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Interview – An Exclusive Interview with Professor Hamidreza Ayatollahy

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1. Would you like to provide us with your opinion on the importance and relevance of the issue of social and human sciences for Islamic communities in the contemporary world?

Those whose minds have been nurtured on Western thought turn inevitably to the concepts of religion and secularism when they wish to study the Islamic world. But words do not always have the same meaning within differing contexts. This is especially true in the per- spective of different civilizations. Therefore, it is necessary to define what is meant by religion and secularism in relation to Islam before discussing their significance in Islamic history.

To anyone familiar with Islam, it is only too obvious that these terms do not have the same meaning in languages connected with Muslim civilization as they have in various European languages. There is not in Islam the distinction between the religious and secular, or the sacred and the profane, as there is in Christianity.

The so-called dilemma of religion and the state has long history in Western culture that can be understood in its context. There is a belief among Muslim

thinkers that for understanding the matter we must study two important backgrounds and foundations of the matter, namely Christianity and modernity (not modernization) which brought a secular solution for the problem.

The essence of Christianity is so that the best way for protecting religion and the state simultaneously is the separation that could reach an overall acceptance in Western culture, while this is not so for Islam.

First of all, we must study the essential differences of Islam and Christianity in this respect for a deep understanding of the problem in Muslim countries. The social attitudes of Islam and the important role of all social and political dimensions of human life in Islamic doctrines are quite different from Christianity which is more individual and ethical religion.

I refer to some differences between fundamental doctrines of these religions which necessitate some demands for everyone:

Islam, like Judaism, has religious jurisprudence, while this is not the case with Christianity that emphasize on morality. Because of this specification, the religious laws penetrate in all aspects of a Muslim believer's life.

Furthermore, the many social religious laws in Islam make this religion more involved to the social activities of a society. Islam does not concern only with the personal relation between man and God, which try to change individually the spirituality of human being. Because of this difference, religious experience has a more important role in Christianity than Islam. A lot of Islamic doctrines focus on the relation between man and his society. Islam emphasizes on the belief that the relation between man and God may not be completed unless the social duties of a believer be fulfilled. The social duties of Muslim believers contain all dimensions of their lives like economy, politic, culture and social development. Therefore, if they want to be good believers they may not ignore their social duties.

We can not speak of Christian economy or Christian bank, while it is natural to speak of Islamic economy or Islamic bank. It means that some human dimensions of life must be examined in Islamic societies, but they may not be considered in Christian territories

Because the social law in Islam is an essential specification for it, the acts and framework of the state must be examined by Islamic laws. Islam has some economical frame with a discipline of values that may not accept every economical frame, which is based on human autonomy apart from God's order. It has also some essential doctrines in politics that based on its own

foundations. Certainly, it rejects some political thoughts (like racism, imperialism, and compulsion in acceptance of a political government, etc.), and accepts some others.

Another important difference between Islam and other religions is due to its attention to mundane matters of human being beside to future life. We have a lot of activities during our life that we think they are not religious ones, but in Islam every human activity is seen as a religious one. For example, Islam thinks of sexual relations between wife and her husband as worship like other kinds of worship. Although this relation must be done due to divine order that is, in some cases it is forbidden and in some other cases it is permitted, but, beside the prohibition in some cases, Islam does not think of sexual relation as far from being in a spiritual duty of man. It means that the meaning of worship differs in Islam. The activities for mundane matters are just those spiritual activities. We may not separate endeavors for this world from attempts for the life after death. This matter makes secularism very far from an Islamic society than others.

Secularization in Western territory has another background, namely modernity. Modernity is evaluated from the following philosophical point of view.

Modernity which is a historical fact of three or four centuries in a Western context differs from modernization. Western modernity based on humanism, subjectivism, dualism with a hidden scientism in modern period. Humanism that is not necessarily an atheistic attitude made the human autonomy from all divine order in the core of its discourse. It was usually speaking of God but as a man made meaning on his or her subjective perception. In modern period, there existed some kind of belief in God, but it was a man based belief that had its meaning from a humanly subjective point of view not as an external truth independent from human kind. While the existence of God on human understanding usually accepted the lordness of God rejected. Secularism implies ideas and institutions of purely human origin, not derived from an inspired source.

Secularism in man's social and historic existence has come to acquire a reality as great as religion itself. Or, in today's world, in which to most modern men God seems to be nowhere and in which He has become eclipsed by the shadows of forgetfulness, it has even come to occupy the centre of the stage and to claim all rights for itself.

The modern philosophy necessitated this kind of thought because of some spatiotemporal conditions of Western history and contexts in its three centuries adventures. If we want to survey secularism in Western context we must consider its humanistic approach with its philosophical foundations. It can be shown that this kind of humanistic approach was the result of a Western culture in its historical processes that differs from other cultures with their own specifications.

However, briefly stated, it is difficult to speak of this kind of modernity in Muslim countries while we may speak of modernization in their own culture with their own foundations. It is difficult to extend Western humanism which necessitated secularism in Islamic domain. Therefore, the dilemma of religion and the state must reconsider in Islamic context and it must be found what the special problem is in Islamic thought and what can be the solution.

