

*Focus On:*

## Iranian Islam and the Faustian Bargain of Western Modernity

MEHRZAD BOROUJERDI  
Syracuse University

### 1. *Clash of Civilizations?*

The demise of the Soviet Union certainly altered both the symmetries of power in international relations and the vitriolic tone of Cold War diplomacy. Soon after, Francis Fukuyama declared that with the triumph of capitalism as the only remaining legitimate ideology, the mental liberation of humankind was finally accomplished (Fukuyama, 1992). Except for the most purblind, it should strike all that history as the battleground of competing ideologies has now come to an end. At last, since dusk has fallen, Hegel's 'Owl of Minerva' may spread its wings.

Shortly after Fukuyama expressed his philosophical elation, Samuel P. Huntington, one of the most prominent American political scientists, cautioned against this type of premature euphoria by claiming that this Hegelian dusk had not yet completely descended. He asserted that although the 'West' defeated its chief nemesis, communism, a number of other redoubtable foes have refused to swallow the elixir of liberal capitalism. These new contenders, he maintained, should not be mistaken for some impotent ideologies but are, rather, resilient civilizations (primarily the Confucian-Islamic world) that luxuriate in difference behind the garlands of their own cultural constructs. On this basis Huntington proceeded to make the following prophecy: 'The central axis of world politics in the future is likely to be ... the conflict between "the West and the Rest" and the responses of non-Western civilizations to Western power and values' (Huntington, 1993).

Scholars and political commentators alike criticize Fukuyama and Huntington for their pretentious prophecies, partisan historicism, and deficient justifications as well as their portrayal of 'civilizations' as well-defined and homogeneous entities. I believe, however, that more serious faults occur with their theories due to their curt and cursory reading of the intellectual and political history of non-Western societies. To illustrate, this essay concentrates on the case of Iran, a country that may be described as the archetypal 'Islamic' state in the 'Western' imagination as well as a country that has articulated some of the most vociferous calls for political independence and cultural authenticity in the 'Third World'. Behind the caricature of a country ruled by fanatical, sword-swinging ayatollahs, there are many interesting debates and paradoxes taking shape that defy any monolithic characterization of Muslims and/or Iranians. Making allowances for these realities should encourage the abandonment of the message of implacable enmity inherent in any *Weltanschauung* emphasizing civilizational fault lines. Moreover, as Michel Foucault and Edward Said have demonstrated, in-depth cultural analysis also illustrates how discourses are harnessed to powerful social forces and institutions. Looking at the bewildering array of contradictory trends and behaviors may be equally disheartening to the policy-making elite and their intellectual mentors, both in Iran and the West. Yet, the zeal of both constituencies for adopting unambiguous and popular policies should be tempered by a mode of analysis that casts lights over their ideological moorings, travails, and efficacy.

### 2. *Globalization*

Perhaps it comes as a surprise to both Fukuyama and Huntington that many political commentators in Iran interpreted the downfall of the Soviet Union not as a manifestation of the solidified power of the Western world but as a prelude to a Western demise. What accounts for this prediction is the

belief held by Iranian intellectuals that both the political 'East' and 'West' were the inheritors of the rational universalism and secular humanism of the Enlightenment. In other words, both Marxism and liberalism share certain presumptions about the nature of humankind, the universe, and societies. These presumptions manifest themselves in realms such as the stripping of nature's divine essence, the advocacy of science and secular knowledge, and the privileging of mind and body over the soul. According to these Iranian intellectuals, the Enlightenment cunningly subdued philosophy in the name of science. From this seduction, two ideologically distinct offspring were born, Marxism and liberalism.

Despite their ideological squabbling, these two should not be perceived as diametrically opposed ontologies. According to many Iranian intellectuals, Western liberal thinkers who 'dance on the grave of Communism' have yet to realize the extent of the great calamity that has befallen all the inheritors of Enlightenment thought. In other words, these thinkers believe that what was being sacrificed at the altar was not merely Marxism as an ideology but rather humanism as the pivotal truth of post-Renaissance West.

