant in the context of the historical development of the more rational orientation of the Osuli school of Twelver Shi'ism.⁷ It is the foregrounding of reason within the Osuli school which gives it the potential to promote the kind of radicalism in thinkers like Qābel. As an acceptable analytical tool, the exercise of reason demonstrates the extent to which there is an inherent tension or compatibility between rationality and revelation. Ahmad Qābel's contribution to this religious-rational debate was perhaps the most prominent among those advocating reform. Even sympathetic fellow seminarian colleagues recognized the radical content and implications of his thought. One of these reformists, Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, noted how "extreme" Qābel's rationality could be, while other colleagues were often obliged to play "catch-up" with him.

2021a; 2021b. Eshkevari has been discussed by Mir-Hosseini & Tapper, 2006. The best general overview of New Religious Thinking is Ghobadzdeh, 2017.

A sympathetic seminarian view of reform is popularly associated with the smiling face of the immaculately groomed Mohammad Khātami who was president for two terms of office between 1997 and 2005. Khātami became synonymous with notions such as the rule of law and "dialogue among civilizations," and the latter was adopted by the United Nations as its theme for discussion in 2001: see Holliday, 2010; Mirbagheri, 2008; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2019. However, the ideas and views of the aforementioned president were not systematically profound from a jurisprudential perspective to warrant critical scrutiny, and the methodology to implement such a vision was never clearly defined (Mirbagheri, 2008). Khātami's views had neither the daring of Qābel's thinking nor did he possess the religious "clout" and charisma of someone such as Ayatollah Montazeri. Montazeri had served as Ayatollah Khomeini's deputy as Leader of the Islamic Republic in the mid-1980s and he was able to boast a profound pedigree in Islamic learning, revolutionary credentials, in addition to attaining dissident status because of his opposition to the ruling political clique. (An analytical survey of Montazeri's ideas has yet to be undertaken; at present there are biographical works, and an appraisal of his political contribution to the well-known political doctrine of *velāyat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist). On Montazeri's life, see Siavoshi, 2017; von Schwerin, 2015.) It is difficult to divorce Montazeri's politics from his religious thought, especially as he has been so intimately associated with the doctrine of *velāyat-e faqih* (see Chapter 4). For a discussion on this, and on his more "religious" teachings, see Akhavi, 2008. Montazeri plays a vital role in this study of Qābel because he was also his main religious guide and mentor. The seminary has often been considered a conservative institution, but while there is much truth in this statement, such a view does not adequately explain how it has been able to produce and nurture the likes of Qābel, Montazeri, and even Khātami.

⁷ Osuli Shi'ism is well-known for being based on sacred scripture (the Qur'ān and hadith and narrations of the Imams), the consensus of decisions made by the seminarians, which are taken by applying a rational interpretation to the sources. The Osuli form of Twelver Shi'ism became widespread following the demise of the Akbāri school (which foregrounded the literal acceptance of sacred scripture alone). By the time of the Qājār dynasty in Iran (1789–1925), the Osulis were in the ascendancy. See Algar, 1969.

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Qābel has become associated with the idiom *Shari'at-e 'aqlāni*, which has been translated in this book as “rational shariah.” *Shari'at-e 'aqlāni* was the name given by Qābel to his own website, and it is also the title of the collection of his essays, edited by Mohsen Kadivar, and which has become perhaps his most celebrated work. The Persian adjective *'aqlāni* requires some explanation here. In the *Encyclopedia Iranica*, the noun *'aql* is rendered as “intellect, intelligence, reason.”⁸ So, *Shari'at-e 'aqlāni* may be rendered as “intellectual shariah,” “intelligent shariah,” or “reasonable shariah.” Yet these translations of the term do not provide the meaning that Qābel intended to convey, as “intellectual shariah” and “intelligent shariah” suggest an understanding that is academic or elitist, whereas the opposite is the case. For Qābel, the shariah, and Islamic sacred scripture, was open to more than just experts of Islamic jurisprudence. In addition, “reasonable shariah” has a ring of convenience about it, and does not adequately convey the rationality and reason that he understood when considering the shariah. For these reasons the expression *Shari'at-e 'aqlāni* is rendered in this book as “rational shariah” and *'aql* as “reason.”

