Introduction

Political Islam's Romance with the "West"

When the French philosopher and scholar Henry Corbin visited Iran in 1945,[1] Allamah Tabataba'i, the most eminent Shi'i scholar and philosopher of the time, traveled from Qom to Tehran just to meet with him. Corbin conducted several intense dialogues with Tabataba'i and a number of other religious scholars, some of whom later became the leaders of the Islamic Republic (Motahari, Beheshti).[2] Corbin was also a mentor to Darush Shayegan and Housen Nasr, two of the most prominent secular scholars in Iran.[3] Perhaps most significantly, he was highly influential for Ali Shari'ati, one of the better known Islamist intellectuals of the 1970s, who had studied with Corbin at the Sorbonne.[4]

Corbin was a scholar of spiritual Islam and Iranian-Islamic philosophy, but his importance for Iranian religious intellectuals had an additional mysterious dimension. He was known as the French Heideggerian scholar of Islam, and he wielded a particularly important influence for this reason.

Corbin had visited Heidegger in Freiburg in April 1934 and July 1936 to discuss the French translation of *What Is Metaphysics?* He also translated Heidegger's text on Hölderlin and the *Essence of Poetry*. What is interesting in the Corbin-Iran connection is the renewal of strong interest in Heidegger within Islamic intellectual circles: Heidegger, the radical critic of Western Enlightenment who ambiguously collaborated with the Nazi regime, the philosopher of existence, transcendentalism, and the jargon of authenticity. It is within the context of the Corbin-Iran link that we may fully appreciate the meaning and contribution of the three most significant Iranian intellectuals of the 1960s and '70s, Ahmad Fardid, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, and Ali Shari'ati, and their role in intellectually shaping the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

This book accordingly focuses on the contribution of certain ideas and intellectual trends, generated in the West, that have shaped the principal ideological formation of the Islamist critique of modernity and the West. I suggest that an excessive emphasis has been placed on the purely religious quality of political Islam, and that this has led to a scholarly blindness concerning "non-Islamic ideas" in the overall development of the Islamist ideology as a mobilizing and motivating force.

The tendency of most scholars to overlook the Western influence on political Islam has contributed to the perpetuation of widespread and simplifying myths that occlude the actual complex nature of this significant and often troubling political phenomenon of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I propose that there is a profound influence of certain intellectual trends, originating in the West, that has contributed significantly to the formation and continuing development of political Islam as an anti-Western and counter-Enlightenment ideology. In this book, I argue that Muslim intellectuals in general – and Iranian intellectuals in particular – have come to know the West, modernity, and democracy largely through the radical anti-Enlightenment ideas of German philosophy, as well as of certain French intellectuals. These ideas were generated in the counter-Enlightenment discourses that ultimately played so major a role in the fermentation of reactionary modernist politics in Western nations in the mid-twentieth century. These discourses, based on the appeal of nostalgia and the restoration of a "lost" shared sense of community and social meaning, and feeding off of the social discontent and cultural disorientation endemic to rapidly modernizing societies, found their way into influential political discourses offering "salvation" to the newly urbanized publics of twentieth-century Iran and other Middle Eastern and Islamic societies. In this phenomenon, we see the invention of a new language and mode of describing the problems and discontents of modern social realities by way of familiar symbols that conceal a radically transformed meaning and propose a solution based on the familiar modern concept of "total revolution." It is therefore very unproductive to talk about Islamic thought as such, or to discuss political Islam as if it were disconnected from crucial political discourses and issues of the modern West.

