

Introduction

Contemporary discourse concerning the political role and application of Islam is deeply influenced by the west, as it is largely considered as either a positive or negative reaction to the western way of life. Confronted by the emerging technical and military superiority, economic achievements and apparent affluence of western society, Muslims have been forced to address the challenge of modernity and the various dimensions that accompany it. As a result, the need to review and redefine the Islamic position has become necessary, a discussion which has established two main streams of political thought amongst Muslim scholars and intellectuals.

Firstly, there are those who advocate a “liberal” interpretation of Islam and strive to demonstrate its compatibility with the underlying values of modernism and, more precisely, the western political system. Supporters of this stream see their interests and objectives in secular terms; many adopt ideologies such as nationalism, pan-Arabism, socialism and Marxism, frequently disconnecting themselves from classical Islamic political thought.

The second stream of thought, often categorised as revivalism or fundamentalism, embody an extreme reaction to the spread of western ideas throughout the Muslim world. Its followers totally reject parliamentary liberalism, amongst other western ideologies, and advocate the comprehensive adoption of the sources of divine revelation as a means to end the West’s hegemony, whilst overcoming present difficulties faced by Muslim societies.

The reflexive nature of these two streams offers little beyond a positive or negative reaction to modernism and the western way of life (specifically in the political field). Followers of the former adopt a secular approach; providing an optimistic analysis of western political values, either endorsing them or assuming them as Islamic concepts. In short, this attitude provides no potential for the development or evolution of Islamic political heritage.

On the other hand, despite strong aspirations to establish a pure Islamic society and government, revivalism and fundamentalism fail to provide a complete or unambiguous model for this ideal society. Many revivalists have attempted to reform the political theory of traditional Sunni jurist’s (i.e. the theory of *Khilafah* or Caliphate) whilst other, more excessive versions of fundamentalism (such as the Taliban

movement) present an aggressive, oppressive and backward image of the Islamic model.

Born amidst shallow and ultimately reactionary Islamic political ideologies, the theory of “*Wilayat al-Faqih*” constituted an entirely new direction and mode of thinking. This conception of Islamic governance, formally embodied in the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, is distinguished by its close connection to Shi’a political doctrine and the successful amalgamation of *Shari’ah* and democracy. It composes the authority of an Islamic legal system, the political guardianship of a just and capable Mujtahid (jurist) and the democratic role of the people in the distribution of political power. Within the framework of the traditional Shi’a doctrine of Imamah, this political doctrine reconciles the authority of religion and the authority of the people.

There are many misunderstandings concerning the theory of *Wilayat al-Faqih*, its historical background and political justification, the role of people and what separates it from other Islamic political theories (such as that of the Caliphate). The primary function of this book is to clarify these different dimensions and dispel any ambiguities surrounding this version of the Islamic state.

The *Wilayat al-Faqih* (guardianship of the scholars) is a religious model of government. It is therefore essential to discuss why we are in need of a ‘religious state’ and to take full account of the implications and justifications of this model in the contemporary world. Chapter one addresses the definition of a ‘religious government’ and explores the relationship between Islam and politics. It also assesses the principal arguments presented by various Muslim thinkers, particularly those who are opposed to the concept of an Islamic government.

Chapter two intends to clarify the doctrine of *Wilayat al-faqih*, its historical background, what distinguishes it from other political theories, and its connection to the traditional religious authority of the Islamic jurists (Marja’a Taqleed), to whom ordinary Shi’a refer to and whose decrees they follow on religious affairs. All scholars and jurists accept that the Marja’a has a duty to act as vicegerent on behalf of the absent, infallible Imam. However, it is the scope of authority in this vicegerency that is contentious. The second chapter aims to expound and develop this discussion, thereby explicating the role of a jurist in the model of *Wilayat al-Faqih*.

As a political theory of state, *Wilayat al-Faqih* maintains the collective vicegerency of the faqih adil (a just or trustworthy jurist), which is the maximum scope of his authority. The third chapter will discuss the justifications of this theory and expound some of the traditional evidence provided by high-ranking jurists who support the doctrine of *Wilayat al-Faqih*.

Liberal democracy remains the prevalent political theory of our time. The final chapter of this book will deal with the dichotomy that arises between the concept of Islamic democracy, embodied in the theory of *Wilayat al-Faqih*, and the liberal interpretation of the democratic system, which exists in the majority of western countries today.

It is my hope that these four chapters will provide the reader with a comprehensive outline of Shi’a

political thought in general, and the modern incarnation of this political thought, which is embodied in the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in particular.

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