This book investigates rational seminarian thinking from the diverse interests of Qābel, which shows the direction that the seminary may be forced to travel if it is to adopt the same kinds of perspectives that are espoused within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Such an interpretation was not considered by Qābel an innovation, or an example of “cultural erosion”⁹ as he claimed that this form of rationality existed in the pages of essays that were composed by the great founding fathers among Shi'i jurists. He argued that it was the present generation of seminarians who were responsible for distorting the tradition of applying reason in their jurisprudential works.

Qābel's public advocacy of his worldview was of sufficient concern to the Principlists that they had him repeatedly arrested, as stated above, before his untimely death of natural causes in 2012. As opposed to the Principlist trend toward an authoritarian, centralized force that has deviated from a traditional model of several independent centers, Qābel's Islam, with its stress on human reason (not an individual reasoning, but a collective form), took the Osuli form of Shi'i Islam to its logical

⁸ In their article in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, Rahman & Chittick, 1986: 194, note: “The term *'aql* is said by Arab philologists to mean originally ‘to restrain’ or ‘to tie.’ It then comes to mean ‘reason’ because it ‘restrains man from precipitous conduct’ (see standard Arabic dictionaries).”

⁹ “Cultural erosion” has been a term frequently used by Principlists to denote that Iran's Islamic culture has faced an onslaught from the meta-narrative and cultural imperialism from the West.

conclusion. That is to say, Qābel's perception and promotion of human reason went so far that he advocated perspectives that contradicted literal and traditional ways that sacred scripture has been considered. Qābel justified such an interpretation by appealing to the overriding ethical dimension of sacred scripture. Rather than focusing on the atomized approaches of those who considered texts literally and as applicable for all times, Qābel's grasp of Islam was contextual and historical. His understanding of Islam mixed reason, justice, and compassion, which he considered the basic components of the Qur'ānic message. It is from this perspective that he denied the universal applicability of all of the Qur'ān, such as its verses of retributive punishments, which it is argued were revealed to respond only to a particular cultural and historical circumstance. From this standpoint Qābel examined several of the "redlines" of contemporary Iranian society – and with a faithful adherence to his rational hermeneutical methodology, the crossing of boundaries on politics, historical interpretation, gender, freedom of belief, and society was an inevitable conclusion. The fundamental research question of this book, then, centers on how his worldview, rational shariah, might be envisaged. To answer such a broad question, specific themes have been chosen, and the subject of the various chapters of this book, conveniently reflect those that predominate in Qābel's writings. As such, the importance of Qābel's worldview extends beyond his immediate context of modern Iran to the whole of the Islamic world; indeed his questions still speak to believers of all "revealed" religions and who are concerned with the relationship between reason and revelation.

This study has been undertaken by close readings of Qābel's compositions which have been uploaded onto his website (www.ghabel.net). Because of his "dissident" status, Qābel was unable to acquire the necessary permission from the state authorities to print his works (either as articles in journals or as independent books). However, Mohsen Kadivar, his friend and fellow seminarian pupil of Ayatollah Montazeri, has gathered Qābel's writings together, assembled them into coherent topics, and published them as e-books. Qābel's writings have attracted scant scholarly attention, which is partly due to his inability to publish in the conventional manner, as mentioned above. The lack of attention on Qābel is also related to the difficulty in untangling his knotty but conventional seminarian style of writing and also due to the short passage of time since his death. In English, the only works that consider Qābel's life and works include an article by Forough Jahanbakhsh,¹⁰ and my own work.¹¹ Analysis by Iranian scholars (within Iran and composed in Farsi) on

¹⁰ Jahanbakhsh, 2020. ¹¹ Ridgeon, 2020; 2021: 129–201; 2022a; 2022b.

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Qābel is obviously restricted; those supporting his views are reluctant to express their sympathy in the public sphere for fear of reprisals from the Principlists who simply desire that the whole episode surrounding Qābel is quietly forgotten.

The topics of the chapters have been carefully selected to reveal the full breadth of Qābel's concerns, and these reflect some of the major issues that have dominated the attention of reformers and Principlists alike. The introductory biographical chapter is largely chronological and has been divided into Qābel's early revolutionary years when he served in the Revolutionary Guards, fought in the Iranian army during the war with Iraq, and also pursued his clerical studies in Qom. Subsequently, the biographical chapter outlines Qābel's middle years which coincided with the two terms of office of President Mohammad Khātami. It was in this period that Qābel came into conflict with the Principlists and suffered imprisonment and solitary confinement. He also felt it expedient to spend a year in Tajikistan. His mature years, when he most stridently critiqued the Principlists for their authoritarian tendencies and for the execution of the opposition, are also considered. Finally, Chapter 1 appraises his ten books, many of which were assembled and published posthumously online as stated above. The subsequent chapters focus on themes upon which Qābel wrote and crossed redlines. Each chapter is contextualized before presenting a critical analysis of his contribution.