Changes in the Middle East reflect, not an autonomous or linear historical process, but, like all late modern history (and to a lesser extent early modern), a distribution of often fractured lines of becoming in tradition, modernity, and cosmopolitanism, expressing geographical and economic realities cutting across and incorporating multiple distinct conflicts

(class, colonial, political, religious, ethnic, gender, regional, ideological, etc.). These conflicts are patterned in the twentieth century by the World Wars, the Ottoman disintegration, decolonization, the Cold War, nationalism, refugee influx and state formation (particularly Israel), development and labor migration patterns, the postwar capitalist boom, and corresponding population and resource connections. We have, in sum, a complex historical-geographical configuration or multiple interconnected singularities from the Russo-Japanese War to the Marshall Plan and the Soviet politics in Azerbaijan. In this accumulation of connections and productions without an organizing center – except the minimal structural logic of capitalism in dependent populations, universal exchange value, surplus, wage labor, state-law complex, and so forth – we may identify several formative discursive moments in, first, modern Enlightenment as the French Revolutionary model of national assimilation and emancipated human nature as "intellectual virtue" (narrowly essentialized as modern/tradition, science/culture, fact/value), and, second, radical Enlightenment seeking to conceive "rights" within a more inclusive framework than autonomy as property ownership or education (Marx, Sen) and seeing in practical "moral virtue" a potential for everyday forms of democracy beyond the legislative moment of the state (Dewey or Thoreau as thinkers, Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King as practical demonstrations). Third, we have the influential discursive moment of counter-Enlightenment that in rejecting the coercive universal pretences of Enlightened modernity also categorically rejects the institutional forms of secularism and liberal democracy in the name of a totalized "local" and "ontological" claim to either religious or cultural truth – the highest intellectual expression of which is probably contained in the works of Martin Heidegger. This was the discursive moment that gained ideological influence in late-twentieth-century Iran within the context of the crisis of the secular modern developing state and a history of foreign intervention and had enormously dangerous consequences for the project of building Iranian democracy.

Because of this strong identification with anti-Enlightenment discourses by many important Muslim intellectuals during the late twentieth century, the Muslim understanding of the West and modernity is often highly limited. The exaggerated association among these intellectuals of "modernity as such" with the particular paradigm grounded in French Enlightenment and revolutionary experience has resulted in many Muslims seeing modernity as secular in the sense of inherently hostile and even at war against non-Western/traditional cultural ideas and beliefs. This

French Revolutionary paradigm was the vision of modernity and secularism adopted by Kemal Ataturk and the Shah of Iran in the Middle East. In fact, a more "middle way" secular politics exists and is available as evidenced by different experiences of the secular from Britain (expressed in the eighteenth-century moral philosophers such as Shaftesbury, and the tradition of progressive and piecemeal social and administrative reform) to the independent Indian Republic (expressed in the ideas and practices of Gandhi and Nehru).

Although "secularization" may be a specific socioeconomic process, theorized by Habermas as the "public sphere" and necessary to all free societies, it is an institutional rather than cultural or moral construct. The "secular," by contrast, is an epistemic or imaginative construct shaped heavily by cultural and moral elements, but has often been taken to mean Europeanization projected as a fixed "scientific" universal (i.e., for Ataturk, with his now-dated nineteenth-century scientific determinist imaginary) – when in fact even within the West itself the "secular" can mean different things within various historical conjunctures of modernity and their unique historical-geographical variables from population to existing religious structures (from Britain to America, from France to Italy, etc.). Where the "secular" is concerned, different cultures can develop all sorts of specific cultural and moral ideas and discourses in order to imagine, discuss, and negotiate such crucial issues as freedom, agency, justice, and rationality. Within this context, the possibility of a positive contribution by religious ideas and values to the creation of a new democratic society is by no means ruled out – as with late seventeenth-century post-Puritan England, where a prophetic and scriptural structure was used to undermine clerical claims to authority in a championing of secular principles.[5] For the same reason, secularism should not be confused with a "natural" or "inevitable" process, nor should it be supposed that it is inherently linked to democratic or politically free society. The twentieth century offers numerous examples of violently authoritarian secular regimes, from the Shah of Iran to the Ba'athist regime in Iraq.