It is a grave mistake for Westerners to cast off these proclamations as examples of obscurantism. There is a need to acknowledge that these statements are symptomatic of the fact that many people in the non-Western world differ from their Western counterparts in how they view culture, space, and time as well as material wealth, moral principles, and social values. The principles of globalization of capitalism, the nation-state system, and modernity influence most of the world population but obviously not to the same extent or with the same uniform results. As technology makes traditional jobs and skills redundant or obsolete, instantaneous and continuous international business transactions affect one's economic standing. Meanwhile, the scope and speed of Internet, fax and satellite transmissions make a mockery of attempts at cultural policing. Many people in the non-Western world now realize the extent to which the process of globalization has problematized or pierced their 'life-worlds'.

In addition, twentieth century global modernity is elevating the issue of who, or what, directs and delimits the identity of individuals, nations, and cultures. The attempt to criticize the totalizing master narrative of Western modernity is part of the larger search for cultural authenticity in the non-Western world. Many people contend that Western modernity resembles a Faustian bargain in which you have to sacrifice your variant and traditional familial, tribal, ethnic, religious and national identities/attachments for the tediously monotonous materialism of the present age. Moreover, Third World thinkers often criticize democracy and capitalism as euphemisms for cultural and economic imperialism and castigate human rights as the Trojan horse of the powerful West. Needless to say, some of these thinkers are ideological apologists or demagogues trying to provide flimsy justifications for unprincipled disregard of certain inalienable rights by their governments (see Afshari, 1996). Yet to dismiss or marginalize all non-Western objections to the pedigree, precepts, or ethos of the meta-narrative of human rights (or feminism and the uni-linear idea of progress, for that matter) as mere ideological whitewashing runs the risk of cultural arrogance.

### 3. *Responding to Modernity*

Even within the confines of a bona fide theocracy such as that of present day Iran, however, modernity's compulsive and restless presence can be easily detected. While Islam has become an axiom of political life touching all aspects of public life, the ineluctable challenge of modernity and the myriad changes it has already brought about continues to bedevil political thinking. Iranian clerics and intellectuals are now intensely preoccupied with the following questions: Can modernity be overcome? Are there non-Western varieties of modernity? Is it possible for criticisms of modernity to serve as a cultural-historical shortcut to the future for non-Western societies? Can Muslims borrow anything from the post-modernist criticism of modernity? These questions have put into motion interesting debates in Iran and abroad. Some of these debates focus on whether modernism is primarily identified with science and technology, or whether its chief attribute is the recognition of human beings as the sole source of values.

Regardless of the debates, modernity has already established itself in such domains as architecture, education, graphic arts, and urban development as well as in social and political institutions. Consequently, many Iranian intellectuals acknowledge that they are deeply indebted to Western thought which serves as the cultural reference point for their struggle with issues of identity and selfhood. Iranian intellectuals' contemplation of modern Western philosophy dates back to the 1934 Persian publication of René Descartes' *Discours de la méthode*. Since then this constituency has increasingly immersed itself in Western philosophical schools of thought.

This immersion has expanded to such an extent that presently in the bookstores of most major cities in Iran one encounters the translated works of such thinkers as Arendt, Aron, Carnap, Dewey, Diderot, Habermas, Heidegger, Hume, Jaspers, Kant, Lévi-Strauss, Locke, Marcuse, Nietzsche, Pascal, Popper, Rousseau, Bertrand Russell, Sartre, Spinoza, Weber, Wittgenstein, and many others. As the above list indicates, some of the seminal figures of analytic philosophy (logical positivism, linguistic philosophy) and continental philosophy (phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism) have been introduced to Iranian readers. While it would be a gross misstatement to maintain that Iranian intellectuals have developed a taste for Western philosophy, it is accurate to say that their present understanding of Western thought is much more complex than it used to be. My Western colleagues are often surprised to hear that one of the most intense debates in post-revolutionary Iran has been an epistemological debate over the positivist ideas of Popper, Hempel, and Carnap versus the historicism of Nietzsche, Hegel, and Heidegger (see Boroujerdi, 1996).