2. As a professor of philosophy and the secretary of SIPRIn (Sadra Iskamic Philosophy Research Institute), you put forward an interesting notion what you called "*Ontological potentiality*" of Mulla Sadra's system of philosophy for encountering numerous crucial contemporary philosophical and thought problems. What do you think about the significance and contribution of Sadra's philosophy for establishing the Islamic Human Sciences (Islamic Humanities)?

The Sadraen Philosophy can be characterized by the recognition of the following aspects:
1. Intrinsic compatibility between Religion and Philosophy;
2. Necessity of a serious rational study of the religious doctrines to the point of bringing together the views of Reason and the views proper to Religion;
3. Need for a combination of the four traditional schools present in the Islamic world, namely mysticism, peripatetic philosophy, illuminationist philosophy and *Kalam*;

4. Importance of studying Western approaches to Philosophy as well as other sources of human thought;

5. Need to proceed to a comparative study of the different philosophical views in order to explain the strengths and the weaknesses of transcendental philosophy;

6. Evolving character of Islamic Philosophy as a whole;

7. Philosophical primacy of ontology over epistemology and of reason over experience;

8. Influence of theoretical philosophy on other dimensions of human thought and activity, namely politics, economy, education, aesthetics, ethics, etc.;

9. importance of the attention to Quran and of the *hadith* and prayers -as an important source of knowledge- for a philosophy that tries to argue her own views based on reason alone and not on revelation;

10. Importance of the dialogue among philosophers from different perspectives in order to achieve better ideas of how to promote the future of the human family.

The philosophy of MullaSadra, must be considered as one of the most important contributions of contemporary Islamic Philosophy specially in Iran. This philosophy has been continued and matured by scholars like Sabzavari and Tabatabaii and Motahhari. In fact, due mainly to its compatibility with the Islamic tradition a very honorable place within the context of Islamic thought was granted to this kind of philosophizing, so much so that it became part of the official learning and teaching in religious seminaries (*hozehelmiyyeh*). We can say, therefore, that understanding and confronting with every kind of rational and philosophical thinking has been a major duty of Islamic scholars in Islamic countries. Islamic philosophy has been a strong foundation of Iranian culture. It constitutes a strong factor in promoting Iranian culture. For example, it was due to the Iranian Islamic philosophical background that the people of Iran were preserved from Marxism and atheistic positivism.

I also would like to add that philosophical research in Iran is not focused on Islamic philosophy only. For more than 50 years, there is an ongoing acquaintance of the Iranian culture with Western schools of thought, which are studied side by side with Islamic philosophy. The number of works of the Western philosophical tradition translated into Persian is already quite significant. But it is also true that Islamic philosophy represents the major interest of this domain in Iran. On the other hand, the comparative study of

philosophy has become a major topic for academic dissertations, lectures, books and conferences. In Iran, the majority of scholars believe that Islamic Philosophy has the power to seriously contribute for the solution of many contemporary problems.

3. You have successfully held a conference on *Ulume Insani Islami* (Islamic Human Sciences) in 2011 at Behesty University, Tehran. What are your expectation of the next conference, the International Conference on Thought on Human Sciences in Islam (IC-ThuSI), which be held in Jakarta on 19020 November 2014?

My expectation is listed as follows:
1) The necessity of introducing non-secular models of relation between religion and the state
There are some suspicions for a Western secular model of the state in an Islamic society in an Iranian thought. Theses suspicions are from two perspectives. In one perspective there are serious doubts about the successfulness of Western secular humanistic states historically and theoretically. In another perspective there are some doubts that these models of state can be compatible with Islamic culture.
The first view is directed to the critiques of modern secular societies and in the second one the important dimensions of Islamic teachings which introduce other models not based on the separation between religion and the state.
2) The critiques of modernity and its humanistic foundations and its secular consequences
There are some critiques of Western modernity in contemporary Iranian thought, which make its secular models of society in question:
i- Western modernity based on enlightenment movement tried to manifest all its capacity in all dimensions of human life in three centuries but the successfulness of this attempts was in question by postmodern thinkers. The foundations of modernity have been analyzed by these thinkers. There were some presuppositions that the castle of modernity was based on them. Postmodern thinkers tried to criticize these presuppositions in both sides for example theistic and atheistic ones. The ideal achievements of modernity in politics, culture, and art and so on, all encountered some fundamental

deficiencies. For example, political approach of Western modernity like democracy and liberalism was criticized essentially by some of these thinkers. The West-centered of all truth has been attacked by them. They emphasized on plurality of truth which is manifested in different cultures. Thus the expanding of Western models of politics has been rejected by them[1]. Although they seek of a kind of relativism that cannot accept a religious state they insist that the Western models of thought also are in question. I want to show that Western modernity as the best model of politics is in question so that the reliance on it cannot bring a best model of politics for us so that we introduce an Islamic society based on those western values.