Overlooking the many rich historical examples of secularism as a "middle way," and focused on the secular regime in its authoritarian variation, many Islamic thinkers have become attracted to a narrowly Nietzschean and particularly Heideggerian critique of the West as the single source of modern inhumanity and a general loss of cultural and existential meaning in a Manichean universe. A clear case study is the rise of political Islam in Iran and the strong Heideggerian influence on a number of leading Iranian intellectuals who helped enormously to articulate

the Islamist ideology that paved the way to the 1979 revolution (Fardid, Al-e Ahmad, Shari'ati, Shayegan, Davari, etc.). Therefore, this project maps out a philosophical genealogy (namely, the reception/mobilization of counter-Enlightenment thought in political Islam); at the same time, it also sets forth counterexamples of nonviolent and pluralistic political practice – within, for example, the twentieth-century Indian experience of achieving national independence – that are highly relevant and useful for modeling alternative futures for Islamic democracy in the contemporary world.

1. Discourse of Political Islam

The goal of this study is to situate the rise of political Islam in contemporary social and cultural contexts from a fresh and alternative perspective. Political Islam promises to restore a pure and unbroken order to modern society based on a claim to an ontologically legitimized higher truth and a uniform set of values grounded in this truth. Critics and analysts of political Islam, as a rule, do not look beyond the superficiality of these claims and uncritically accept them on their own terms, thereby perpetuating a vicious cycle of misunderstanding. My argument is that far too dogmatic a grip has been maintained on the contention of religious content as being intrinsic or essential to political Islam, whereas a comparative blind spot has prevailed regarding those "global" qualities that have been highly important in giving the movement its integral substance and definition. The overemphasis on the religious content has produced a deficit in public understanding and debate where this important issue is concerned, as well as creating an unwarranted sense of "mystification."

This book therefore focuses on the contributions of ideational complexes and intellectual trends that, although generated in the West itself, have ironically had a powerful influence in shaping the principal ideological formation of the Islamist critique of modernity and the West. From this perspective, I hope to raise awareness among scholars by defining the "non-Islamic" ideas that have been essential to the overall development of the Islamist ideology, disturbing at once the Islamist claim to local "authenticity" as well as the too-common assumption in the West that these radical politics somehow represent a "natural" or "logical" extension of Islamic religious or cultural history as such. For, although it is true that Islam in its historical evolution has provided conceptual, institutional, and moral resources for contemporary Islamic political movements, there have also been fundamentally important levels of the

Islamist social *imaginaire* that are interacting and interrelating deeply with core intellectual discourses of what has been called the Western counter-Enlightenment.

I argue in this connection that Muslim intellectuals in general – and Iranian intellectuals in particular – have come to know the West, modernity, and democracy largely through the radical counter-Enlightenment ideas of German philosophy, as well as of certain French intellectuals, in a genealogy that goes back to the counter-Enlightenment movement: from its various twists and turns through such early ideologues as Joseph de Maistre – who defended the French *ancien régime* – to such latter-day and more boldly aggressive defenders of the aristocratic "order of rank" as Friedrich Nietzsche, and finally Martin Heidegger, on the eve of fascist total war against the values of the Enlightenment in World War II. On the other hand, we may just as easily indicate evidence of the Enlightenment democratic tradition at work within modern Iranian political history – for example, in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11, or the democratic experimental interim of 1941–53. In other neighboring Asian nations, we may point to the successful political establishment of these democratic Enlightenment traditions over the long term, most particularly in India.

These expressions of Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment heritage are always unique and specific to the evolving society in question. In this context, I argue that political Islam in Iran is in considerable part a nativist reaction to modernity that is in many ways very similar to early twentieth-century populist reactions to modern democracy in Europe. Similarly for Iran, as for Europe, there is the ever-present possibility of the establishment of democratic hegemony within the Iranian context.

2. The Philosophical Foundations of Islamism

Many Islamic thinkers have become fascinated by the Nietzschean and particularly Heideggerian critique of the West as the source of modern dehumanization and a general loss of cultural and existential meaning, or so-called roots. Through the popularity of these discourses, in turn, the West, modernity, and democracy have often been construed through a narrowly constricted lens that unjustly links the positive democratic heritage directly to such dark experiences as colonization and imperialism. It is necessary to show that the assumption of such an "essential" link is a harmful error and is based on a falsely monolithic imagining of the West popularized in counter-Enlightenment discourses.