This and other anecdotal examples are perhaps better appreciated by understanding that a systematic critical study of the West and its various modes of knowledge has been occurring in Iran since the 1960s. These criticisms were not just articulated by clerics armed with the panoply of traditional learning. Indeed, much of the criticism originated from Western educated secular and lay religious intellectuals (see Boroujerdi, 1996). This 'Occidentalist' literature, which can be considered as a counter-discourse to Europe's Oriental narrative, has so far spawned different theories, predictions, and indictments about the status and the fate of the 'Western other' and the 'Iranian self'. While excessive diatribes about the West's imminent demise or pompous predictions about its bleak eschatological future run rampant, other intellectuals admire the science and technological precocity of the West. The latter group insists that even if an unlikely calamity were to befall Western civilization, it would still not hamper Iranians' attempt to critically assess their own history, culture, and politics. One of Iran's most perceptive philosophers laments the cultural schizophrenia of Islamic societies by writing:

For more than three centuries we, the heirs of the civilizations of Asia and Africa, have been 'on holiday' from history. (Doubtless there are exceptions.) Having cemented the last stones into place on our Gothic cathedrals of doctrine, we sat back to contemplate our handiwork. We succeeded so well in crystallizing time in space that we were able to live outside time, arms folded, safe from interrogation. . . . The problem of the Islamic world resides in its cumbersome atavism, its defensive reflexes, its intellectual blockages and above all in the illusory pretensions that it possesses ready-made answers to all the world's questions. We need to learn a certain humility, a certain understanding of the relativity of values (Shayegan, 1992).

#### *4. Science versus Sapientia*

The absence of unanimity regarding the West is emblematic of the larger disagreements within the Iranian intellectual polity concerning the nature of science, religion, and secularism in the modern world. The range of questions being presently discussed in Iran demonstrate a sense of Iran's intellectual barometer: Is science a disinterested entity? Does science need philosophy (especially a spiritually endowed Eastern or Oriental one)? Is technology merely a tool at humans' disposal or is it the embodiment of a new and subjugating metaphysics of being? Can spirituality and technology be fused? Should religion be relegated to the domain of individual consciousness? Should Islam be interpreted in terms of the principles of modernity? If not, how should Islam be interpreted? Is an ideological interpretation of religion possible, desirable and/or inevitable? Should Islamic jurisprudence be subjected to epistemological analysis and hermeneutical readings? Would such an exposure lead Muslims toward deism? Is Islam a political religion by nature? Should morality bend the knee

to politics under any circumstances? Are secularism and Westernization one and the same? What have been the repercussions of Muslims' and Christians' different and non-synchronous encounters with modern civilization? Should criticisms of Eurocentric ideologies lead to incrimination of Enlightenment principles? Is selective philosophical borrowing from the West possible?

Despite their repressive political machinery, the ruling Shi'ite clerics in Iran have not been able to articulate a monolithic discourse as far as the above questions are concerned. This lack of a unified discourse arises from the abysmal failure of the clerics to solve the abstruse social, economical, and political problems of the country through moral dictates. This failure has fueled the intellectuals' longing for finding practical solutions for the myriad enigmas that surface in a modern day theocracy. Similar to Martin Luther's crusade to free Christendom from the yoke of corrupt church officials selling indulgence letters, a number of Iran's leading religious reformers are now incriminating the clerical caste, albeit in a less flamboyant manner, for catering to the superstitious longings and fallacious beliefs of the masses. While the ruling clergy insists on turning Shi'ism into a belligerent and integrative ideology, these critics maintain that the simplicity of ideology overshadows and devours one of the main properties of religion: its mystique. In other words, such a metamorphosis is tantamount to robbing religion of one of its innermost values.