ii- The secular humanistic thought that defends of separation of religion and the state has tried to introduce some alternatives for religious state like socialism, democracy and liberal democracy and so on. But these kinds of political systems have had a lot of problems that are pointed by political philosophers. Marxism was also a kind of those models of modernity that in a long period of time in twentieth century could attract huge number of peoples in the world as the best kind of the state but its collapse from political discourse showed the deficiency of those secular solutions. In an examination of liberal democracy by contemporary scholars the consequences of those liberal democracies in the future may be more problematic than Marxism. American militarism in recent years made liberal democracy as the enemy of human kind. The existence of Israel and its huge governmental crimes, and also imperialistic militarism and nuclearism of United States is supported by liberal democracy of Western countries.

iii- In reality, the humanistic achievements of western modern political thought brought the biggest disasters in human history, namely the world war one and two. Although the western modern people reject those kinds of political systems like fascism and racism and Nazism, they can not ignore the secular humanistic basis of those systems. The secular solution of the state may cause those tragedies that may be the result of its secularity and it is not rational to rely unconsciously on those treatments.

iv- While the twentieth century was a century of development in science and technology for human kind to use their capacity in serving man, the twenty first century is a century with a lot of suspicion to this kind of human activities because of all disasters they brought for human kind by their technological development[2]. Thus, the twenty first century is named as the century of

environment. This new approach brings bioethics in the core of scientific and technological circles. Because of insufficiency of secular bioethics, the need for religions has been more and more important in this century for removing environmental pollutions that have made by human vanity. Professor Nasr has analyzed the matter and the role of religions in helping humanity for the best solution in his book *Religion and the Order of Nature*. He emphasizes in this book that the most capacity in this respect can be found in Abrahamic religions especially in Islam. The problem and dangers of pollution made by a secular science and technology based on human autonomy in interfering in the nature, and the emergency of a solution have been in the center of scientific and technological circles. Therefore the necessity of solution has shown the weaknesses of humanistic solutions which brought those huge troubles and the need for a sacred science. It can be a time for religions to introduce themselves as savoir of humanity.

4. The need for presence of religious and Islamic teachings in most dimensions of human life:

i- The increasing tendencies and inclinations to religions specially in recent decades have made the religious discourse in the core of human life[3] while religions in the middle of twentieth century was in the margin. This is not restricted to a personally religious activity but is going to penetrate all dimensions of human life; it is going to requisite a need for social and political attendance of religions.

ii- There are a lot of Islamic doctrines that are social with a kind of political attitudes[4]. If someone wants to be a true Muslim believer he cannot ignore his social and political duties. To reduce Islam to spirituality that is more compatible with Christianity and Buddhism means to ignore the most part of Islamic teachings of Qur'an and *Hadiths*. The Semitic conception, shared by Judaism and Islam, sees law as the embodiment of the Divine Will, as a transcendent reality which is eternal and immutable, as a model by which the perfections and shortcomings of human society and the conduct of the individual are judged, as the guide through which man gains salvation and, by rejecting it, courts damnation and destruction.

iii- The other challenge of Muslim believers with Humanistic approach of the West is the challenge of best way of life. While in Western culture the best way of life depend of welfare and humanistic freedom this is not so with Islamic system of value. The importance of spiritual progress of mankind and defining him as who must think of himself as spiritual animal which will be possible in his worshipping God bring an Islamic worldview quite different from a Western concern. The emphasis of Islamic teachings to heavenly essence of man and the duty of prophets to purify him toward training that essence (*Tazkiah*) as well as its emphasis on mundane matters have brought different system of value from a Western one in which the definition of the best way of life is restricted to the best material life manifested in those material welfare and freedom. For example, homosexuality rejected in all its kind in Islam because it makes man very far from its true life, while in a Western system of value it is in the direction of human enjoyment and a kind of his welfare and freedom. Homosexuality in an Islamic system of value is just like terrorism in a Western one. The judgment about one action due to two systems of value is quite different because the different definition of mankind.

The decision about a successful and fruitful political system hardly based on the system of values and the definition of man and his ideals in which we are going to judge about. Therefore, we may not judge about development absolutely in a Western manner of life; perhaps some of those developments are decline than improvement. This is the sovereignty of mass media ruled by Western secular humanistic regimes that try to impose its system of value that is made for the benefits of Western companies. There are also some other reasons for the need of attendance of religions in the state.

[1] - Albrow, M. *The Global Age: State and Society beyond Modernity*. Harvey, D. The *Condition of Postmodernity: an Enquiry into the Conditions of Cultural Change*.

[2] - Peccei, A. *The Chasm Ahead*.London: Macmillan. 1969; Commoner, B.*The Closing Circle: Confronting the Environmental Crisis*; Meadows D. H & others, *Beyond the Limits: a Global Collapse or a Sustainable Future*.

3 - Voll believes that Islam will be as an active solution of the political presence in its territory. See: Voll, John O., *Islam Continuity and Change in the Modern World*. p357.

4 - There are a lot of verses in Quran that indicate to this matter. See for example: 57:25, 5:8, 4:135, 16:36, 4:75, 8:60, 3:103, 8:46, 49:10, 49:29, 5:2, 3:59, 3:110, 5:59.