This project presents a clear case study of the rise of political Islam in Iran, and the strong Heideggerian influence on a number of leading Iranian intellectuals who helped enormously to articulate the Islamist ideology that paved the way to the 1979 revolution (Fardid, Al-e Ahmad, Shari'ati, Shayegan, Davari, etc.). These individuals reckoned with experiences of social and cultural dislocation spurred by rapid modernization, urbanization, foreign intervention, concomitant economic marginalization, and crises in political legitimacy – all of which induced them to seek and, indeed, invent an appropriate ideology of radical social transformation. In light of such complex evidence and genealogies, it becomes meaningless to talk about Islamic thought as such as any explanation for these political movements and discourses, or to discuss political Islam as if it were disconnected from crucial political discourses and issues contemporary to the modern West itself. We see, rather, how it is more productive to discuss radical Islamist movements in terms of the troubling alternative vision of modernity that was ushered in by the counter-Enlightenment tradition with a reactionary emphasis on rigid social cohesion, hierarchy, and preservation of order grounded in shared public meaning and culturally rooted values and traditions. The counter-Enlightenment undertook a fearful effort to bring final closure to the disconcerting unity of disunity that is modern life.

The reappraisal of political Islam in this light should lead to a new approach in public discussion and better illuminate the general predicament of Islamic societies by going beyond the current focus on two issues:

(a) The idea that political Islam is representative of Islam or the Muslim world against the values and institutions of the democratic West or Judeo-Christian civilization. Framing this conflict as a fundamental clash of two essential worldviews, or competing forms of socioethical understanding, will only assist Islamists who claim that their own political aspirations represent the historical grievances of the Muslim world as a whole. The framing of the issue in this way, moreover, is consistent with the Islamists' goal of presenting their agenda in terms of opposing identity politics, and can only close any meaningful public dialogue concerning the relationship of our contemporary societies and the possible nature of their complex interactions.
(b) The treatment of current tensions in terms of an idea of East-West communication. This is something to be avoided, because we know that this kind of discussion is prone to imagining the West

> as a closed and essential entity that is situated in the context of the historical experience of Christian moral values and is hostile to the "Eastern" worldview. This project should alert us to the fact that the West is not a bounded geographical entity and has a great deal more presence in the Muslim world than has so far been adequately recognized and reflected on. Of even more significance, the Islamists themselves are far more influenced by important ideological waves in "Western" thought than they are ready to admit and than others indeed have so far recognized.

These two mainstream tendencies are embodied in the writings of, for example, Esposito and Hadad, in arguments that "Islam" represents a tradition that does not separate religion from politics. There is also the "critical theory" social science approach that interprets Islamist movements as part of larger emerging discursive movement identified, in Michel Foucault's terms, as the rise of "subjugated knowledges." From this perspective, Islam is viewed as a tradition presenting an alternative to liberal modernity and challenging the totalizing nature of rational Enlightenment. Influential writers including Talal Asad, and in a less rigid way Saba Mahmood, have declared the Islamic tradition incompatible with secular liberalism on this theoretical basis. These views ultimately entail a concept of Islam anchored in a notion of romantic authenticity.

Going beyond these two dominant interpretations (the "conventional" and the "critical") will first contribute to a demystification of Islamism, and will second indicate the extent to which we live in a critical and defining moment in the future development of Islam itself, in which an important struggle is taking place over how Islam is to be defined in the modern situation. Within this context, we see that, although political Islamism offers an important voice within contemporary Islam, there are at least two other voices with very different interpretations of Islam and an altogether different understanding of the place of this religious tradition in the modern world.

(a) The traditionalist Islamic establishment and its Ulama.

> Since its inception in the 1950s in Iran, Islamism has been and remains a major challenge to traditionalist Islamic leadership and institutions. The traditionalist establishment does not agree with the overpoliticization of Islam and religious institutions, and it is therefore an important force in quietly undermining certain Islamic radical movements. This is true in Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and many of the Gulf States.