Meanwhile, other Iranian intellectuals expand and enunciate mere criticisms of ideology by expressing their reservations about rationality and modern science. Reminiscent of Søren Kierkegaard who responded to Kant's claim regarding the universality of reason by arguing that reason itself is a choice (since by itself it does not dictate that one ought to embark on an ethical life), many Iranian thinkers claim that science devoid of the assistance of metaphysics (which is not necessarily logical or sensuous) neither furnishes a moral reference point nor a broad blueprint for proper human conduct. They maintain that in the West the conquest of nature has displaced metaphysics and that, as such, science and technology have managed to dethrone philosophy. These thinkers, thus, maintain that one should not put the delicate and sacred hands of Oriental religions in the skeletal and powerful hands of Western sciences. The above set of epistemological and ontological assertions means that in objecting sourly to modernity and its trappings, Iranian intellectuals find it possible to understand Kierkegaard's disdain for Christian 'mobs' (i.e., those who have ceased to be passionate individuals), to identify with Heidegger's criticism of technology, to sympathize with Camus' Myth of Sisyphus, and to appropriate Sartre's ethics of responsibility (see Solomon, 1988).

### 5. *Quest for Authenticity*

The common denominator between many contemporary Iranian thinkers and the Western existential philosophers referred to above is their preoccupation with the problematic of authenticity. Both groups believe in the telos of living a moral, sensible, passionate and authentic life. Authenticity is tantamount to taking hold of one's existence and traditions in a manner that is genuine, trustworthy, and sincere. To be 'authentic' is to embrace one's time and culture critically, and, yet to keep an eye on the overriding sense of loyalty and belonging. For the prototypical Iranian intellectual this has translated into a rejection of the apish imitation of the West on the grounds that mimicry and submission are fraudulent and counterfeit states of being. This explains why anti-Westernization and anti-imperialism have become two of the fixed hallmarks of the modern Iranian intelligentsia's identity discourse. The formidable ideological permeation of the West and its (neo)colonial exploits lead many Iranian intellectuals as well as the common people of Iran, in search of indigenization, authenticity, and freedom, to turn toward nativism and Islamicism. In their desire not to be a prolegomenon to Western philosophical texts or a nodal point in the Western imperialist maps, some of these intellectuals and social movements, alas, succumb to cultural xenophobia toward the West and adopt essentialist world-views. As a result, precarious policies (i.e., hostage taking, export of revolution, the death sentence against Salman Rushdie) should not come as a surprise.

Yet we should seriously refrain from portraying Iran, Islamic states, and the non-Western world (with all the nations, cultures, and civilizations subsumed under them) as monolithic polities (see Mottahedeh, 1996). Such a portrayal is as valid as depicting the West as an undifferentiated whole

or as a Hegelian Geist. Referring to the West, Islamic states, and the non-Western world as static entities ignores the varied and evolving historical, cultural, socio-economic, and political trajectories of the communities or nation-states that comprise them.

Only by recognizing the existence of contradictory philosophical worldviews and political tendencies within the contour of each of these broadly defined categories are we able to have any realistic hope of promoting pluralism and tolerance. The cause of civilizational understanding and world peace will not be advanced as long as each side evokes deceptive, yet effective, prophecies anchored in abstract prejudices and concrete exaggerations. This perpetual drive-by pseudo-dialogue must be replaced by critical understanding.

#### REFERENCES

- Afshari, Reza, 1996. 'An Essay on Scholarship, Human Rights, and State Legitimacy: The Case of the Islamic Republic of Iran', *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 3, August, pp. 544–593.
- Boroujerdi, Mehrzad, 1996. *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Fukuyama, Francis, 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.
- Huntington, Samuel P., 1993. 'The Clash of Civilizations?' *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3, Summer, pp. 22–49.
- Mottahedeh, Roy P., 1996. 'The Clash of Civilizations: An Islamicist's Critique', *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 1–26.
- Shayegan, Daryush, 1992. *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West*. London: Saqi Books.
- Solomon, Robert C., 1988. *Continental Philosophy Since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self*. New York: Oxford University Press.

---

MEHRZAD BOROUJERDI, b. 1962, Ph.D. in International Relations (The American University, 1990); Assistant Professor of Political Science at Syracuse University (1992–); current interests include the intellectual history of modern Middle East and Third-World resistance to modernity and cultural globalization.