Chapter 2 concentrates on jurisprudence and Qābel's understanding of the rationality of the shariah, which in many cases brought him to conclusions that conflicted with the official reading of state religion. The analysis examines *Shari'at-e 'aqlāni* (*Rational Shariah*), one of his e-books. The jurisprudential methods that are contained in *Shari'at-e 'aqlāni* are important because Qābel used such tools to arrive at the kinds of far-reaching conclusions that are discussed in subsequent chapters of this book.

Chapter 3 investigates Shi'i religious history by analyzing the story of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam Hosayn;¹² Qābel not only depoliticized Hosayn and the nascent Shi'i movement that had been given a radical and revolutionary "makeover" by the likes of Ayatollah Khomeini and Dr. 'Ali Shari'ati, but he also ignored the soteriological dimension related to the Third Imam in his ethical reading of the tragedy. This does not mean to say that Hosayn was unimportant for Qābel; he considered the Imams great leaders and interpreters of Islam, and he

¹² This chapter was published in *Persica* (see Ridgeon, 2022b) and I am grateful (in particular, to Professor 'Ali-Asghar Seyed-Ghorab for his comments, criticisms, and advice) for permission to reprint it in this book.

associated Imam Hosayn in particular with the old Islamic political concept of “commanding the good and forbidding evil” – which was a traditional way of advising and warning political rulers. It may not be too far-fetched to claim that Hosayn provided Qābel with a role model by which to conduct his own version of “commanding the good and forbidding evil” vis-à-vis the modern-day Principlists.

Chapter 4 turns to politics and the controversy over the political doctrine commonly associated with Ayatollah Khomeini, the *velāyat-e faqih* and the centralization of power, which Qābel claimed he had rejected from the very outset of the revolution.¹³ A slightly different version of the chapter, which examines the theme of religious secularity and *velāyat-e faqih*, was published very recently (Ridgeon, 2022a). The version herein explains the complex relationship between the traditionally more quiescent version of *marjaʿiyyat* (which is the pinnacle of Shiʿi religious leadership) and how this became entangled into the political doctrine associated most commonly with Khomeini. The chapter also examines Qābel’s relationships with three senior figures whose presence looms large in this debate: Ayatollahs Khomeini, Montazeri, and Khāmenei.

In Chapter 5 the investigation is upon gender, that is, the rights of women, which includes discussions related to the supposed superiority of males, the necessity for women to wear the hijab, and the inequality of inheritance, all of which Qābel denied. It is this chapter more than any other that demonstrates Qābel’s application of reason to burning issues of a practical nature that impact millions of people. In particular, the focus includes Qābel’s interpretation of Q. 4.34 (the verse which seemingly permits men to beat disobedient wives). Qābel’s reading of this verse and associated passages which have traditionally been read in a misogynist way went “against the grain,” and he offered a version of gender equality that arguably has more in common with Western modes of perceiving gender equality. Rather than “complementarity” Qābel argued for equality of opportunity and rights.

Freedom of belief and expression, and the right to change one’s religion (or apostasy), is the subject of Chapter 6. The context of this chapter necessitates a discussion about the freedom of the press in Iran (the connection with freedom of belief and expression are obvious), as the media was an outlet for “dissident” journalists and reformers in the 1990s, and enflamed the ire of many Principlists in the 1990s. Qābel’s writing on the topic demonstrates his care and attention to detail, showing his belief how

¹³ A slightly different version of this chapter appears in *Religions* 13(5) (see Ridgeon, 2022a). The *Religions* version focuses more specifically on political secularism and religion. I am grateful to the guest editor, Naser Ghobadzadeh, for inviting me to contribute the article to the journal, and also for permission to reprint it here with revisions.

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traditional scholars had distorted sacred texts to expand the category of unbelief. Qābel's analysis, as outlined in this chapter, returns to the sacred scripture and in so doing he produced an understanding of freedom of belief which would allow genuine religious pluralism in Iran (including an acceptance of secular atheists).