The unfortunate tendency to treat Islamism as representative of Islam as such in today's world has made it difficult for the traditionalist forces to effectively challenge political Islam in the more serious way of which they might otherwise be capable. Making the distinction between opposing elements and tendencies within an "Islamic" world space already rich in diverse languages and ethnocultural variety will both help the existing democratic forces and, at the same time, undermine the ability of Islamism to claim for itself the role of complete embodiment of the religion.

(b) The reformist movements, intellectuals, and institutions.

In almost all Muslim countries, including Iran, Algeria, Egypt, and Turkey, the main challenge to conventional Islam comes from reformist religious intellectuals, and the many institutions with which they have been involved. Religious intellectuals such as Abdolkarim Soroush in Iran, Mohammed Arkoun in Algeria-France, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd in Egypt, and so on, are important forces with powerful and practical ideas that have attracted and captured the imagination of both educated youth and the middle class. Those who see these religious intellectuals as representing simply more moderate versions of Islamism make a considerable error. Intellectuals of this variety have achieved a fundamentally different view of Islam and its place in society and have, moreover, set themselves and their ideas up as potential democratic forces aligned with the more progressive elements in the society.

Although it is no doubt true that these Islamic tendencies have certain shared ideas and outlooks, in looking at the social and intellectual contexts and the complex developments that have attended the ascent of political Islam over the decades we should be able to clarify the distinction between the basic aims and precepts of political Islam in comparison to those of the religious intellectuals. The larger argument of this study is that Islamist movements are a part of the larger issue of reconciling Islamic societies with modernity, a project that has opened up a variety of roads. Whereas much current literature on political Islam focuses largely on the origin or nature of Islamist movements or their failures in resolving the crisis of Islamic societies, I argue that unless a properly democratic narrative of modernity that is compatible with contemporary Islamic societies can be offered, the Islamist ideology will likely continue to dominate even in the clear absence of an ability to offer any meaningful political or socioeconomic progress.

3. Alternative Narratives of Modernity and Enlightenment within the West, in Non-Western Countries, and within Islam

One central aim of this project is to offer a democratic narrative of modernity by highlighting diverse intellectual trends in the West and in non-Western societies such as India. There were different experiences at the origins of modernity in England and the United States, with their own particular approaches to religion and secularism, and these differ from the French model that is so often taken to represent the experience of modernity as such. Yet, these often more open experiences, allowing for a far wider latitude of possible belief and a greater openness to religion, are regularly overlooked or minimized in comparison to those historically constructed and more dogmatic discourses that are repeated routinely in studies of the meaning and nature of modernity. The vision of an expanded democratic narrative of modernity is also given articulation in the philosopher John Dewey's ideas of democratic public life and his philosophy of conceptual pluralism, which critique the often unknowingly recycled metaphysical presuppositions that insist on the unique possibility of a single road to democratic modernity. Dewey goes further to argue that secularism – as merely a formal and legal system – cannot by itself maintain democratic and egalitarian principles in a society, and some additional "common" or unifying ideals and moral traditions are required to help develop our communities toward the realization of freedom.

Dewey's ideas are given an interesting practical counterpart in the social movements in both India and the United States, in which intellectual leaders – namely Gandhi, Nehru, and King – envisioned democratic social change in terms of the incorporation of values of the Enlightenment, in addition to a critique of Western oppression, with their particular moral and cultural understanding of the world.

Through an in-depth look into the ideas of visionary democratic leaders of the twentieth century, such as Gandhi, Nehru, and King, we find models for practical experiences of democratic social change that incorporate moral and cultural sensibilities while creating democratic spaces and extending the heritage of Enlightenment along new paths. Both Gandhi and King articulated nonviolent and inclusive democratic discourses suited to the growing complexities of evolving global multicultural societies in which the traditional past need be neither enshrined in dangerous dogma nor rejected out of hand as being "other" to modernity. Rather, for these thinkers and activists, the traditional past is to be engaged as a vehicle for the construction of a democratic form of social