Chapter 7 concentrates upon Qābel's view of society, that is, the kinds of goals that should be pursued, and whether there was a need to protect Iran from the "cultural erosion" which has been a theme of concern for 'Ali Khāmenei. Qābel did not want to live in a society that was characterized by sadness, typified by what he saw as the kinds of excessive ritual activity associated with crying and lamentation for the "wrongs" perpetrated against the Imams. His explanations of the kind of desirable society included one in which there was not an imposed "top-down" Islamification of society, represented by the Islamification (or gender segregation) of universities. Qābel's vision was also one that "frees" Islam from a particularistic Hejazi understanding of the Islam of the seventh century, and renders it into a universal religion that offers genuine pluralism and tolerates diversity and difference. In effect he argued for a secularization of society, which did not mean an irreligious society, but one that endorsed religious secularity.

And finally, Chapter 8 turns to Qābel's analysis of superstition, which involves a discussion of miracles. His interpretation of miracles, driven by a commitment to reason, renders an understanding that explains the miracle through natural causes. Such events are known as superstition when they become widespread and common through society. This unusual way to understand miracles highlights one extreme in his rational worldview. Of course, he was aware of other "irrational" superstitions which are more conventional to the understanding of the Western reader (e.g. palm-reading), but he also discussed "superstitions" that are specific to the Iranian religious context concerning beliefs about the Imams, and in particular the "Hidden Imam." It is at this point that superstitions become a significant political issue.

This brief summary of the chapters demonstrates why Qābel's worldview presented a challenge and threat to the Principlists. However, as previously mentioned, his way of thinking is of a greater significance than the immediate context of Iran during the first decade of the twenty-first century. It is an example of how Islam may be envisaged by reformist seminarians in such a manner that it does not contravene traditional shariah. Indeed, Qābel frequently insisted that he was a man of the *hawza* and that his message was not new, even if his commitment to Shi'ism and the Imams appears at times very different from the "orthodox" version of either the Akhbāri or Osuli schools of thought of Twelver

Shi'ism. Yet Qābel was an individual with deep religious principles, and as a champion of New Religious Thinking, he provided a model of what a rational interpretation of religion might look like for modern Iran. He was passionately uncompromising in his attachment to reason, regarding it as the very essence of religion (not just Islam), and he dedicated his life to pursue the dictates of rationality to the extent that he suffered harassment and imprisonment, which many believe contributed to his death at the relatively young age of fifty-eight.

The appendices comprise translations of the most important articles that are included in Qābel's *Shari'at-e 'aqlāni*. They offer the reader an example of both the kind of methodological tools that he employed as well as the Arabized Persian style of jurisprudential writing. Qābel's compositions have yet to appear in any language besides the Persian original.

An understanding of modern Iran in the twenty-first century, and in particular, an appreciation of reformist thinking in Iran, is incomplete without a consideration of Qābel's contribution. His bravery in espousing his reformist ideas is remarkable in light of the repressive position taken by the Principlists on other "dissenters." But as the fourteenth-century Persian poet Hāfez so eloquently said, the path is easy if you know the stages of the way, but the difficulty is being able (*qābel*) for the path.

چنگ در پرده همین می دهندت پند ولی و عظمت آن گاه کند سود که قابل باشی
 گرچه راهیست پر از بیم ز ما تا بر دوست رفتن آسان بود ار واقف منزل باشی¹⁴

From behind the curtain the harp is giving you the same advice, but
 Its preaching profits you [only] when you are able (Qābel)
 Although the path from us to the friend [is] full of fear,
 It is easy going if you know the stages of the way.

Qābel was aware of the danger, and he was prepared to meet the intellectual challenges of modernity and the political opposition of the Principlists. Time will judge the degree to which he was successful in guiding Iranians to the kind of vision that he had for society.

A word is required about the transliteration system adopted in this work. By and large the system is the same as that used by the *Journal of Persianate Studies*. Some names are spelt in the idiosyncratic way that the individuals themselves render their names in English (which does not conform to any recognized or consistent transliteration system). Some Persian words have not been transliterated (or the *'ayn* or *hamza* has been omitted)

¹⁴ Hāfez, #447: 894. The two lines are chosen by Kadivar, who edited *Vasiyat be mellat-e Iran*. Kadivar took the second and sixth couplets of the ghazal.

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because they have become common terms in the English language (e.g. shariah is used for *shari'ah*).

Finally, many scholars and researchers have assisted me in the course of writing this work, from providing materials, to listening to my ideas and views, and reading drafts of chapters. My deepest gratitude is extended to them all. I refrain from mentioning them, due to the sensitivity of the subject matter.